

DESTINIES



By Michel Poulin

DESTINIES

A SCIENCE-FICTION NOVEL

BY MICHEL POULIN

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

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

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This science-fiction novel is the fifth installment in a collection of novels depicting the adventures through time of Nancy Laplante, a female Canadian war correspondent from 2017 and the chief of operations of the Time Patrol, an organization originating from the 34th Century. Those novels were written prior to the fictionalized events of the 21st Century depicted in them, thus should be treated as novels about alternate realities. The year in the dates shown in the headings are followed by the letters 'A', 'B' or 'C', denoting in which timeline the action is happening. Timeline 'A' is the original historical line, while Timeline 'B' is a parallel alternate history created accidentally by Nancy Laplante when she was transported against her will from 2012 to the year 1940 and changed history by her actions. Timeline 'C' is a second parallel history created from 1941 'B' when enemies of Nancy tried to kill her and thus change history in their favor.

The sixth novel in the collection, *TIMELINE TWIN*, will be published in 2014.

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CHAPTER 1 – TESTIMONY

13:16 (Washington Time)

Monday, March 6, 2017 ‘A’

United States Senate public hearings chamber

Russell Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C.

USA

Senator Robert Menendez (Democrat – New Jersey) scanned quickly the room full of reporters and spectators as his colleagues from the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations took their seats at the head table. There definitely was expectation, if not excitement, in the air as this latest part of the special hearings on the situation in Pakistan was about to start. That was not surprising in view of the identity of the next witness due to testify in front of his committee. That witness, apart from having saved the famous CNN anchor person, Anderson Cooper, from the clutches of the Taliban in Pakistan barely three weeks ago, had also won the Oscar for best actress less than two weeks ago. Allied to her many past sensational and daring news reports from numerous war zones around the planet, these achievements had made the oncoming witness a true World celebrity. That witness was already seated at the witnesses' table, along with a representative from the State Department, which had requested her expertise concerning the complex and threatening situation in Pakistan. Menendez took a few seconds to visually detail that witness, a tall and athletic woman of 34 years of age with long black hair and sparkling green eyes. From the information folder on her that he had, Menendez knew that Nancy Laplante stood an even 183 centimeters in height and that she could be a very dangerous woman indeed, with or without weapons in her hands, to anyone attacking her. The tall Canadian had already proved that point a number of times in the past, most recently in Pakistan, where she was reputed to have killed by herself over twenty Taliban extremists, including their spiritual leader, Mullah Omar. She also happened to be the current female World champion in Kyokushin karate and had even beaten the male World champion in a public match after the latter had insulted her and had accepted a challenge from Laplante. In view of all this, it was

not surprising that this woman was presently all the rage in Hollywood as a female action movie character.

Scanning next the first rows of spectators, Menendez stopped his eyes for a moment on a slightly overweight man in his fifties wearing a good quality suit sitting just behind Laplante: he had seen him before during a visit to the headquarters of the CIA in Langley, Virginia. Menendez could not remember his name but the man was definitely a senior executive of the CIA. In view of the many delicate implications of the present crisis with Pakistan, the presence of a senior CIA officer here was however not so surprising to Menendez. The situation in Pakistan, a nuclear-armed state that had for all intents and purposes lost effective control of its borders to Islamist extremists and terrorists that had been attacking and killing American soldiers for years, was indeed tense and threatening. Filling the other front row seats was a collection of media reporters and political think tank experts interested in the outcome of these hearings, in which drastic changes to the United States' policies concerning Pakistan could well be proposed and debated.

With his fifteen Democrat and Republican colleagues now seated, Menendez took hold of his wooden gavel and banged it three times, calling the room to order.

"This session of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations has now resumed. I invite Miss Nancy Laplante to present her testimony about Pakistan and to answer the questions of the members of this committee. Miss Laplante, welcome to the United States Senate."

"Thank you, Senator!" Replied Nancy in a clear and strong voice. "I hope that what I will say will help the United States establish an effective policy to deal with the extremism problem in Pakistan."

"I am confident that you will be indeed helpful to us, Miss Laplante. May I first congratulate you on your Presidential Medal of Freedom that you just received last week from the President?"

Nancy smiled at that and nodded her head.

"Thank you, Senator!"

"You are welcome, Miss Laplante. Could you first present yourself and then tell us how you came to go to Pakistan to deliver Anderson Cooper, the CNN anchor person

that had been kidnapped in Afghanistan by the Taliban and was then brought to Pakistan?”

“With pleasure, Senator Menendez. I was born in 1982 in Montreal, Canada, and still resides on the South Shore of Montreal. I am a retired officer of the Canadian Army, in which I attained the rank of captain, and am a war correspondent working part-time for CNN. I also publish periodically geostrategic analysis and opinion papers in various world media outlets, plus work from time to time as an actress when offered roles by various Hollywood producers. As for the kidnapping of Anderson Cooper, I heard about it first from televised news and then decided on my own to immediately go and try rescue him. I subsequently left Montreal and flew to Dubai, arriving there on February the sixteenth and then taking a connecting flight to Quetta, Pakistan, where I was hoping to find Anderson Cooper and his abductors. Thankfully, I was quickly able to find him and then infiltrated the Taliban compound in Quetta where he was being held, freeing him after killing his captors. That was in the early morning of February the seventeenth. We then went to the Quetta airport, hoping to find there a way to escape Pakistan, but we were then captured by the Pakistani intelligence service, the ISI. While the ISI eventually let go Anderson Cooper after a couple of hours and allowed him to fly out to Dubai, I was held and tortured by the ISI for over twelve hours before I could escape and flee to the Quetta airport, where I borrowed a civilian helicopter and flew to Kabul, Afghanistan. There, the American embassy arranged for me to fly out to the United States in an Air Force C-17 cargo plane. I arrived in the United States on February the eighteenth and was then brought to Washington, where I met with President Rodham-Clinton. The rest is history.”

“A fascinating story indeed, Miss Laplante.” Said Menendez, smiling to her before looking at her with seriousness. “I know that you already told your story in detail on a number of occasions since then, but could you tell us if the Pakistani government at any point assisted in the freeing of Mister Anderson Cooper?”

“Not one bit, Senator! In fact, the Pakistani government was closing a blind eye to the activities of the Taliban in Quetta and was giving a total free rein to those extremists in town. Mullah Omar’s compound was well known in Quetta and was openly guarded by more than twenty armed extremists, yet the Pakistani Army was nowhere in sight near that compound. The Pakistani ISI only grudgingly let go Anderson Cooper when it saw that it could not accuse him of any crime, but tortured me to try make me

name my contacts and allies in Quetta. They wanted in particular to find if any CIA agents had helped me deliver Cooper.”

“And, in your opinion, what would the ISI have done to those presumed CIA agents if they had found them, miss?”

“Then, those CIA agents would have been arrested, tortured and then probably paraded in Pakistani courts in order to embarrass the United States, Senator.”

A wave of whispers and low voice exclamations through the audience greeted her answer, while Menendez grimly nodded his head.

“I see! I will now let my colleagues ask you questions, Miss Laplante. The Honorable Robert Corker Junior, Ranking Republican Member, now has the floor.”

“Thank you, Mister Chairman!” Said the graying senator from Tennessee before staring at Nancy, a friendly smile on his face. “Miss Laplante, let me first salute your courage in risking all to save an American citizen from the Taliban.”

“Thank you, Senator! I however would have done the same for any other friend of mine. The price I paid in Pakistan was well worth it, even though the utter lack of help from the Pakistani authorities bitterly disappointed me.”

“As it disappointed all of us here, Miss Laplante. I understand that, since your escape from Quetta, the Pakistani government has publicly accused you of multiple murders and of stealing a privately-owned helicopter. Is Pakistan still pursuing those charges against you?”

“The Pakistanis still do, Senator Corker. Concerning the charge of stealing a helicopter, that helicopter has since then been returned to its Pakistani owner, with CNN paying that owner a fair sum to cover its use and fuel costs. That owner has since then withdrawn all the charges of theft concerning that helicopter. As for the accusations of murder against me, they are still in the books and concern the 23 Taliban extremists I had to kill to free Anderson Cooper, including Mullah Omar, as well as the three ISI members that had tortured me and that I killed in order to escape. While Pakistan tried to have me arrested on an international warrant, Interpol refused to execute or validate that warrant, in view of the utter inaction of the Pakistanis regarding the kidnapping and detention of Anderson Cooper in Quetta. As for the United States, it publicly declared that warrant as worthless.”

“And what was the Canadian government’s reaction to that Pakistani warrant against you, Miss Laplante?”

Nancy then had to take a deep breath to contain the resentment and disappointment that this question brought back to her. The utterly gutless reaction of her own government then had embittered her and had struck hard at her pride of being a Canadian citizen.

"I have to say that it proved to be rather shocking to me, Senator. On arrival back in Montreal, the Canadian intelligence services, the CSIS, and the federal police, the RCMP, detained me for three days and interrogated me at length, even debating whether to send me back to Pakistan to face murder charges there. I was finally released when the public outrage at my detention and the political pressure from Washington became too much for the Canadian federal justice minister, who by the way is an ethnic Pakistani. As for the Canadian Prime Minister, he stayed silent during the whole affair, dodging responsibility and refusing to act one way or the other."

"Incredible!" Exclaimed Corker, visibly and truly outraged by that. "And have the Canadian authorities now left you alone since then?"

"Mostly, but they warned me not to get in trouble again overseas before releasing me. I basically told them then to grow a pair of balls for a change."

A few laughs greeted that last sentence, including a chuckle from elderly Senator John McCain, who had grown increasingly frail in the last few years. Robert Corker then passed back the floor to Menendez, who in turn passed it to Barbara Boxer, the 76 year-old democratic veteran from California. The female senator looked briefly at her notes before looking benevolently at Nancy.

"Miss Laplante, you are highly respected as a professional world affairs analyst and war correspondent and you have extensive first-hand experience of the Middle East and of South Asia. In view of the present state of affair in and around Pakistan, what would be your suggested conduct towards Pakistan, from the point of view of the United States?"

Nancy put both forearms on her table and linked her fingers as she bent forward to answer, her expression dead serious.

"Simple, Madam Senator: Washington should stop pretending that Pakistan is an ally and should treat it for what it is in reality: a quasi-failed state that has been harboring Islamist extremists and terrorists for decades. The Pakistani ISI has been in bed with the Taliban and with other violent extremist groups for decades now, playing a dubious game of political influence over Afghanistan at the expense of the lives of thousands of American servicemen and servicewomen killed by the Taliban. Furthermore, the influence of Islamist extremists and fanatics is growing constantly inside the ISI and the

Pakistani armed forces, while its government doesn't really control its own army. As for the nuclear weapons and missiles owned by the Pakistanis, nobody really knows how safe those weapons are, or who controls them in reality. I have to remind you that it was a Pakistani nuclear scientist who initially sold years ago the secrets of atomic bomb-making to both North Korea and Iran. The security of Pakistani Army bases, while theoretically good, is in reality questionable, with unknown but growing numbers of Pakistani soldiers being actually Islamist extremists sympathetic to the Taliban. You just have to think back at the attack by extremists on a Pakistani Navy base a few years ago that destroyed on the ground a number of maritime patrol aircraft. More recently, media reports revealed that the Pakistani Air Force shot down two American drones sent over the Quetta region in order to find Anderson Cooper and his abductors. In my opinion, it is only a matter of years before Pakistan loses one or more of its nuclear weapons at the hands of Muslim fanatics, or even sells one secretly to another Islamic country. My counsel would be to cut all military aid to Pakistan and to treat it as a hostile nation harboring terrorists. While I do not advocate for the United States to start a war with Pakistan, Washington should at the very least watch that country very carefully and be ready to straighten it if it threatens the United States in any way."

Most of the senators on the committee nodded their heads at that, while none questioned or criticized her opinion then. Barbara Boxer then thanked Nancy and passed the floor to another senator.

All went well in Nancy's perspective until a new member of the committee, Senator Benjamin Koch of New York, got the floor. Despite his apparently unctuous attitude towards her, Nancy could easily detect his hidden hostility via her power of telepathy, one of the mental powers she possessed as a Chosen of The One. She thus braced herself mentally as Koch spoke while reading from a document in his hands.

"Miss Laplante, you said that you killed a total of 23 Taliban extremists, as well as three ISI agents, during your short stay in Quetta in February. In fact, you made it sound as if it had been easy for you to kill all of these men. In their warrant filed against you, the Pakistani government said that you killed those Taliban by cutting their throats, while you either crushed or broke the necks of three ISI officers during your escape from Quetta. Now, if I can believe some past media reports from Japan, you were called in by the Japanese National Police to their headquarters on October 31 of 2015, to answer questions concerning the deaths of four Russian nationals killed in Tokyo three days

prior to your convocation. The autopsy report on those Russians, who were found to be armed by the way, stated that two of them had their necks crushed by a very strong person. Barely three days later, on November the third, while you were still in Tokyo, the Israeli commercial attaché was gunned down and killed in the underground garage of his residential tower by an unknown assailant. If we go further back in time, in 2013, the Israeli government put out an international warrant for your arrest, accusing you of murdering two Israeli security officers on November 21 and of being a supporter of Islamist terrorist groups. You subsequently fled Israel via its border with Lebanon, where you met the head of the Hezbollah, a known terrorist organization linked to Iran. On November 24, you flew out of Beirut and went to Teheran, where you met a number of high level Iranian officials. My first question to you, Miss Laplante, is about all the deaths that seem to happen in your wake. You say that you are a war correspondent by trade, but you certainly have shown talents more akin to those of a secret agent, or of an assassin.”

While the other senators looked with either shock or confusion at Koch, a concert of exclamations ran through the crowd of spectators, forcing Senator Menendez in knocking his gavel twice to reestablish calm.

“ORDER! ORDER PLEASE, OR I WILL BE FORCED TO HAVE THE SPECTATORS LEAVE THIS ROOM.”

Menendez then gave a jaundiced look at his democratic colleague from New York.

“Senator Koch, I do not see the point of your line of questioning towards Miss Laplante. We are here to debate our future foreign policy towards Pakistan.”

Koch, unrepentant, returned his stare and answered in a strong, loud voice.

“Mister Chairman, what I intend to do is to demonstrate that Miss Laplante’s opinions and advice may be biased and that she may be in reality a clandestine foreign agent bent on circulating disinformation.”

As more exclamations went around the audience chamber, Nancy spoke up in her microphone, in order to be heard by all.

“Mister Chairman, I wish to be able to reply to the Senator from New York.”

Menendez, still upset at Koch, looked at her briefly before nodding his head.

“You may reply to Senator Koch, Miss Laplante.”

“Thank you, Mister Chairman.” Said Nancy. She then stared hard at Koch as all the cameras and heads around turned towards her. “Senator Koch, to answer you about your comments on how easily I kill men. In case you didn’t caught on it while

reading your information on me, I was a reserve officer of the Canadian Army for ten years and served in many overseas theatres, including Afghanistan, where I saw combat a number of times. I also happen to be ranked number three worldwide as a combat pistol shooter, on top of being the World champion in Kyokushin karate. Of course I can be deadly, Senator Koch, but that doesn't make me a clandestine agent or an assassin. The Taliban extremists I killed in Quetta were no more than illiterate thugs and I killed them in order to free an American citizen that had been kidnapped and was in danger of execution. As for the three ISI agents I killed, I did that in order to escape and avoid further tortures at the hands of the Pakistani government. I thus acted simply in self-defense, unless torture is for you a legitimate legal tool. The two Israeli agents that I killed near Tel Aviv in 2013 had kidnapped me from my hotel room at night and were about to torture me under the assumption that I was some kind of terrorist sympathizer. First off, I am no terrorist sympathizer, irrespective of what the Israeli government may say about me. The fact that I killed in battle close to a hundred Taliban extremists in Afghanistan in 2012, added to the fact that I killed more Taliban, including their spiritual leader, last month, should be a good indication to anyone without preconceived ideas about me that I am far from being a supporter of terrorists. Second, about me meeting with the head of the Hezbollah and with Iranian officials, I did so as a war correspondent on assignment for CNN. If I avoided or refused to interview foreign officials that may be accused of supporting terrorism, then I might as well pack it in as a reporter. Journalists are supposed to report facts and public statements, not pick and choose who they will listen to or speak with on the basis of their reputation. I in fact came to Israel in November of 2013 to interview both Israeli and Palestinian officials, in order to build a picture of the local conflict. I pride myself in doing a thorough, balanced analysis every time that I report on a conflict. However, for whatever reasons they had, some Israeli security officials put it in their minds that I was somehow a supporter of extremists and had me captured in order that I could then be tortured and later made to disappear."

"So, you are accusing Israel, the only true democracy in the Middle East, of having kidnapped you with the intent of torturing and then killing you, is that it, Miss Laplante?" Replied Koch, raising his voice noticeably. "Didn't you in fact kill those two Israeli officials because they were about to prevent you from entering illegally the Gaza Strip?"

That earned him a contemptuous look from Nancy.

“That is the official excuse that the Israeli government is bantering around, Senator Koch, but it has nothing to do with the truth. I actually entered Gaza from Egypt, which shares a border with the Gaza Strip. Besides, the borders between Israel and the Gaza Strip were then closely guarded and blockaded by the Israeli Army and I don’t recall having fought my way through Israeli Army units to get into Gaza. If that would have happened, I am sure that the Israeli medias would have reported on such a battle.” There were a few laughs and derisive chuckles at her sarcastic response, while Koch reddened with anger.

“We have only your word about this, Miss Laplante. Why should we believe you, instead of the Israeli government?”

“You mean the same government that detained in secret a dual national from Australia without trial, until that man hanged himself in his cell in 2013? You mean the same democracy in which the medias are still subject to daily military censorship, and where one can be put in jail without trial under so-called ‘administrative detention’? Senator Koch, I am no anti-Semite and in fact have many good friends that are both Jewish and Israeli citizens, but those Jewish friends will be the first to agree with me that the Israeli government has for too many years abused its powers concerning human rights and liberties, justifying its conduct on the grounds of national security. I submit to this Senate committee that I was illegally kidnapped without any legal justifications by Israeli officials on November 21 of 2013 and had to escape to avoid being tortured and then killed. If the Israeli government would really have had concrete evidence that I was a supporter of terrorists, then it could have arrested me publicly on my arrival at Tel Aviv Airport and then put me on trial on such charges. It had the power to do that but instead chose to act clandestinely against me. That suggests to me that it in fact had no credible evidence against me but was not ready to allow me to defend myself legally. That makes the Israeli government the criminal, not me, Senator Koch!”

There was a heavy silence for a second before Koch tried to regain the initiative.

“And those suspicious deaths in Tokyo in 2015? Will you tell me that the Japanese National Police called you in by mistake?”

“It seems so, since they let me go after a short interview. Are you going to accuse me of all the murders that are committed in the various cities I visit, Senator Koch? I was invited by both this committee and by the State Department to give my professional opinion on the present situation in Pakistan, not to be roasted about old

Israeli accusations that have been long discredited and refuted. Now, do you have a pertinent question for me concerning Pakistan, Senator Koch?”

“Careful about how you talk to me, miss: you could still be accused of contempt of Congress.”

“No, I cannot, Senator!” Replied at once Nancy in a forceful tone. “May I remind you that I am a Canadian citizen and came here at the official invitation of your government. You have absolutely no legal power to even accuse me of contempt of Congress.”

“Miss Laplante is right about that, Senator Koch.” Then said Senator Menendez, having had enough of Koch’s disturbing rants. “Senator Flake of Arizona now has the floor.”

As the proceedings became distinctly more civil, CIA Deputy Director for Operations Julian Moore discreetly blew air in relief. That idiot Koch could have unknowingly caused a lot of irreparable damage by his line of questioning. He in fact had to have a secret agenda to launch such a reckless verbal attack on Laplante. Moore was one of the only nine living Americans to know the full truth about the true nature of Nancy Laplante as a secret time traveler and an holder of some fantastic supernatural powers. That same Nancy Laplante had however rendered some significant, if rather discreet services to the American government, notably as a result of her celebrated visit to Iran in 2013 and, most lately, by finding and freeing Anderson Cooper in Pakistan while killing at the same time the spiritual leader of the Taliban, Mullah Omar. In fact, Laplante still had an official CIA identity card in her name and, while Moore was not ready to call her a genuine CIA field agent, he was personally convinced that the Canadian woman would never hurt willingly the United States or, God forbid, support terrorists hostile to the USA. There was still however the question of this Koch idiot: someone connected to the Israeli Mossad, which had vowed to kill Laplante and had in fact tried to do just that a few times already, must have used the good senator from New York in order to try discrediting the Canadian. While the CIA was officially barred from spying on American soil, Moore considered that Laplante’s secrets were too critical and sensitive to let the Mossad a free hand in operating in the United States, especially when it used the services of a member of the United States Senate. Bugging and following Senator Koch to find who had prompted him to lash at Laplante sounded definitely like a necessary evil to Moore.

16:26 (Washington Time)

Offices of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee

Russell Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C.

Benjamin Koch was both furious and worried when he stormed out of his committee's offices, having just received a sharp verbal lashing from his chairman and from other colleagues about his anti-Laplante rant. Menendez had even questioned his competence about being a member of the committee, something that had particularly irked him. Using a back exit door in order to avoid the horde of reporters that was certain to be waiting for him at the main entrance of the building, Koch took out his cell phone and punched in a number as he walked briskly towards his parked car. He knew that his call recipient, whose name he didn't know, used disposable cell phones with pre-paid cards, thus wasn't worried about his call being traced. He got an answer after two rings.

"Quite a pathetic show you gave this afternoon, Mister Senator." Said off the cuff his contact, the male voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Listen, you! I did my best to sink her but she seemed to have an answer for everything. Besides, your own people haven't been too successful either concerning Laplante, so don't come taunting me like this, mister."

That seemed to hit home, as his contact then spoke in a much more subdued tone.

"Well, you can forget about her: we are going to take care of her for good tonight. Keep a low profile for the next few days and don't call me back. I will be changing phones anyway."

The call was then terminated. Koch looked for a moment at his cell phone before pocketing it: this meant that he was going to have to wait until he got some innocuous message containing the coded number of the next cell phone his contact will use. At least, he could not fault his Mossad contact for being careless.

Erik Johnson could have told Koch that he was wrong about that last point. The CIA action agent had just listened on to the short phone conversation, which had given Johnson a crucial piece of information. Now was the time to get to serious business. Looking at his long-time partner in black operations, Dean Price, he nodded his head.

"They will try to take down Nancy tonight, Dean. Be ready to follow her as soon as she walks out of the Russell Senate Office Building. I will alert our team at her hotel so that they can be ready for those Mossad assholes."

"Got it!" Answered Price, who was sitting behind the wheel of their rental car, parked in view of the Russell Building. "Those reporters hounding Nancy inside sure are firing lots of questions at her still."

Johnson looked down at the smart phone held by Price, which was tuned to the CNN television news channel. An earphone plugged to the smart phone was inserted in the big agent's right ear.

"How is she doing?"

"Very well indeed, Erik. That girl can bullshit like the best. I will advise you when she will be about to leave the building."

Less than two minutes later, Johnson received a call on his own encrypted cell phone.

"Yes?"

"This is Ian." Said the voice of the geeky but very efficient CIA analyst that was often paired with Johnson's team. "We just intercepted an encrypted radio signal from the area of the Capitol Building. You may have an opposing team on the stakeout near you. If they use their radio again, our crypto-crunching supercomputer should be able to break their encryption algorithm. I will keep you apprised of any developments."

"Thanks, Ian!" Simply said Johnson, who then looked again at his partner.

"Heads up! We may have some opposition nearby. I think that I will go on foot and look around discreetly to see if I can spot them. We will keep in touch by radio."

Price smiled and patted the steering wheel of their location sports car with his gloved hands.

"I will be ready to charge in the moment you ask, Erik."

Johnson nodded, then stepped out of their car, zipping up his light windbreaker coat at the same time. While there was no snow, the wind was still chilly and the sky cloudy and quickly darkening. He then started walking slowly, looking around him discreetly while thinking how a Mossad team would operate in these circumstances. From the message he had eavesdropped on, he doubted that the Mossad would act against Laplante here in proximity to the Capitol Hill. It was more probable that whoever Israeli agent was close by would only be tasked with following the tall Canadian. Since

Laplante had come by taxi to the Russell Building, Johnson thus decided to go do a reconnaissance around the taxi stands situated near the Russell Building. Two minutes of walking got him there, his eyes scanning discreetly the cars and pedestrians visible around. There was quite a lot of people passing by, as it was just past closing time for Congress staffers. It didn't take long before a young woman sitting on a bench near the taxi stands attracted his attention. What caught his eyes was the fact that she was holding up a newspaper, as if reading it, but her eyes were looking up and around at frequent, short intervals. Walking past the rear of the bench, Johnson saw a barely visible ear microphone plugged in her left ear. She still could be some American federal agent engaged in a surveillance or protection task, something very possible around the Capitol Hill, but her slightly Semitic traits would be too much of a coincidence in this case. His attention further sharpened, Johnson continued down the sidewalk, eyeing covertly the inside of every parked car he passed by. A four-door sedan parked about sixty meters away finally caught his attention: two fit-looking young men wearing suits sat in the front, cups of coffee in their hands. They also kept looking nearly constantly towards the taxi stands and the main entrance of the Russell Building. Their hair was cut short, nearly military style, while their skin was darker than the average Caucasian American. One of the men looked at Johnson for a moment as he was passing by the car, then returned his attention on the entrance of the Russell Building. While a very dangerous man indeed, Johnson was actually a rather plain-looking one of medium built, sporting a short goatee and hair falling nearly to his neck. The stereotypes about secret agents and spies that were circulated in James Bond movies actually made him sneer in disdain: a good spy was an anonymous one that didn't attract attention. He refrained from smiling to himself when the driver of the car raised a bagel to his mouth to bite in it: sometimes, the most innocent little habits could give you away. These men probably were Mossad agents flown in from Israel for this mission, rather than long-time resident agents. Johnson thanked his luck for that, as it made them much more easy to spot. He waited until he was a good twenty meters past the car before speaking in his lapel microphone.

"I got a suspect car, a four-door blue Honda ACCORD with rental plate number 4HC 508 and with two men inside. I also have a young woman with brown hair wearing a dark blue ensemble and sitting on a bench near the taxi stands. Ian, can you put a trace quickly on that rental plate?"

"Consider it done, Chief!"

Johnson then stopped at a mobile vending stall to ostensibly buy a hot dog, before sitting on a nearby bench to eat it. That gave him time to reflect on the conflict raging between the Mossad and Nancy Laplante. The whole thing had been started by the Mossad, when it had discovered in 2012 through sheer luck that Nancy was a time traveler. The Mossad had then decided to kidnap her in 2013 to appropriate the secrets of time travel and had been ready to torture her to get those secrets, then kill her. Nancy had however fought back with her mental powers, killing two Mossad agents and freeing at the same time a CIA female agent being tortured by the Israelis. That was basically how the CIA had learned that Nancy was a time traveler. DDO Moore had then decided, rightly in Johnson's opinion, that the technology of time travel was too dangerous for anyone in this century to have and that the CIA would stop the Mossad or any other foreign power from grabbing it. Since then, the Russians had joined the Mossad in chasing after Nancy, but had only succeeded in losing a number of agents in Tokyo in 2015, when Nancy's Time Patrol had also pushed back against the Israelis and had assassinated the Mossad chief of station in Tokyo after he tried to have Nancy killed by the Japanese Yakuza. Realizing that it would never be able to extract the secrets of time travel from Nancy, the Mossad was now simply trying to kill her as revenge for the losses in agents and reputation that Israel had suffered thanks to her. As for the Russians, they had been thankfully quiet lately concerning Nancy.

Having finished eating slowly his hot dog, Johnson got up from his bench and went to a nearby garbage bin to throw away his used paper napkin while keeping an eye on the Honda Accord. The crowd of pedestrians coming out of the Russell Building had now thinned out noticeably and the Sun was quite low, with the ambient light dimming rapidly. That was when he got a new radio message from Ian Dorset.

"Chief, this is Ian. That Honda ACCORD was rented from an airport agency by someone with a name and address that has turned to be bogus. Whoever is in that car is not here for honest reasons."

"Thanks, Ian! I believe that we might as well eliminate this threat right away: no sense in wasting time here and making Nancy run unnecessary risks. Dean, move out of your spot and be ready to pick me up quickly near the taxi stands on Constitution Avenue."

"Got it! On my way!" Replied Price on the radio. Johnson then walked to a nearby newspapers and magazines stand and bought a copy of today's Washington

Post before walking to the rear of a parked minivan. There, sandwiched between the minivan and a big SUV, he quickly but discreetly took out his Beretta 92 9mm pistol and, covering it with his newspaper, screwed in place a silencer extracted from one pocket of his windbreaker. As he was emerging from between the two vehicles while holding his pistol under his folded newspaper, Johnson saw the suspected female Israeli agent hurrying towards the Honda ACCORD. A quick look towards the entrance of the Russell Building showed him Nancy Laplante, coming out while still trailed by half a dozen reporters asking her questions. Timing his walking speed carefully, Johnson arrived at the level of the Honda ACCORD just as the female Israeli agent had taken place on the rear right seat and was closing her door. Pointing his pistol still covered by the newspaper and shooting from the hip, the CIA action agent shot a first round through the opened rear right window, killing the woman with a bullet in the head, then took one step and shot three more times through the front passenger's window, killing the passenger and driver before they could react. Thankfully, the roaring noise of a passing bus accelerating past the car covered the muffled noise of the shots and no one around noticed anything as Johnson walked calmly away while speaking in his lapel microphone.

"Time for a pick up, Dean."

Barely six seconds later, Dean's rental car braked to a halt at Johnson's level, allowing Erik to get in the front passenger seat, his pistol still hidden under his newspaper.

"Job done! Go!"

Dean had time to accelerate away and cover a good fifty meters before Erik saw in his rear view mirror a sort of commotion start on the sidewalk, at the level of the parked Honda ACCORD: a pedestrian had finally noticed the three dead Israelis in their car. At this point, Nancy Laplante was nearing the taxi stands and a couple of the reporters hounding her noticed the commotion. The horrified screams of a woman then made them go investigate at a near run. Soon, the whole area turned into a pandemonium, with Nancy Laplante all but forgotten by the reporters in the excitement that followed. As Dean and Erik kept driving away, they soon got a new radio message from Ian Dorset.

"Heads up, guys! The Washington Police Department dispatcher is now reporting a triple murder in front of the Russell Building. There is however no information given yet about any specific suspect or vehicle. I will keep monitoring the police net in case they get any clue."

"Thanks, Ian!" Replied Erik before looking at Dean. "Let's ditch this car and change rides, Dean. We are returning to our hotel after this."

Dean nodded at that and drove for another two minutes before parking his rental car in a paying parking spot along a commercial street. The two CIA agents stepped out and put some money in the parking meter before walking away from the locked car, heading towards a nearby supermarket that had a large adjoining parking lot. There, they got in a prepositioned car and drove away towards their hotel, which also was the hotel used by Nancy Laplante for her stay in Washington. Their rental car was not going to be ticketed and eventually towed away for another two hours at the least. The city transportation department, when trying to forward a parking violation to the rental company, would then learn that the user was non-existent. Even if the WPD then connected the dots, it would have absolutely no way to trace the car to the CIA, or to anyone in fact, as both Erik and Dean had worn gloves constantly while using it.

18:46 (Washington Time)

Lafayette dining room, Hay-Adams Hotel

Lafayette Square, Washington, D.C.

Nancy was eating supper alone at a corner table of the dining room of her hotel when two men wearing suits approached her. She tensed up at once on noticing the bulges of pistols under their suit jackets but relaxed when their thoughts identified them to her. The leading man, an African-American in his late thirties, took out a badge and showed it to her as he and his partner stopped in front of her table.

"Miss Laplante? FBI Special Agents Martin Jameson and Richard Savage. Could we speak with you for a moment?"

Nancy smiled to them and pointed the three empty chairs around her table.

"Of course, gentlemen! Please, have a seat."

She waited for them to be sitting down before speaking to Jameson.

"So, Special Agent Jameson, to what do I owe you this visit?"

"Have you watched the news in the last few hours, Miss Laplante?"

"Not yet! Should I have?"

"Indeed, miss! Did you notice on exiting the Russell Senate Office Building that some kind of commotion was happening near the taxi stands?"

"I did, but I didn't stay to find out what was happening and took a taxi to come back to my hotel. So, what happened exactly, Special Agent Jameson?"

"Basically, two men and a woman were found murdered in their parked car, with bullets to their heads. On searching them and the car, the Washington Police Department found the three of them to be armed with pistols, knives and garrotes, while the trunk of their car contained an assortment of rifles, submachine guns and explosives. The dead also had recently arrived from Israel with fake American identities, something that prompted our agency to take on the case."

"Ah, the Israelis, again!" Said Nancy with apparent frustration. "They will decidedly never leave me alone."

"It seems so, Miss Laplante." Said cautiously Jameson, who personally felt that there was a lot more to this than what was apparent. "Senator Koch was right on one thing during his rant against you at the Senate hearings this afternoon: you do leave a trail of bodies in your wake."

Nancy shrugged at that while taking a bite from her food.

"Some people love me, while others hate me: it's the price of celebrity, I guess. I however can tell you right away that I had nothing to do about those three dead people. Maybe you should go ask questions to the Israeli ambassador instead."

"We may just do that later, with the support of the State Department. By the way, would you know by chance who could have killed these Israelis? Could it be your Canadian intelligence service protecting you?"

To Jameson's and Savage's surprise, that question made Nancy burst out in laughter.

"The CSIS? These Keystone Cops wannabe can't even run a proper security clearance program and you think that they can handle a multiple assassination against Mossad field agents? Don't worry about them, mister."

"If you say so, miss. Meanwhile, you should be on your guards: you were obviously targeted for assassination and more foreign agents could be after you."

"Then, could I suggest that you add Pakistan in the list of those who may send assassins after me? The Pakistanis have been sounding rather apoplectic about me lately."

The two FBI agents looked at each other while tensing up: they had not thought about that. Jameson then got up from his chair, imitated by his colleague.

"Uh, you may be right about that, Miss Laplante. We will have a few things to go check out now. Please be careful in the meantime."

"I always am, gentlemen. If this may reassure you, I do hold an American federal concealed carry permit and have a pistol on me, so I am not defenseless."

"A federal concealed carry permit? How did you get it, Miss Laplante?" Asked Jameson, surprised. Nancy answered him with a big smile.

"Presidential favor, Special Agent Jameson. A presidential executive order can make many things happen."

"Uh, I see! Well, we will now let you finish your supper in peace, miss. Have a good evening."

"You too, gentlemen."

The two FBI agents then walked away from the table, leaving the dining room and heading back to their parked car. Once inside their vehicle, Rick Savage shook his head in disbelief.

"A presidential executive order! Decidedly, there is nothing routine about that woman."

"Definitely not! Let me call Greg at the office first: there is something that needs to be checked on."

Taking out his cell phone and punching in a number, Jameson then spoke after a few seconds of waiting.

"Greg? This is Martin! I need you to check the list of arrivals by air in the last week. Check for single males between the age of twenty and 45 that are of Pakistani citizenship or origin and who traveled without family members. Look for anyone that could be Pakistani agents or assassins possibly sent to come kill Miss Nancy Laplante here in Washington... Yes! Make it a priority: Laplante is due to stay only for another day in Washington and someone may try to get her before she leaves. We are now on our way back to the office."

Jameson gave a discouraged look at his colleague as he pocketed back his cell phone.

"Let's just hope that Miss Laplante doesn't have more enemies that we don't know about yet. It sounds already like we won't get much sleep tonight."

CHAPTER 2 – BACK TO SCHOOL

09:06 (Boston Time)

Monday, January 8, 1945 ‘C’

Classroom of the aeronautical engineering department

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.)

Boston, Massachusetts

USA

Peter Simpson, a tall young man of nineteen with blond hair and gray eyes, was entering with other aeronautical engineering students in the amphitheatre when his eyes hooked on a very beautiful young woman who was also entering the room. He was so taken by her beauty that he bumped in the student in front of him, attracting an acerbic remark.

“Hey, watch where you go, buddy!”

“Uh, sorry about that.” Said quickly Peter before starting to follow the girl. She was tall for a girl, measuring about 175 centimeters, had an athletic body and long legs and had reddish-brown hair falling to her neck. Unfortunately for him, the girl took place at the end of a row of seats that was then fully occupied and he had to content himself with finding a seat on the other side of the aisle, one row up from hers. Looking around him, Peter saw that the girl was the only female student present in the class, something that many other boys had also noticed. Peter was however not surprised by that, girls being rare in the M.I.T.’s student body. They were in fact at most a few dozens, mostly concentrated in the Humanities and Arts programs.

Their teacher, a man in his late forties and with a balding head, smiled with amusement on seeing the male stares that his sole female student attracted. He had to concede that the girl was indeed very beautiful. Knowing who she was exactly only widened Doctor Richard Goodale’s smile. He had personally interviewed the girl and had reviewed her application and various school certificates and entrance qualifications exams in order to allow her to start her M.I.T. studies in the Winter-Spring semester, rather than make her wait until the next Fall semester. Once all of his students were

seated in the amphitheatre, Goodale rapped his knuckles three times on the blackboard behind him to attract their attention.

“YOUR ATTENTION PLEASE, LADY AND GENTLEMEN!”

Silence fell quickly, allowing him to continue in a more normal volume of voice.

“Welcome back to the M.I.T. aeronautical engineering department for this Winter-Spring term. For those who don’t know me yet, I am Doctor Richard Goodale, head of the aeronautical engineering department. Now that the war is over, the M.I.T. has been able to incorporate in its programs a few of the technological evolutions that the said war brought in, including in rocket technology.”

Goodale did not miss the fact that his lone female student then made a discreet gesture of satisfaction at his words. He smiled at that and went on.

“You have all certainly noticed that a young woman is now part of our engineering class. While women are still rare in our domain, I am certain that this will change rapidly in the coming years and I certainly welcome them in aeronautical engineering, a specialty with a bright and fascinating future indeed. Miss Ingrid Dows, your new student colleague, is here to study and I suspect that she will appreciate if you won’t harass her constantly with the view of dating her. Concentrate on your own studies and let her concentrate on her studies and you will make me happy. I will now review your semester program schedule and speak a bit about the new additions to it. Then, at ten, you will get your first class in basic engineering...”

12:08 (Boston Time)

Students cafeteria, Lobdell Student Center

Peter Simpsons didn’t have the courage to go speak to Ingrid before lunchtime came. Following her in the cafeteria of the Lobdell Student Center, Peter got served at the food counter, then gathered his courage and approached Ingrid’s table, stopping in front of it and smiling down to her.

“Excuse me, miss. Could I sit at your table?”

Ingrid returned his smile, admiring discreetly the 181 centimeter-tall boy with blond hair and gray eyes.

“But of course! Please, sit down!”

Peter put his food tray down on the table, then sat down facing Ingrid before offering his right hand.

"My name is Peter Simpsons. You probably saw me in the aeronautical engineering class this morning."

"Effectively! Ingrid Dows, happy to know you." Replied Ingrid while shaking his hand. There was then a moment of silence as they looked at each other, until Peter finally spoke again.

"I noticed that you were the only girl in our class, and one of the rare girls at M.I.T.. What attracted you to aeronautical engineering, Ingrid?"

Ingrid gave him a warm look with her big blue eyes that nearly melted him.

"I have been fascinated by planes since my youth. I also obtained my private pilot's license in 1941 and want to know more about the technical aspect of aircraft."

"You are a qualified pilot? Great! I envy you! It must be fascinating to fly."

"To be frank, flying is my passion, Peter."

They then ate a few bites before Peter spoke, a bit hesitant.

"Uh, do you mind if I ask you if you reside on campus, Ingrid?"

"Not at all! I have a room in the girls' wing of Bexley Hall, on the fourth floor. And you, Peter?"

Peter smiled at that.

"I also lodge in Bexley Hall, on the second floor. My roommate is however a bit of a noisy guy: he is one of these football player types who are in love with their own muscles. And you, do you have a roommate?"

"Yes, I do! Betty seems to be a quiet, decent girl. She studies biology. And you, Peter, what attracted you to aeronautical engineering?"

"Well, I also love planes, even though I am no pilot. I believe that aviation is a domain with a bright future, as Doctor Goodale said."

"I believe so as well. My dream is to one day be able to pilot an aircraft that I will have helped design."

"A fine dream indeed, Ingrid. I am sure that it will come through one day."

That made her smile again in a way that accelerated Peter's heartbeat. Not wanting to tempt too much his luck at first, Peter didn't ask her then about her private life, staying on banalities or on the subject of aircraft during the rest of the meal.

19:29 (Boston Time)

Female quarters, Bexley Hall

M.I.T., Cambridge

Betty Woods put down her backpack full of books on her work desk and then sat down on her bed, which faced Ingrid's bed in their tiny room.

"Thank God! No assignments or mandatory reading tonight. I came out easy today. And you, Ingrid?"

"The same here. I however believe that this will change quickly, Betty, probably starting tomorrow."

"You are probably right. Say, I saw you at the gym this afternoon. You seem to be very fit physically. You train a lot?"

"Every day, in fact. I intend to start every morning with a run around the campus, alternated with swimming and weight-lifting sessions."

"My God, why so much physical fitness training?"

Ingrid thought for a moment while eyeing Betty.

"If I told you why, would you keep that to yourself?"

"Uh, yes, of course!" Answered the young black woman, surprised by so much secrecy on such a benign subject.

"Because a fighter pilot needs to be in top physical shape, Betty."

The biology student opened wide eyes at that.

"You? A fighter pilot? Then, you must have fought in the war, Ingrid?"

"Yes, I did! I am presently serving on a part-time basis, on weekends and Summer, during my studies. That will allow me as well to keep my flying qualifications. But enough about me. Do you mind if I put on some music?"

"Not at all! You have a radio or a record player?"

"A bit of both. In fact, that is another secret I would like you to keep discreet about, Betty. I will show you."

Ingrid then unlocked the padlock of her storage closet and took out a small electronic appliance of unusual shape, along with a small type of briefcase. She plugged in her appliance before looking back at her roommate.

"Betty, my adoptive mother was Nancy Laplante, the Canadian time traveler that died in 1941. I inherited her possessions, including that portable radio with disc player that comes from the year 2012. I also have with me a well-furnished music library from the future."

Betty's eyes instantly grew as large as saucers.

"Great! I want to listen to that!"

Smiling, Ingrid opened her briefcase full of laser discs and chose a particular CD, taking it out and showing to Betty the picture on its plastic case.

“This disc is a recording of the biggest successes of a future Swedish group named ‘ROXETTE’. I think that you will like it.”

07:51 (Boston Time)

Saturday, January 13, 1945 ‘C’

Headquarters of the 33rd Wing

Logan International Airport, Boston

Ingrid was first greeted inside the headquarters of the 33rd Wing by a young corporal sitting behind a table supporting a telephone and set in the entrance lobby. The offices of the unit were established in the annexes of a large aircraft hangar in the Logan International Airport and everything indicated to Ingrid an organization in transition and with an uncertain future. She knew that the 33rd Wing had just returned from Europe a few months ago and was still waiting for Washington to decide its future. What however counted most for Ingrid was the lineup of RP-38N photo-reconnaissance aircraft parked in front of the hangar, along with about twenty P-51 MUSTANG fighters. The corporal receptionist, intimidated by her rows of medal ribbons on her uniform, including that of the Medal of Honor, and by her rank insignias of brigadier general, hurried at once to lead her to the office of the commander of the wing. Colonel Charles Brentwood shot up from his chair on seeing her insignias and saluted her crisply, with Ingrid saluting back before shaking his hand.

“Brigadier General Ingrid Dows. I am here as the officer responsible for the training of all the reserve and Air National Guard units in the Northeast Area, with offices here in Logan.”

“Well, we certainly will be happy to have such a combat veteran pilot as you as chief-instructor for the area. But please, sit down, General.”

Ingrid took place on the sofa pointed by Brentwood, who sat on a swivel chair facing the sofa.

“So, General Dows, how are your studies at the M.I.T. going?”

“Well up to now, but they are just starting. I must say however that I like the atmosphere on the campus. It is a nice change from what we lived through during the war.”

“Quite true!” Said Brentwood in a jovial tone before sobering up somewhat. “On my side, I must say that the mood in the 33rd Wing is rather somber since our return from Europe. Our biggest worry is the uncertainty concerning the future, even the survival, of our unit and of other air units in the United States. Chaos still reigns in the Pentagon concerning the reorganization of the Army Air Forces and air units continue to be disbanded left and right, while thousands of planes are either being scrapped, sold or mothballed. Many of our pilots who wanted to stay in the service have now left for civilian jobs, disgusted by the incompetence and lack of vision displayed by Washington. While I have presently in my aircraft inventory 17 Lockheed RP-38N and 22 P-51 fighters, I now have only 36 qualified pilots and 272 mechanics and technicians left on my roster of personnel.”

Ingrid straightened up in her sofa, shocked by that information.

“But, that is barely more than the normal operational strength of a single squadron. Are your maintenance and training budgets at least sufficient enough for your present unit, Colonel?”

“Thanks to the disbanding of so many units lately, our present stocks of parts, munitions and fuel are quite large, General. I also have a sufficient budget to pay my personnel and maintain proper housing for them and their families. The big unknown is about what type of training to give to our personnel. Even though the 33rd Wing is presently the sole combat air formation in the New England states, the Pentagon still has not finalized the reorganization of the air defense units in the Continental United States. I especially risk losing my RP-38Ns, since their photo-reconnaissance role doesn’t correspond to the expected future role of my wing.

“Losing those RP-38Ns and their photo-reconnaissance capabilities would be a sad waste indeed, Colonel. I however think that I have an idea about how to retain them in service while making them truly useful.”

“Oh, how, General?”

“By giving them two new roles. One would be as a coastal patrol unit, which would coordinate its activities with the Navy and the Coast Guards. The other would be as an aggressor unit, which would simulate enemy aircraft penetrating our airspace, thus helping to train our coastal fighter units. I could go sell that concept to the area commander and at the Pentagon, while also checking on what the 33rd Wing can expect for the near future.”

Brentwood seemed to like her idea and gave her a guarded smile.

“That could work and would certainly give an exciting new mission to the pilots of the 39th Reconnaissance Squadron. Well, how about doing a little tour of my unit with me, General? I could then arrange for you a training flight or two on RP-38N for you for this weekend, if you are interested in that, of course.”

The wide smile that Ingrid then gave him was enough of an answer for Brentwood.

23:19 (London Time)

Friday, March 30, 1945 ‘C’

Blueprints drawing section, Roll-Royce’s Bristol jet engine factory

Bristol, Somerset County

Great Britain

Margaret Woodward was alone at this late hour in the large blueprints drawing room as she swept the floor with a wide broom. The Rolls-Royce engineers and industrial drafting specialists were now gone for the weekend, leaving behind their usual mess of blueprints piles, discarded faulty blueprints, technical manuals, full ashtrays and empty tea cups. When it came to the blueprints, the directive Margaret had got from the drawing room supervisor was simple: the ones in the trash cans and on the floors were free for her to pick up and throw away, while those on the drawing tables were not to be touched. The 45 year-old janitor lady had been working at this factory for over nine years now and was well accustomed to the rather slovenly conduct of the technical and production staff, who believed that it was solely the responsibility of the night janitors to keep the place clean. Cleanliness was not however the only department in which the plant’s staff was lacking. A competent security officer would have added classified document handling and storage to that. And the plant managers expected her to clean by herself two such drawing rooms and ten management offices, all for a pay that was barely above minimum wages. Margaret did not expect much better in fact from the typical capitalists and exploiters running Rolls-Royce and other big British enterprises. She had gladly worked here during the war for such miserly salaries, to help the country survive the Nazi threat, as she genuinely loved England, but she had expected something a bit better once the country had prevailed over Germany. In that she had been bitterly disappointed. Thankfully, she had found a way to round up her salary, at the same time that she lent help to the only country in this World which seemed to care for the lowly common worker.

Finding a large discarded blueprint in a nearly full trash can that she was intent on emptying in her own big rolling garbage bin, Margaret unfolded it, curious to see what it was. It turned out to be a nearly complete blueprint of a new type of jet engine about to be put into production by Rolls-Royce. It was in fact similar to another, incomplete blueprint sitting on a nearby drawing table, except for the red ink circle and hand-written note on it from a drawing supervisor that showed where the drafter had made a minor but crucial mistake. Thinking quickly, Margaret looked up from the blueprint and, not seeing any security guard close to the drafting section, folded and pocketed the blueprint. Her heart beating faster now, she resumed her sweeping while keeping an eye open for more golden opportunities like the discarded blueprint. She did find such a second treasure in the trash can of the secretary of the head design engineer, in the form of a typed technical directive that bore extensive hand-written corrections and additions. The directive itself was meant to explain in rather technical terms the innovations added in the new type of jet engine, along with their advantages over the old techniques. The head engineer had obviously thought about some extra points and had probably told his secretary to retype the directive, following which she had thrown away the old version, which bore no visible security classification. The head engineer in fact had the sloppy habit of putting on the security classification only on final, approved versions of the documents he wrote, using ink stamps rather than have it typed in. That was however all to the taste of Margaret, who folded and pocketed the discarded document. Her handler was going to be quite pleased with her tomorrow.

10:48 (Boston Time)

Thursday, April 24, 1947 'C'

'Wright Brothers' test wind tunnel

Aeronautical engineering department of the M.I.T.

Cambridge Massachusetts

"So, Joe, can you now tell me what was exciting you so much when you called me?" Asked Doctor Richard Goodale as he faced the engineer in charge of the main test wind tunnel of the department. Joseph Bicknell answered in a low voice while pointing the test model chamber of the wind tunnel, in which a female student was visible, modifying the attack angle of an aircraft model.

"It's the experimental project of that young Ingrid Dows, Doctor. When she showed me the blueprint for her project, I thought then that she was going to hit a technological impasse, even if her chosen subject seemed interesting. Now that she has completed the first wind tunnel tests of her experimental model, the results she obtained are truly stunning and may signal a real breakthrough in terms of aerodynamics."

"Oh? And what is precisely the subject for her experimental project, Joe?"

Bicknell answered him by giving him a document, which Goodale then started reading.

"The diamond wing, an ideal wing for supersonic and high subsonic planes." Goodale said, reading out loud the title of the thesis, which was signed by Ingrid Dows. Now frankly intrigued, he read quickly the main points of the document, concentrating in particular on the drawings and mathematical formulas. What he saw made him nod his head slowly with appreciation.

"I must say that this concept looks fascinating...and theoretically sound. That second concept about a so-called 'flexible adaptive wing profile' also sounds damn interesting. And the first wind tunnel tests are backing her theories up, you say?"

"They more than back them up, Doctor! Compared to a classic rear-swept wing of the same surface, her diamond wing offers a nearly fifteen percent weight saving, while aerodynamic drag at close to Mach one is reduced by a whopping 36 percent. Her adaptive wing profile system, by offering a smoother profile while configured to landing speeds, in turn gives a nine percent extra in lift and a reduction of twelve percent in drag compared to classic flaps. Her diamond wing also is proving to be more stable and resistant to spins than a classic wing."

"Hell, these are very interesting results indeed." Exclaimed Goodale. "Let's go see her."

The two engineers got closer to the model test chamber of the wind tunnel, entering it as Ingrid was finishing her last adjustments. Goodale felt excitement grow in him when he saw from up close the reduced scale aircraft model fixed to the test stand. Two swept wings, one swept towards the rear and the other swept towards the front, were joined at their tips by vertical rudder surface that extended far to the rear of the wing tips. With the rear-swept forward wing fixed to the top of the fuselage and the forward-swept rear wing fixed to the bottom of the fuselage, the whole thing formed a sort of closed loop lozenge. Seeing Goodale and Bicknell inside the test chamber, Ingrid hurried down from the test stand once her adjustments were completed.

"Good day, Doctor Goodale! What do you think of my experimental model?"

"That it has an intriguing shape, Miss Dows. Mister Bicknell just showed me your experimental thesis and told me about your preliminary wind tunnel results. How did you get the idea for such a wing form?"

"To be honest, Doctor, I didn't invent that wing form. Do you remember Nancy Laplante, the Canadian time traveler who died in 1941?"

"Yes! What about her?"

"She was my adoptive mother, Doctor." Said Ingrid in a sober tone. "She educated me during many months before her death and told me about many things, including the future of planes. The concept of the diamond wing comes from the future but, even then, was never actually applied in practice to a production aircraft. It fascinated me and I wanted badly to study it, along with other aeronautical concepts Nancy told me about. I thus decided to center my thesis on the diamond wing concept and on the flexible adaptive wing profile concept, two ideas that nicely complement each other in my opinion. If the results of my wind tunnel tests prove positive, I will then request that they be patented under my name. That is if you approve such a demand of course, Doctor."

"Hum! To hear about a concept is one thing. If you would have simply put a request for a patent without doing any theoretical calculations or wind testing to verify your claims, I would be the first to scream plagiarism. However, with the concrete performance test results you are getting and with your mathematical studies of the variables for such a wing form and adaptive profile, you would then have the perfect right to ask for a patent and I will then gladly support your request, Ingrid."

"Thank you very much, Doctor Goodale." Replied a happy Ingrid. Goodale had another look at the scale model, his mind boiling.

"Do you have more such theoretical concepts from the future that you would like to develop and test during your studies here at the M.I.T., Miss Dows?"

"Many in fact, Doctor. Unfortunately, most of them would necessitate a supersonic wind tunnel to test them. My dream is to see our air force become equipped one day soon with supersonic jet fighters. Unfortunately, from what I can hear, it seems that we are presently developing a collection of flying lemons, with old generals without true vision in charge of our military aircraft projects. I must say that this is frustrating me to no small degree."

"And I understand you, Miss Dows. Well, I will let you finish your wind tunnel tests in peace. Be assured that I will read with great interest your final experimental thesis paper."

"Thank you, Doctor Goodale."

As Goodale walked away with Bicknell, he spoke to him in a low voice once out of earshot of Ingrid.

"Damn! I should discuss more with this girl about what Nancy Laplante told her about the future of planes. It could be fascinating."

"Other students could take that as favoritism on your part towards Dows, Doctor." Warned Bicknell, making Goodale think for a few seconds.

"Hum, maybe. Some could certainly claim that those revelations from the future are giving her an unfair advantage over the other students of our program."

"But she was very open about the source of her inspiration." Added Bicknell.

"I know, Joe, but there are jealous people everywhere. For the moment, keep the origin of her experimental concept confidential. By the way, if she tells you that she wishes to test another experimental concept during the Summer period, then warn me at once."

"Understood, Doctor."

11:10 (Boston Time)

Thursday, May 20, 1948 'C'

Office of Doctor Richard Goodale

Aeronautical engineering department

M.I.T., Cambridge

"Please, sit down, Ingrid. No need to be nervous: this is to pass you some good news."

"Just good news, Doctor?"

"Just good news, Ingrid." Replied Goodale with a smile. "The Dean of the institute has approved my request that your diploma in aeronautical engineering be given to you along with the fourth year students next week. You filled all the criteria, obtained all the necessary credits and executed all the required lab work, all of that with top grades."

Ingrid couldn't help then scream her joy, making Goodale smile again.

"Ingrid, you worked and studied hard during those last three and a half years and you fully deserve your engineering diploma. I am certain that it will greatly benefit the nation when you will return to active duty with our new Air Force. Who knows? Maybe you will then be able to develop that supersonic jet fighter that you dreamed so much about."

"I haven't abandoned that dream yet, Doctor, on the contrary. If that dream comes true, then I promise you to arrange so that you could see the final result from up close."

"That would truly please me, Ingrid. Here is your official list of credits earned and your final grading notes, plus your official diploma as a bachelor of science in aeronautical engineering. Once again, congratulations, Ingrid! I will see you next at the diploma handout ceremony."

Ingrid then shook vigorously Goodale's hand, feeling on top of the World. Yes, she did work hard during those three and a half years, but the experience she had gained here was worth as much as the diploma that was now in her hands. Her only regret would be to leave behind the good friends she had made here at the M.I.T..

11:14 (Boston Time)

Thursday, May 27, 1948 'C'

Female quarters, Bexley Hall

M.I.T., Cambridge

Betty Woods, who was herself preparing to receive her own diploma this afternoon, watched Ingrid as the latter was ironing her ceremonial graduation cape.

"I am truly happy for you, Ingrid: to complete in three and a half years an engineering degree, and with an honor mention on top of that. You can be proud of yourself."

"Thank you, Betty." Said Ingrid, smiling to her friend and roommate. "Your opinion counts a lot to me, truly. Talking of your opinion, do you think that I should wear a civilian dress or my Air Force uniform under my graduation cape?"

Betty glanced at Ingrid's closet, where her new uniforms, which she had received two months ago after the official formation of the new United States Air Force, were stored inside zipped up suit bags. Betty still remembered well the official declaration by

President Truman announcing the formation of the Air Force and also the accompanying presidential executive decree ordering the desegregation of the American armed forces, an event that she had happily celebrated with Ingrid.

“Wear your best dress, Ingrid. You won’t have too many occasions after this to wear civilian clothes, if you return to active service.”

“Then, a civilian dress it will be. As for returning to mil...”

Three knocks then rang on the door of their room, interrupting her. Putting away her steam iron, Ingrid walked quickly to the door.

“That must be Peter coming to see me.”

To her surprise, she opened the door only to face a young captain of the Air Force in dress uniform who saluted her crisply.

“Brigadier General Ingrid Dows?”

“That’s me!” Answered Ingrid, feeling dread appear in her. “What can I do for you, Captain?”

“I am sorry to ask you this, General, but could you show me your military identity card before I state the goal of my visit?”

Now frankly mystified, Ingrid nodded her head and told the captain to enter the room, closing the door behind him before too many of the other female residents could see the young officer and ask questions. Even after those three and a half years here, only Betty, Peter and Doctor Goodale knew that she was a military pilot and a brigadier general. She then went to her purse and searched in it, taking out her military identity card and giving it to the captain. The young officer examined carefully the I.D. card before giving it back to her, then extracted from inside his vest a sealed envelope that he presented to her.

“General, I was sent here by General Vandenberg to hand to you personally this classified mission order. You are as of today returned to full-time active service and will have to present yourself no later than tomorrow afternoon at four O’clock to General Vandenberg in his office at the Pentagon.”

Ingrid threw him a surprised look as she opened the envelope.

“But, I notified the Pentagon of my impending engineering degree graduation and of my request to return to full-time service only three days ago. That kind of response speed is a bit unusual.”

The young officer gave her an embarrassed smile.

"Let's say that things were already rolling before you notified the Pentagon of your graduation today, General. Your orders will explain to you the situation."

Taking a folded document out of the envelope, Ingrid read it quickly, her face closing up gradually as Betty looked on. Ingrid finally nodded her head once and stuffed the letter in her purse while looking at the captain.

"Tell General Vandenberg that I will be at his office in the Pentagon no later than tomorrow afternoon. This order says that I am to take a temporary room at Fort Myers?"

"Correct, General. Your room there is already booked: I took care of it myself. You will only need to present your mission order at the administrative desk in Fort Myers."

"Thank you for your diligence, Captain. You are dismissed."

The young officer saluted again Ingrid, then walked out of the room, closing the door behind him and leaving Ingrid alone with a worried Betty Woods.

"What was that all about, Ingrid?"

"My urgent recall to full service, ordered by the Chief of Staff of the Air Force himself. It seems that there is a new crisis on the horizon and that my competences are again needed overseas."

"Where exactly overseas?"

"I'm sorry, Betty, but that is classified."

"You...you are going to war again?" Asked Betty, paling visibly. Ingrid nodded her head somberly.

"Probably, Betty."

The young black woman then got up from her bed and went to Ingrid, hugging her in an emotional accolade.

"God, be careful, Ingrid!"

"I promise that I will, Betty." Said Ingrid, sincerely moved. She then thought that tonight's celebration supper in private with Peter Simpsons could well turn into a melodrama. In fact, she may just have to skip that celebration supper so that she could leave for Washington tonight in her second-hand war surplus jeep.

09:04 (Washington Time)

Friday, May 28, 1948 'C'

Office of the Chief of Staff of the Air Force

Pentagon, Washington, D.C.

Ingrid was a bit apprehensive as she was introduced into General Vandenberg's office by his secretary. There had been bad blood between her and Vandenberg in England in 1944, when he had arbitrarily and summarily relieved her of her command, only to be later overruled by General Kenney and himself relieved of command, while Ingrid was given back her command by Kenney. However, probably because he learned eventually about her ability to remember 7,000 years of past incarnations, Vandenberg later admitted his mistakes and personally sent a letter of apology to Ingrid. She was however not sure how sincere that apology had been. Vandenberg, a tall and very handsome man, got up from behind his desk when Ingrid entered and went around to come and greet Ingrid with a handshake and an apparently genuine smile.

"Brigadier General Dows! I am happy to see that you could make it to here from Boston so quickly. Congratulations by the way for your new diploma in aeronautical engineering from the M.I.T.. The Air Force needs technically competent officers."

"Thank you, General! I must say that the tone of my orders left me little doubts about the urgency of the situation. I suppose that we are talking about Korea, General?" Vandenberg nodded his head, not really surprised to see that she had guessed what was going on: after all, she had the reputation of knowing at least in general lines what was to come in the future, thanks to her past connection with Nancy Laplante.

"Exact, Ingrid! The Soviets are showing signs of wanting to push their North Korean puppets into a war of conquest against South Korea. General MacArthur, Commander of the Far East Command, has asked that a provisional air task force be sent to Korea, to be ready to provide direct air support to our army units there if need be. He asked for you by name as its commander. You are going to take with you major parts of your old 99th Composite Wing, which is still based in the Philippines, plus a few more squadrons based presently in Okinawa. Do you feel ready for an immediate deployment to Korea, via the Philippines?"

"Yes, General! I will only need a few days once in the Philippines to properly form up my new command and ensure that it is ready for a combat deployment."

Looking satisfied, Vandenberg took a document from the top of his desk and gave it to her.

"Here are your detailed mission orders, Ingrid. Once you are in theater, you will come under direct command of General MacArthur and of the United States armed forces representative in Korea, Lieutenant General John Hodge."

Reading quickly the three-page document, Ingrid then looked back up at Vandenberg.

“Do you have special instructions concerning my transportation to the Philippines, General?”

“Yes! A seat has been reserved for you on the C-69 effecting the regular Washington-San Francisco-Honolulu flight, with departure tomorrow at two O’clock in the afternoon from the National Airport here in Washington. Once in Hawaii, it will be up to you to find the fastest ride to the Philippines. Your mission order however gives you absolute priority on all military planes. Please keep the content of your orders to yourself, though: Washington wants to keep our response to the Soviets move in Korea discreet. We don’t want to give excuses to the North Koreans to attack us.”

“General,” replied Ingrid with a sarcastic smile, “ the North Koreans don’t need excuses to attack. Neither do the Soviets. They just need our inaction.”

CHAPTER 3 – INTERPOL

10:28 (Paris Time)

Saturday, May 17, 1947 ‘B’

Time Patrol Paris outpost

Le Bourget Airport, Paris

France

The couple that had just stepped out of a cab in front of the main entrance of the Time Patrol outpost at Le Bourget Airport stared for a moment at the transparent sliding doors, a mix of hope and anxiety on their faces. The woman, in her thirties like her husband, finally spoke in a strangled voice as their cab was rolling away.

“You really think that they will be able to help us, Jean?”

Jean Demaersk swallowed hard before answering her, tears in his eyes.

“They must, Paulette: they are our last hope. Come!”

Wrapping an arm around the shoulders of his wife, Jean walked with her to the transparent sliding doors, which opened automatically at their approach. Hesitating for a short moment, the couple finally entered what turned out to be a large security airlock, with a second pair of sliding doors opening once the external doors closed, giving them access to a vast reception lounge. The couple went to the reception desk along the left side of the lounge, behind which sat a young giant bald woman. The giant, visibly a person from the 34th Century, smiled to them and spoke in excellent French.

“Welcome to the Le Bourget Time Patrol outpost. How may I help you?”

Jean Demaersk, a bit intimidated by the futuristic décor of the lounge, took on him to answer her.

“We...we have come, me and my wife, to ask for the help of the Time Patrol to find our little daughter, miss. She disappeared three months ago and the police is telling us that they can’t do anything more to help us find her.”

The smile of the receptionist faded as Jean spoke, to be replaced by a somber expression as she activated her videophone screen.

“I will immediately contact the duty Time Patrol agent, so that he could speak with you. Are you French, sir?”

“No! We are Belgians. We come from Florennes, near Charleroi. I am Jean Demaersk and this is my wife Paulette.”

The receptionist nodded her head before looking at her screen, on which had appeared the head and torso of the Time Patrol agent on duty in Paris at this time.

“Agent Bigras, I have here a Belgian couple, the Demaersk, which is asking for the help of the Time Patrol to find their daughter, which disappeared three months ago.”

Jean Bigras, sitting at his control station, raised an eyebrow on hearing that: the official mandate of the Time Patrol was to prevent illegal time travel and to help regulate the temporal traffic between the 34th Century of both Timeline ‘A’ and Timeline ‘C’ and the 20th Century of Timeline ‘B’. The Time Patrol, despite its relatively small size as an organization, enjoyed tremendous influence in this century, the result of its intervention in 1942 ‘B’, which had put a quick end to the Second World War. However, it had in theory no judicial power in this century, except on matters concerning time travel.

“Very well, Vana: I will receive them. Have them come up to the third level.”

“Right away, Agent Bigras.” Answered the receptionist before looking up from her videophone screen and looking at the Demaersk. “Agent Jean Bigras will receive you right away. Please take one of the elevator cabins to your right and go up to the third level. Agent Bigras will be waiting for you there.”

“Thank you very much, miss.” Replied Jean Demaersk before going with his wife towards the three elevators visible in one corner of the lounge. The trip to the third level was short and smooth and the couple stepped out of their elevator cabin to be met at once by a young man of modest size wearing a form-fitting gray uniform.

“Welcome to our outpost, Mister and Misses Demaersk.” Said the agent while smiling and offering his hand for a shake. “I am Agent Jean Bigras. Please follow me to my office.”

The couple followed him after shaking hands with him, soon entering an office where what looked like a large, flat electronic horizontal screen seemed to act as a work desk. Jean Bigras offered the couple two comfortable swivel chairs and went to sit behind his control station. He took a moment to examine his visitors, whose sadness was too evident.

“Mister and Misses Demaersk, I must first tell you that the Time Patrol doesn’t normally implicate itself in the judicial and criminal affairs of this century, unless some kind of time travel is involved. This said, however, the Time Patrol is always ready to

help people in distress as much as possible. Can I have first your names and place of residence?"

"We are Jean and Paulette Demaersk. We live in Florennes, in Belgium. It is about fourteen kilometers to the southeast of Charleroi. Our address is 17, Beaudry Street."

"Thank you!" Said Bigras while finishing to type that information in his computer. "Now, describe to me when, where and how your daughter disappeared."

"Our daughter's name is Marie and she had just turned nine years old." Answered Jean Demaersk while taking out his wallet and extracting from it a small picture that he gave to Bigras. "This is a recent picture of Marie. You can keep it. Marie disappeared on the morning of February the Thirteenth of this year, while she was on her way to school. Our house is about 600 meters from the school Marie frequented, by the way. She left our house at about ten past seven in the morning that day, so that she could have time to play with her friends in the school yard before the classes started. At about ten on that same morning, the school principal called us to ask if Marie was sick. That was when we realized that she had disappeared. My wife immediately made a few phone calls, to make sure that Marie had not gone to the home of one of her friends, but came up empty. That evening, when I came back from work, I learned that Marie was still missing and I called at once the local police station to signal her disappearance. Unfortunately, the gendarme on duty decided that this was a simple case of Marie running temporarily away and did nothing, apart from telling me to wait until the next day to see if my daughter would show up. I did try to convince that idiot that Marie was in danger, but to no avail. The next day, with Marie still missing, I called back the police station. This time, the head of the local detachment listened to me and accepted to launch a search for my young daughter. Unfortunately, despite an intensive search that went on for three days, no trace of Marie was found. Inspectors from Brussels then took over the case, but they closed it after a month, having found nothing about Marie. Since then, the police is considering her case as a closed one and refuse to do more to find our daughter. We are now desperate, Mister Bigras, and we have no one else left to turn to in order to find Marie, or at the least find what happened to her." The plea by Jean Demaersk shook Jean Bigras by its evident sincerity and deep despair. He already had suspicions about how Marie could have disappeared, but the judicial implications of this case didn't allow him to take a decision himself.

"Mister Demaersk, please understand first that our eventual intervention will have to be approved in advance by the Belgian authorities, since the Time Patrol has no jurisdiction on criminal affairs in your country. Unfortunately, as you may already know, the relations between the Time Patrol and the Belgian government are rather, uh, tense."

Jean Demaersk threw him a frustrated look.

"Is it because of your declarations about the nature of Jesus Christ?"

"That and also because we have publicly denounced the racist exploitation system in place in the Belgian Congo." Answered Bigras, equally frustrated. Many European governments, on top of the Vatican, had lashed out at the Time Patrol in general and at Nancy Laplante in particular following the publication of the documentary filmed during the 1st Century about the life and death of Yeshua, better known as Jesus Christ, calling the documentary a blasphemy. On top of that, the anti-colonial and anti-racist views of the Time Patrol had grated on many European capitals, as well as in Washington. Jean Demaersk, from frustrated, then became irritated and raised his voice.

"Are you telling us that you can't help us find our daughter, Mister Bigras?"

The Time Patrol agent looked at him calmly, understanding his pain.

"No, I didn't say that, Mister Demaersk. We will find a way to justify our intervention. As for finding Marie or learn what happened to her, that will actually be the easy part for us. The problem is to whether the Belgian justice system will accept the proofs that we will find or will refuse to accept them and will then let go any suspect implicated in the disappearance of your daughter."

Paulette Demaersk then opened her mouth for the first time since she entered the office.

"Mister Bigras, what will happen to any suspect is not important for me. What is important is to find my little daughter."

"In that case, I believe that we could start our search very soon, Misses Demaersk. I now have on the screen of my computer an aerial view of your village. Please show me where your house is, as well as where Marie's school is and which streets she follows to get to school."

Paulette, helped by her husband, did so, with Bigras carefully noting the points designated by her on the satellite view. The Time Patrol agent then hesitated for a moment before speaking again, suspecting that what he was about to say could infuriate the Demaersk.

"Mister and Misses Demaersk, I must warn you about one thing: whatever we find, what happened during the last three months cannot be changed, on pain of changing history again and creating a new split in the timelines. This means that, if we find your daughter alive, she will still have to stay missing until today, in order to avoid creating a causality loop. Also, if we witness her death, we won't be allowed to go back in time to save her, on pain of again possibly creating a causality loop. Playing with History is a very risky business and our mandate is actually to preserve History from irresponsible manipulations. While I sympathize with you, we will not be allowed to break those rules."

What he didn't have the heart to tell them was what kind of horrors could have happened during those three months of disappearance. The Demaersk looked at each other, hesitant, before facing again Bigras.

"We understand, Mister Bigras." Said Jean Demaersk, his voice shaky. "The important thing is to find our daughter."

"Thank you for your confidence in us. I will now have to leave for a short time, in order to warn my headquarters of this. Would you like in the meantime to have something to eat or drink? A coffee, maybe?"

"A coffee will be appreciated, Mister Bigras." Answered Paulette Demaersk, imitated by her husband. Bigras nodded to that as he got up from his chair.

"In that case, I will leave you in the care of my assistant while I go speak with my superiors. I should be back in less than twenty minutes."

Calling in his personal assistant in Paris, a young woman from the 34th Century, Jean Bigras left the Demaersk in her care and left his office. Taking an elevator reserved for the personnel of the Time Patrol, he then walked hurriedly to the Scooter Hall of the outpost, the data chip containing the information given by the Belgian couple in one pocket of his uniform. Sitting inside one of the small three-seat time machines parked in the Scooter Hall, he noted carefully the actual time before powering the time scooter: he now had a sixteen minute play to return here to his office. Rising silently from the ground thanks to its anti-gravity field, the scooter then disappeared from the hall in a brief flash of white light.

08:00 (New Zealand Time)

Saturday, February 15, 2992 Before the Common Era (BCE)

Secret Time Patrol main base

Future site of the city of Auckland

New Zealand

The time scooter and Jean Bigras reappeared in a hall similar to that of the Paris outpost. The external view via the large panoramic windows of the hall however showed the sea nearby, along with the beaches to the east and west of the secret base of the Time Patrol. There were two main reasons for having chosen this location and time period for the base: first, no contemporary man was going to land in New Zealand before another millennium; second, the local climate was nearly perfect, being mild and moderate year long. Only the occasional earthquakes darkened this picture, but the base was built to easily resist such cataclysms. In fact the base was not a fixed structure, but rather a giant ship able to travel through time and space at will. If some kind of emergency or threat made it necessary, the base could thus take off and disappear towards the safety of another time period. Fortunately, such an emergency had never happened, the secret concerning the location and time period of the base being carefully kept secret.

Opening the sliding canopy of his time scooter, Jean Bigras stepped off the machine and went to the small duty station situated near the entrance to the hall, where a member of the Time Patrol was in charge of recording the departure and arrival of time scooters. Jean saluted with one hand the giant sitting at the station.

“Hi, Greg! I left Le Bourget at 10:44 local time, on May 17 of 1947 ‘B’. I need to discuss a delicate matter with Farah. Keep my scooter for my sole use until I come back here.”

“Got it!” Said the giant, who was bald and had six fingers per hand, like all the humans from the 34th Century. “What kind of delicate matter, if I may ask?”

“Child kidnapping.”

Greg Thorgal made a disgusted grimace at that: the citizens of the Global Council generally abhorred violence and abusing a child was a concept as repugnant to them as it was incomprehensible.

“I hope that you will be able to find that child...in good health.”

"I hope so. The main question is however if I will be allowed to search for that child. I will keep you posted about that, Greg."

Jean then left the Scooter Hall, taking an elevator to go up three levels, where the executive offices of the Time Patrol were. He was confident to find in her office at this hour Farah Tolkonen, the scientist from the 34th Century who had co-founded the Time Patrol with Nancy Laplante and who was now its Chief Administrator. He was arriving near the door of Farah's office when a young girl of seven years of age came out of the office. She was tall for her age and was also very athletic, while her black hair fell to her shoulder blades. Her green eyes sparkled on seeing Jean.

"Hi, Jean! How are you doing?"

"I'm good! And you, Nancy?"

Nancy Laplante 'B' smiled to him while answering.

"Very well, thank you! I am going to swim a bit at the beach. Will you go there this morning?"

"Uh, I'm afraid that I am here only shortly, to take care of some business. Next time maybe, Nancy."

Jean shook his head in amusement as he entered Farah's office: despite her young age, Nancy's timeline twin already promised to become as much of a teaser as her big sister. Jean found Farah Tolkonen sitting behind her work desk, typing something on her computer. The scientist, who measured a good 220 centimeters but was of slim built, looked up at him with her yellow eyes.

"Jean? I don't believe that you have completed your tour in Paris yet, no?"

"Not for another two months, Farah. I came here to ask your authorization to take care of an unusual case."

"What kind of case?"

"The disappearance of a young girl in Belgium."

Jean then told Farah about the plea from the Demaersk, also giving her the data chip with the information on Marie, concluding in a sober tone.

"I hope that we will be able to help this little girl, Farah. I don't think that I will be able to look at myself in the mirror if I do nothing for Marie Demaersk. In fact, I think that it is high time that we offer our services in the 20th Century to help solve the worst crimes there."

"I would also like to do the same thing, Jean, but the problem is with those stupid politicians in the 20th Century, not with us."

“Then, let’s ignore those politicians and let’s act by ourselves for the public good, Farah.”

The scientist sat back in her chair, thinking about the problem for a long moment before taking a decision and then activating her videophone, switching it to the public announcement system of the base.

“Your attention, please! This is Farah! I want the crew of the scout ship ANGEL OF MERCY, as well as Mike Crawford and Assault Section Charlie to report to my office on the double for a new mission.”

She then looked at Jean Bigras, who was now smiling with satisfaction.

“I am sorry, Jean, but you won’t be able to go with them: you cannot coexist with yourself during a specific time period and I need you at our Paris outpost. Once the others will be briefed by you and get instructions from me, you will return to Le Bourget to inform the Demaersk that we are starting the search for their daughter.”

“Thank you, Farah. You won’t regret that decision.”

“Oh yes I will, Jean! I can already see the diplomatic hotlines between the 20th Century and the Global Council heat up.”

11:03 (Paris Time)

Saturday, May 17, 1947 ‘B’

Dinant Justice palace

Namur Province, Belgium

Marc Labrecque, King’s Attorney for the judicial district of Dinant, was reviewing a case file when excited shouts from adjacent offices made him look outside through his window. To his astonishment, he saw a small, futuristic machine that was landing silently in one of the parking spots in front of the justice palace. A man and a woman wearing body-fitting gray uniforms then stepped out of the vehicle, which was the size of an ultra-compact car, to then enter the justice palace. Having recognized the newcomers as being members of the famous Time Patrol and being curious about their reasons to come here, Labrecque left his office and walked towards the main central staircase. He was however preempted by the appearance of the two visitors, who were climbing the stairs while being led by a gendarme. The latter, seeing Labrecque approach, immediately came to him and stopped in front of him, saluting him.

“Sir, these two people from the Time Patrol are asking to speak with you.”

Labrecque eyed quickly the newcomers: the man was a colossus with an impressive physique but also with a frank and sympathetic look, while the young woman, also tall by average standards, was slender and beautiful, with blond hair cut at the neck. The man presented himself first, speaking a good French and presenting his right hand.

"Let me present myself, mister: Mike Crawford, Deputy Chief of Operations of the Time Patrol. My colleague is Agent Angie Wells, pilot of the scout ship ANGEL OF MERCY."

"And I am Marc Labrecque, King's Attorney for the district of Dinant. To what do I owe a visit from the Time Patrol, Mister Crawford?"

"To a tragic affair concerning a little Belgian girl that disappeared three months ago. Could we discuss this in private?"

"But of course, Mister Crawford! Please follow me."

Leading his two visitors to his office, Labrecque made them sit in a sofa before sitting himself behind his work desk.

"So, what are we talking about exactly? I am surprised that the Time Patrol would be concerned by a simple disappearance case, especially in Belgium." Mike Crawford didn't challenge the tone used by Labrecque, instead nodding simply his head.

"Normally, criminal cases that do not imply time travel are effectively none of our concern, Mister Labrecque. However, a Belgian couple that lost their little daughter three months ago came to our outpost in Le Bourget to ask our help in finding their girl. It appears that your office officially closed the case concerning Marie Demaersk, from Florennes, two months ago, for lack of leads. Is that correct?" Labrecque thought over for a moment before nodding his head himself.

"I remember that case. Unfortunately, no witnesses came forward and no evidence was found to help our investigation. The judge that I put on that case was finally forced to close the file as a cold case. I understand that the Demaersk asked you, but why would the Time Patrol want to imply itself in this file now?"

"Because we have the means to find what happened to the little Marie Demaersk, by going back in time and observing the events on the day of her disappearance. However, this raises the question of the legality of any proof or evidence we would then collect. To find and save that little girl is the most important thing for us and for her parents, but we don't want to see legal disputes concerning our

investigation methods to let a potential suspect escape punishment. We thus came here to see you in order to obtain the legal support of the Belgian justice ministry in this affair.”

“I see!” Said calmly Labrecque, who now understood perfectly what this implied. A good lawyer could probably throw out of court as inadmissible evidence any proof found by the Time Patrol via unconventional methods. He was also conscious of the cold relations between the government in Brussels and the Time Patrol. On the other hand, the life of a little Belgian girl was at stake here.

“And if you go back in the past and find Marie Demaersk, what do you intend to do?”

“That is actually one of the delicate and also tragic points about this affair, Mister Labrecque. Even if we find Marie while she is in the process of being abused, or if she is already dead, we would technically be unable to change history. The only way we could do something would be to save Marie then and put in temporary detention any suspect, to transport them back to today. In any case, Marie would not be able to officially reappear before today and we may be forced to let the suspect or suspects continue their activities in the meantime, in order not to change history. Even in the worst case, you will then know who to target for your investigation and we will provide you video recordings proving to you what happened to Marie Demaersk. So, Mister Labrecque, are you ready to accept our help in this case?”

“Personally, yes, but I will have at a minimum to inform Brussels about this, to obtain the support of the justice minister and to...”

Mike Crawford then raised his hand to cut him off.

“Please understand this, Mister Labrecque. If Marie Demaersk is still alive today, the probabilities are that she has been abused regularly since her disappearance, maybe even raped by a depraved pervert...or worse. Any time wasted consulting your superiors, unless done very quickly, will mean more suffering and abuse for that little girl. If you really want to consult your superiors in Brussels, do it, but tell them at the same time that our ship will depart for the past this afternoon at three O'clock. Also, if you intend to have one of your judges to accompany us, that judge will have to be ready to leave at three, with a suitcase for a long trip.”

“But, making the judicial machine move so fast is nearly impossible! Do you have any idea of the number of administrative levels between me and the justice minister?”

"If this could help convince your superiors, you can tell them that the Time Patrol is ready from now on to help the Belgian justice system resolve any problematic case of kidnapping, disappearance, murder or other serious violent crime. This is of course dependant on Brussels approving and supporting our investigation methods. Tell them as well that, irrespective of what we will find in the past, we will be back here this evening at six O'clock, and that even if we have to spend three months in the past." Labrecque was left speechless for a moment, overwhelmed by all this. He finally got over it and grabbed the handset of this telephone, composing an internal number.

"Hello, Régis? There is something new in the disappearance of the little Marie Demaersk three months ago in Florennes. You will need to go home right now and pack a suitcase for a prolonged trip... I know that Florennes is only 25 kilometers away, but I don't have the time to explain in detail now. Just go home, pack up and come back here for no later than three O'clock this afternoon. I will see you then." Labrecque then cut the line and looked at Mike Crawford.

"Jacques Régis is the examining judge that was in charge of the initial investigation on the disappearance of Marie Demaersk in February. He is both competent and dedicated and I can assure you of his complete collaboration. I will now contact my superiors in Brussels."

"Thank you, Mister Labrecque. Your comprehension is most appreciated, believe me."

"You can best thank me by bringing us back that little girl, Mister Crawford." Replied in a sober tone the King's attorney.

06:58 (Paris Time)

Thursday, February 13, 1947 'B'

Scout ship ANGEL OF MERCY

5,000 meters above Florennes

Belgium

Jacques Régis, examining judge for the district of Namur, still didn't believe the speed at which things happened since the call received from Labrecque. The moment that he showed up at the justice palace with a suitcase of clothes and a briefcase containing crime scene analysis equipment, he was put inside a time scooter and brought aboard a ship of the Time Patrol. That ship, the ANGEL OF MERCY, measured

a good fifty meters in length and, with its ovoid shape, represented an impressive flying mass. Despite of that, Mike Crawford had told him that it was part of the smallest class of combat ships the Time Patrol possessed. Small or not, the ANGEL OF MERCY had proved to be extraordinarily well equipped for their actual mission. Designed for armed patrols and reconnaissance missions, it had on top of a very respectable armament a number of extremely sophisticated surveillance and observation equipment, apart from being able to become invisible to both the naked eye and to radar. It now had been floating over Florennes for nearly a half hour, and this without anyone noticing its presence.

Sitting at one of the sensors monitoring stations in the ground surveillance section, situated just forward of the large belly cargo bay of the ship, Jacques Régis could see on a giant flat screen facing him a view of the house of the Demaersk, as seen from a spy probe floating less than thirty meters away and above the house. Apart from Régis, Mike Crawford and three other members of the Time Patrol were in the compartment. Two of them were women who controlled the spy probes deployed around the Demaersk house, while the third member was a young and athletic man wearing an impressive combat armor and armed to the teeth. The man, George Townsend, had been presented to Régis as being the leader of one of the assault sections of the Time Patrol, with the task of leading any armed intervention if it became necessary. One of the two women suddenly pointed at a small car visible on the main screen. It had just stopped along one side of the snow-covered street, less than fifty meters away from the Demaersk house.

"Mike, look at that car: the driver is letting the engine turning but doesn't seem to want to come out."

"I see it! Gertrud, reposition your probe to the rear of that car, with a field of view that includes the Demaersk house."

"Understood, Mike!"

Régis felt tension rise in him as he examined the scene on the giant screen. Everything appeared set for a typical child kidnapping scenario.

"Mister Crawford, would it be possible to print a photo of this scene on the screen?"

"Certainly, Mister Régis." Answered Mike while approaching the station. He then pointed one of the buttons on the control panel in front of the Belgian judge. "Each

time that you will press this button marked 'Print Screen', the image you see on the screen will be printed in color and with the date-time and coordinates references in the lower right corner of the image. The pictures will then come out of that printer to your right. What our probes are filming is anyway recorded in our databanks, so we could even produce a video film of the events of today, if you need that as well."

Pushing the said button, Régis then looked at the nearby printer, in time to see a large format, high definition color picture come out of it. It fell in a reception bin, where Régis picked it up and admired it, impressed by its clarity and detail.

"My God, I wish that I had such equipment to work with every day. No criminal would then escape me."

"Here is Marie Demaersk!" Suddenly said one of the probe operators, making Régis look up at the screen. Young Marie was effectively coming out of her family house, wearing a winter coat and a pair of mittens, plus her school backpack. Régis immediately printed that image, noting the hour: 07:04. Followed without knowing it by five anxious pairs of eyes, little Marie started walking along the street, heading towards her school. The car noted before started rolling slowly forward in the poor light of dawn after Marie was over a hundred meters from her house, then followed her from a respectful distance. When Marie started passing through a section of street where the houses were distant from one another, the car accelerated and caught up with her, then slowed down once level with her. One of the spy probes immediately got close and Régis was able to see and hear the driver as he spoke in a friendly tone to Marie.

"Hey, little girl! It is quite cold to walk outside like this. You are going to school? I can give you a lift if you want."

"Oh, thank you, sir!" Replied the girl, who then got in the car, sitting in the front with the driver. Régis printed that image as well, while Mike Crawford whispered an information into his ear.

"Our video recordings include the ambient sound track, so you will have an audiovisual record of this kidnapping."

"Excellent! I really can't ask for better. Let's see now what that bastard will do."

The answer came quickly, with the driver stopping beside a nearby park and then applying and holding a tampon soaked with chloroform under the nose of Marie until she passed out. The driver then started rolling again but changed direction, going south instead of west. He continued to roll for a few more minutes, leaving the village by the

Rue de la Tannerie before turning on a small private dirt road leading to an isolated house. Régis printed more pictures as the man, his face now clearly visible to the camera, carried the inert body of Marie inside.

“Damn! That bastard will now escape our surveillance.”

“Not true, Mister Régis.” Said one of the young female operators, a woman with exotic features but with a name that was nearly impossible to pronounce. “I just had my spy probe jump inside the house via space-time. Here is your suspect, with Marie still in his arms.”

“Well done, Lakshmi.” Said Mike Crawford while keeping his eyes on the screen. “Mister Régis, can you tell me if you would have right now enough evidence to charge this man with child kidnapping and to have him condemned?”

“For kidnapping, yes.” Replied Régis after a short hesitation. “However, know that the Belgian Police has been actively searching for months for the origins of a child pornography ring that often deals in sadistic acts. If that man is connected to that traffic or is the main source of it and if we could charge him for those offenses, the jail term that we could then inflict on this bastard would be much more severe.”

Mike Crawford stared gravely at Régis, not liking the implications of what he had said.

“Are you telling me that other young girls in this region also disappeared in the past, and that you found their faces in pornographic films?”

“As for disappeared girls, two of them were effectively declared missing in the provinces of Namur and Hainaut during the past twelve months. As for the child pornography movies we confiscated, the girls forced to perform in it were masked and gagged and could not be positively identified. I am not saying that I am ready to simply watch and let that man abuse Marie without doing a thing, but you said yourself that you were not allowed to change the past.”

“Not in a way evident in history, Mister Régis. However, with enough information on that man, we could possibly arrange some kind of setup that would take him out of the circuit without visibly changing history. The space-time continuum is fragile, but not completely inflexible.”

“Uh, Mike, I am not sure that I like what seems to be coming up.” Said Gertrud Schwarz ‘B’, making Mike and Jacques turn their heads towards the screen. Mike swore when he was able to detail the sinister décor of the basement in which the suspect had carried Marie. One corner of the concrete basement, with a mattress put directly on the concrete floor and with a long chain and manacle fixed to a wall hook, evidently served

as a place of detention. The rest of the basement, separated from the detention corner by bed sheets hung up from the ceiling, looked like a cross between a love nest and a torture chamber, with powerful arc light reflectors and a tripod-mounted camera in one corner.

"And that, Mister Régis? Is it enough to condemn that bastard for child pornography?"

"Unfortunately not. Those are circumstantial evidence only and this man could pretend that he only finds the girls and that someone else produces the pornographic films. We must continue to simply observe for the moment."

Dropping roughly Marie Demaersk on the mattress, the suspect then methodically undressed her, leaving her totally naked, before chaining one of her hands to the wall. To the disgust of Régis and of the members of the Time Patrol watching, the man next proceeded to rape Marie while she was still unconscious.

"The bastard!" Grumbled Gertrud, attracting a nod from Jacques Régis.

"He is effectively one of the worst kind, miss. We can now add the charge of rape of a minor to the list of charges. I just hope that he will not go further for now." To the relief of all, the man then simply sat on a chair near the mattress and waited for Marie to regain consciousness. The girl screamed with fear when she saw that she was naked and that she was chained, with a stranger looking down at her. She then rolled in a ball to hide her nudity and shouted in panic.

"WHY DID YOU DO THAT? WHAT DO YOU WANT?"

The man answered her with a mean smile.

"Listen to me, girl, and listen well. If you stay quiet and do as I say, you will be well treated. If not, I will flog you until you understand your lesson. There is a chamber pot in the corner behind you and I will leave some bread and water with you. I have to leave for a few hours, but don't think that you will be able to escape. Others before you tried, without success. It won't matter as well if you scream: nobody will hear you from the bottom of this basement. This said, I will see you again this afternoon, kid."

The man put down a jug of water and a loaf of bread near the mattress, then climbed the stairs and left the basement, locking behind him what appeared to be a steel door at the top of the stairs. Going out of the house, he took place in his car and started its engine, to then roll down the private dirt road. That was the moment that Jacques Régis was hoping for.

"Mister Crawford, could you follow this man and find where he is going? In the meantime, I would like to search that house for extra evidence."

"And Marie?"

"We will not show ourselves to her yet. I still have too many unconnected pieces to put together before I can put this man under arrest. Besides, you said yourself that you still had to find a way to arrest him without changing history."

"Unfortunately, you are right. This bastard still has it coming. Lakshmi, follow that man with your spy probe and don't lose him, please. Gertrud, watch the approaches to the house and warn us if someone comes. I will go with Mister Régis and George inside the house."

17:16 (Paris Time)

11 Rue du Cheslé, Florennes

Pierre Gallien was smiling with anticipated pleasure as he stepped out of his car, now parked along one side of his house: he was going to offer himself a few delightful days of pleasures, on top of producing a new series of pictures that he was going to be able to sell for very good prices to his usual customers in Brussels and Charleroi. Walking on the thin coat of snow to the entrance door of his house, Gallien took out of a pocket of his trench coat his key ring and opened the door, then closing it quickly behind him and pushing the safety bolt: he certainly didn't want to be disturbed during the few hours he was going to spend with the little girl held in his basement. Turning around to take out his coat, Gallien suddenly froze, while his heart jumped in his chest: three men had come out of his lounge and were now staring at him with eyes full of hatred. Two of the men, wearing some sort of gray uniforms, were pointing pistols at him, while the third man, dressed in a brown suit, raised his right hand to show him a police badge.

"Mister Pierre Gallien, I am Jacques Régis, examining judge for the judicial district of Dinant, and I am arresting you for child kidnapping, rape of a minor, production and traffic of child pornography and for two premeditated murders."

"But, but, who are these people? How..."

"Agents Crawford and Townsend belong to the Time Patrol, Mister Gallien. They followed you and filmed you since just before you kidnapped little Marie Demaersk this morning. Their sensors also found on the grounds of your property the hidden tombs of

the two young girls you abused and then killed during the last months. Mister Crawford, you can now cuff him.”

“With pleasure, Mister Régis.” Said the colossus in the group, taking out a pair of handcuffs from his equipment belt and then advancing on Gallien while careful not to block the line of fire of his partner. Gallien, a lot less massive and at least fifteen centimeters shorter than the colossus, didn’t dare resist him and was brutally turned around and pushed face first against the wall. Once handcuffed, he was turned around again, which allowed him to see little Marie Demaersk, now dressed and escorted by a young woman in gray uniform, who had come out of the kitchen and was now looking at him with a mix of disgust and hatred. Jacques Régis then spoke again.

“Know that we found the list of your customers and distributors, as well as copies of the past photos and films you produced, hidden in your bedroom. You will not be the only one to fall from high up, Mister Gallien. Mister Crawford, I believe that we can now leave...discreetly.”

“What do you mean, leaving discreetly?” Said Gallien, surprised. “Are you really with the police?”

Régis had a mean smile then.

“Yes, we are, Mister Gallien. Know that we came from May the Fifteenth of this year, traveling back in time to find the trail of Marie, who was then still missing. We will now return to the Fifteenth of May, where you will be officially charged and jailed before you are put on trial. In the meantime, your house will sit empty and will not be disturbed, to preserve the evidence inside and to avoid disturbing the course of History. Once back to May, your house will be searched in detail and the bodies of your two young victims will be dug out of your yard. You will then pay for your despicable crimes, Mister Gallien.”

A brief flash of white light coming from the lounge then made Gallien turn his head. The colossus holding him by one arm pushed him towards the lounge, allowing him to see a small, futuristic vehicle that was now parked on the carpet. Its large canopy slid backward, showing a man in the uniform of the Time Patrol sitting at the controls of the machine. Gallien was made to sit on one of the three seats, with the colossus sitting inside as well while facing him. The canopy closed again and the machine rose silently from the carpet, floating briefly in midair before disappearing in a flash. Marie Demaersk watched that scene with big eyes, making Lakshmi Saduranidrasekar smile.

“You will soon travel through time with us, to be reunited with your parents, Marie. Understand however that your parents will have suffered your disappearance during three long months. Going back in time was in fact the only way to find you. We will explain that to you in more detail once we will be on our ship.”

18:04 (Paris Time)

Saturday, May 17, 1947 ‘B’

Dinant Justice Palace

Province of Namur, Belgium

“MOM! DAD!”

“MARIE!”

The happy reunion of Marie with her parents attracted a grin on the face of Jean Bigras, who had escorted the Demaersk couple to Dinant in an air car. Attorney Marc Labrecque and examining judge Jacques Régis also were looking at that scene with contentment. Labrecque finally turned to face Jean Bigras and Mike Crawford and shook hands with them.

“Gentlemen, working with you was a pleasure. We could not unfortunately save Réjeanne Lacroix and Claudette Vermillion, but that Gallien bastard and his associates will not hurt children anymore. I will personally insist on the death penalty for Gallien and, with the evidence you collected, I believe that my case is solid. Know that I will push Brussels to ask again for your services in any unresolved cases of murdered or missing children.”

“The Time Patrol will be happy to help in such cases.” Replied Mike Crawford. “May I suggest that the services of INTERPOL¹ be used to centralize all future requests for assistance, and this for all the member countries of INTERPOL, and not only Belgium. We would be ready to assign on a standby basis one ship and a team of temporal agents to answer the requests for assistance in criminal cases. Who knows? Maybe the fact that we are now available to investigate murders and kidnappings in the past will convince a few criminals to stay quiet.”

¹ INTERPOL : Acronym for ‘International Criminal Police Organization’. Organization that helps coordinate the fight against crime around the World. Its headquarters in 1947 were in Saint-Cloud, near Paris, but moved in 1989 to Lyon, France.

“That would definitely be a very positive result, Mister Crawford.”

Mike then looked again at little Marie, happy in the arms of her parents, and told himself that the extra workload that such criminal cases would bring to the Time Patrol was going to be more than compensated by the satisfaction it would bring to his agents.

CHAPTER 4 – KOREAN WAR

14:20 (Korea Time)

Saturday, June 19, 1948 ‘C’

K-1 (Pusan West) Airfield

Pusan, South Korea

As was her habit, Ingrid let her pilots land their P-38NCs and RP-38Ns first before landing herself last on the main runway of K-1 Airfield. What she could see of the airfield was about as bare and desolate as the surrounding coastal plain and nearby hills, which were apparently totally devoid of trees. The airfield installations were rudimentary, to say the least, and were exposed to the wind blowing from the nearby sea. Strangely enough, Ingrid could not see the bombers and transport planes of her command, named ‘Korea Air Task Force’, or KATF, that were supposed to be in Pusan since this morning, as she taxied her P-38NC towards the parking apron reserved for her fighter units. One of her mechanics, who had been flown in with most of her ground personnel and stocks of spares and support equipment prior to the arrival of the P-38NCs, guided her to her reserved spot, where Ingrid quickly shut down her two engines before undoing her harness and stepping out of her cockpit. A USAF captain waiting for her behind her aircraft saluted her after she jumped down on the ground.

“Welcome to Korea, General Dows! I’m Captain Jim Reynolds, sent to escort you and your pilots to a quick briefing with Colonel Lee, Commander of the 6132nd Tactical Air Control Group.”

“Can’t it wait until my pilots could at least get their personal luggage to their quarters, Captain? And where are the bombers and transport planes of my command?”

“I’m sorry, General, but they were sent to Suwon two hours ago, on the orders of General Stratemeyer, Commander of the Far East Air Force. You are also to transfer your fighter units today to Suwon Airfield.”

“What?” Nearly shouted Ingrid, surprised and irritated. “How could I operate from Suwon if my ground support is here in Pusan?”

“Most of your ground personnel and support equipment has been transferred to Suwon as well, General. Only some of your mechanics were left behind temporarily to refuel and check your planes on arrival.”

From irritated, Ingrid then became plain angry.

“My planes and ground support elements have been moved to another airfield and I wasn’t even informed of that before flying out of the Philippines?”

Captain Reynolds, now looking uncomfortable, stammered an answer.

“I’m sorry, General, but the chain of command in Korea is still quite fluid. Colonel Lee will brief you on the situation at the base operations building. I have trucks waiting for you and your pilots.”

“Very well, Captain! Give me two minutes to inform my pilots of this and I will be with you.”

Letting Reynolds get his trucks closer to the parked P-38NCs and RP-38Ns, Ingrid assembled her 46 pilots around her for an impromptu meeting behind her aircraft. She looked briefly around at the faces of her women, all of them decorated veterans of the last war and members of the celebrated 99th Wing, The Fifinellas.

“Listen up, people! Don’t bother unloading your personal kit from your planes, as we are going to move to Suwon Airfield today. I was just told that our other planes, ground crews and equipment have moved there already. We are now going to get a briefing at the base operations building. Load up in those trucks to your right and keep your swearing to a minimum: this looks like it isn’t going to be the last screw-up for us in Korea. Go!”

“You’ll see lots of new scenery, they said!” Said sarcastically young and beautiful Captain Shirley Slade, a confirmed ace of the last war with 23 air victories on her score sheet, as she went to the waiting truck with the others.

The operations building was nothing to shout about, being a single story brick building that was a good twenty years old and to which electricity had clearly been added only recently. Reynolds led Ingrid and her pilots to the room used for pilot briefings, where a colonel and a captain were waiting for them. Ingrid went to the colonel, who saluted her crisply.

“Welcome to Pusan, General! I’m Colonel Joseph Lee, Commander of the 6132nd Tactical Air Control Group, and this is Captain Alan Smith, my intelligence officer.

If you may all take a seat, Captain Smith will first give you a brief overview of the situation in Korea. It is quite a sloppy one, believe me! Captain Smith..."

"Thank you, sir." Said Smith, positioning himself besides a large map of the Korean peninsula and of the nearby Chinese and Soviet territories that was pinned to a wooden board on the wall. He read from a few sheets of papers in his hands while using a pointer to indicate various areas and locations as he spoke.

"First, a short history of Korea since the end of the war in 1944 is in order. When the Japanese forces here finally surrendered in 1944, they were at first left to themselves and kept running the country through Korean proxies. Soon however, a group of Korean left-leaning politicians formed the so-called Korean People's Republic, or KPR, with the approval of the Japanese, running the country through a number of local people's committees. Since the communists in China, supported by the Soviets, were about to push the nationalists out and since the Soviets themselves were grabbing large chunks of Manchuria, our government then decided to put a stop to communist expansion in Asia. Lieutenant General Hodge and his XXIVth Corps were thus sent to Korea and ordered to establish a United States military government. The Soviets protested this move vigorously but bid their time until the communists of Mao Zedong took firm control of all of China, save for the British colony of Hong-Kong. Then, a year ago, the Soviets started training and equipping a so-called Army of the Korean People's Republic, which was to take its orders from the abortive KPR government pushed out of power by our military government. That KPR Army stayed at first in the northern part of the country, where our forces had not been able to deploy due to the Soviet presence there, and recruited Koreans who had fought with the Chinese communists during the war against the Japanese and then during the Chinese Civil War. When it became evident that the Soviets were intent on launching the KPRA southward in order to seize the whole Korean peninsula, our Far East Command started sending in some units of the 8th Army, under the command of General Walton Walker. That's it for the historical part. Now, for the tactical picture."

Ingrid had a bad feeling as Smith presented his historical overview: Nancy had taught her to always consider the political and military aspects of a problem together as a whole. What she had just heard told her that the United States had basically decided on its own to take control of Korea because it didn't like the local government being formed by Koreans after the war. That smacked of paternalistic imperialism to her and possibly said a lot about the realistic level of actual support American forces could expect from

the Koreans in general. This was a recipe for strategic disaster but she unfortunately had little to no say in this political picture. Smith then pointed at the map of Korea.

“The KPRA concentrated at first most of its forces, which number about 100,000 men equipped with Soviet weapons, around Pyongyang, which the KPR government is using as its center of power. Then, about a month ago, it started deploying along an East-West line roughly going from Nampo, south of Pyongyang, to Wonsan, on the East Coast. Our latest intelligence reports show that the KPRA is probably ready to strike south at any time now. That is why General Stratemeyer is pushing our air assets forward as much as possible in order to provide as good a support as we can to our ground troops. Another reason for moving your squadrons to Suwon, General Dows, is that Pusan will very soon be used to airlift in troops from our 24th Infantry Division.”

“What about our own forces?” Asked Ingrid, Still not happy about this. “Are there Korean or allied units to support us? How many men do we have ourselves in Korea at this time?”

Smith hesitated at first, seemingly unprepared for that question. Colonel Lee then came to his help.

“General Hodge’s administration has been training a Korean constabulary force, which numbers about 20,000 men, since early 1946. That force represents eight regiments of infantry equipped with light weapons. Our main force in Korea is the 7th Infantry Division, supplemented by a number of support units. Units of the 24th and 25th Infantry Divisions will start arriving soon and parts of the 5th Marine Corps regiment is now coming off transport ships in Inchon harbor. We will thus soon have as many troops in place as the enemy, troops that are much better trained and equipped and that enjoy total air superiority. Our only real problem now is the confusion in the command structure, which is evolving constantly.”

Again, Ingrid felt uncomfortable with the information given to her. She had seen for herself how rundown the American military had become since the end of the war in 1944, with massive cuts in personnel, deactivations of many units and the scrapping or mothballing of much equipment. She may be extremely young at the official age of 24 (she was in reality 22) for her rank and position, but she nonetheless had four years of combat experience under her belt and had seen her fair share of mistakes made through overconfidence and underestimation of the enemy. She also had close to 7,000 years of life experience accumulated through the souvenirs of her 72 previous incarnations, something that had taught her plenty about the cost of overconfidence. The way the

American forces had snubbed the Japanese as supposedly inferior soldiers before the attack on Pearl Harbor had been a perfect case in point. The way she saw the present situation, Ingrid suspected that many Americans were repeating that same mistake again concerning the KPRA and the Chinese.

The rest of the briefing was dedicated to weather, terrain and air control-related information, following which Ingrid ordered her pilots back to their planes. Going back by truck, the pilots found their remaining ground mechanics already formed up with their vehicles in a small convoy by the side of the parking apron. Ingrid wished them luck before getting in her plane and giving the signal to start the engines. The 41 P-38NCs and six RP-38Ns, with Ingrid in the lead, then took off in pairs from the main runway and regrouped in loose formation over Pusan before flying to the Northwest, towards K-13 Airfield in Suwon.

They arrived in Suwon two hours later, only to find that it was as desolate and bare a place as Pusan, without Pusan's benefit of having a view on the sea. Ingrid was happy to see the 42 bombers and transport aircraft of her air task force there, well dispersed on the ground. She also saw twelve F-82G TWIN MUSTANG night fighters and two C-47 transports sitting in dispersed parking spots at Suwon. The TWIN MUSTANGs were strange oddities, consisting basically of two P-51 MUSTANG fighters joined together through a common central wing that supported a long pod containing an air intercept radar. Ingrid had seen one only once before, at the Logan International Airport. To her joy, Ingrid was met on the ground by an old friend from World War Two, Colonel Vance Hemmingsworth, the task force's airfield support group commander, who was waiting for them with their intelligence officer, Major Jenny Kawena. Hemmingsworth, a big, beefy but jovial man at ease with anything mechanical, shook her hand vigorously once Ingrid jumped down from the right wing of her plane after parking it.

"I'm happy to see that you brought all of my birds intact to Suwon, Ingrid. Any problems on the way in?"

"What do you mean, YOUR birds, Vance?" Replied Ingrid with fake indignation, getting a grin from Hemmingsworth. "And no, we didn't have any problems, apart from the screw-up about this move to Suwon."

Hemmingsworth rolled his eyes at that.

“Tell me about that! To make it even better, I am happy to announce to you that we are back to good old tents as accommodations and facilities goes. As you could see from the air, those bums of the 68th Fighter All-Weather Squadron are also here. I had to read them the riot act when they started harassing our female personnel.”

“Good move! If they keep trying, tell me and I will go round their peg personally.” Hemmingsworth smiled at her retort, then showed her four trucks and a jeep waiting nearby.

“If you would care to take your personal kit out, I will drive you and the other pilots to your luxury hotel. Unfortunately, the men of the 68th FAWS live just across the street from us.”

“I see! Should we install a few trip wires and booby traps across that street?”

“I’m working on that.” Said Vance, deadpan. He didn’t help Ingrid take out her personal kit from the small storage compartment of her LIGHTNING, since he knew from experience that she always took care of her own kit herself. As she said often enough: one person, one kit. On this deployment she again was proving to be frugal with what kit she took with her, despite being a flag rank officer. Her single kit bag and one suit bag probably contained no more than four spare flying coveralls or combat uniforms, two dress uniforms and some underwear, plus hygiene items, but no civilian clothes. Reflecting her no-nonsense attitude about life in a war zone, she wore on her right upper leg her personal .45 caliber pistol, a futuristic GLOCK 21 SF given to her by Nancy Laplante, secured in a low-slung combat holster. She also carried a M2A2 .30 caliber automatic carbine with folding stock, the standard long arm of the aircrews of the 99th Wing. She may be damn young for her rank, thought Vance, but nobody could accuse her of being immature. He however knew better than to think that Ingrid was anything like a virgin. She could in fact party with the best but kept discreet about it.

“So, how were your studies at the M.I.T., Ingrid?”

“The work and studies were intense, but I loved the experience, Vance. Being a qualified engineer also makes me feel much more rounded up as an Air Force officer. Now I will be able to see through your technical smoke screens when you will tell me why some maintenance job has not been completed yet.”

That made Hemmingsworth laugh loudly at her reply.

“Then, I will have to find some better excuses in the future, I suppose.”

With Ingrid riding in the jeep with Vance and with the other pilots loaded on the trucks, the small convoy rolled for less than 300 meters before stopping in a dirt lane separating long, multiple rows of army tents. Colonel Ernest Wakefield, the commander of the task force's support services group, met Ingrid as she exited the jeep. He saluted her before waving a hand towards the nearest tent behind him, on which a cardboard sign with two names written on it was suspended over the entrance.

"Welcome to Suwon, Ingrid! I put signs on your tents, so that our pilots would know where to drop their kit. Your tent is over here. You will be sharing it with Teresa James, since accommodations are rather limited here, like everything else. The only things we have no lack of in Suwon are rats and morons."

Wakefield said those last words while looking at a dozen or so male pilots sitting in front of the tents across the lane and who were whistling in admiration at the female pilots climbing out of the trucks. Ingrid, repressing a smile, nodded her head.

"I see! Anything else I should know, Ernie?"

"Two things, actually: first, we are on hard rations; second, keep the door of your tent well closed when undressing, as those neighbors of ours are not below using binoculars to watch you from ten yards away. We had many complaints from our female ground staff about being spied on and harassed."

That immediately made Ingrid very serious: sexual harassment, especially in a war zone, could destroy morale and discipline very quickly indeed.

"Then I will make a point of dealing with that problem swiftly. Let me just drop my things in my tent first."

Preceding Teresa James inside the tent assigned to both of them, Ingrid simply dropped her kit bag and suit bag on one of the two camp cots and left the tent, still wearing her flying helmet and flotation vest. She approached at a brisk walk the men who had whistled at her female pilots, stopping in front of them and forcing them to get up and stand at attention. The most senior in rank, a captain, saluted her while eyeing her from head to toe. He and the others were particularly taken in by her helmet, a futuristic affair with a sun visor and painted the colors of the American flag. They also noticed her non-standard pistol in its combat speed holster.

"Good day, General! What can we do for you?"

"You and your men can start by leaving my female personnel alone, Captain!" Shot back Ingrid frostily to the man. "Then you could understand that we are about to be

part of a shooting war soon. These women have a job to do and they will do it a lot better once you stop ogling them.”

“But, General, we were not ogling them, I assure you.”

“Oh? Whistling at a fellow officer and pilot of equal rank in front of her subalterns is a proper conduct for you, Captain? Where the hell did you learn discipline? In a dog pound? Start acting like a proper officer instead of a street bum, mister! If such behavior continues, I will be forced to press disciplinary charges against you or any other culprit that will be caught behaving improperly. Do you understand me, Captain?”

“Perfectly, General!” Shouted the captain, saluting her. Ingrid saluted back, then returned to where Wakefield and Hemmingsworth stood near her tent.

“Well, hopefully this will be enough to put some sense of discipline in those guys’ heads. If you see more gestures of harassment from them, march them in and charge them. That squadron is now under my command as part of this air task force and will have to follow MY rules. This said, I am going to quickly get settled in my tent. I want to meet all the squadron, company and group commanders in one hour, to review our situation here in Suwon and make a list of things to do. How many U.S. Army troops or South Korean soldiers do we have here in Suwon to protect the airfield?”

“None, Ingrid!” Answered Hemmingsworth, shocking Ingrid. “We only have our own airfield security company and air defense battalion from the 99th Wing to protect this airfield.”

“Is there at the least a perimeter security fence around the airfield?”

“Nope! This airfield is wide open to everyone.”

Ingrid then let out a few choice swear words before looking back at her two group commanders.

“Then, I know where our top priorities are: to build some defenses and shelters for this place. Then, I will have to go do some liaising with our army units and coordinate close air support arrangements with them. The next days will be quite busy, guys.”

Two hours and a half hours later, Ingrid departed the airfield in a small convoy of three M20 GREYHOUND armored command cars. With military policewomen from the security company of the 99th Wing behind the heavy machineguns of the M20s, the convoy created some public curiosity as it entered Seoul, the Korean civilians looking with wide eyes at those uniformed and helmeted women. Jenny Kawena, who knew a little bit of Korean, had to ask for directions from local policemen before the group finally

arrived just before dusk at the headquarters of the military government administration of Lieutenant General Hodge. Ingrid, her three female officers at her back, made a noted entrance in the headquarters, with men nearly ogling them. On her part, she was struck at once by the frenetic atmosphere in the building, which bordered on panic. She went to the reception desk, where a corporal got up and saluted her.

“General?”

“Could you inform General Hodge that Brigadier General Dows, Commander of the Korea Air Task Force, is here to see him urgently, Corporal?” Asked politely Ingrid after returning the salute. As the young soldier sat back down and grabbed the receiver of his telephone, Ingrid looked around her, also listening to the orders and comments exchanged by the headquarters’ staff nearby. Everything pointed to a degree of confusion and uncertainty that was worrying her about the local situation. After a minute, the corporal told her that an officer would come to guide her to General Hodge. A slightly overweight major effectively showed up four minutes later and escorted her and her officers to the third floor of the building, where she was introduced into what looked like an operations center. Lieutenant General Hodge, a man in his fifties that Ingrid had met before during the war against the Japanese in the Pacific, came to her with a smile and a hand extended for a shake.

“Ingrid, it is nice to see you here with your famous group of aviatrix.”

“And it is nice to be able to provide you again with close air support, General.” Replied Ingrid, shaking his hand after a quick salute. “Most of my air task force, minus my helicopters, is now in Suwon and I would like to discuss with you a few points, apart from getting your command directives for the days to come. May I present you my second in command, Colonel Evelyn Sharp, as well as Colonel Teresa James, commander of my fighter group, and Major Jenny Kawena, my intelligence officer.”

“Pleased to meet you, ladies!” Said Hodge while shaking hands with them. “Let’s go to the tactical situation map: we will be able to better discuss the present situation there.”

The group thus went to stand in front of a map pinned to a wall board and covered by a plastic sheet bearing red and blue symbols. One look was enough for Ingrid to see that the American forces in Korea were dangerously stretched out and dispersed.

“General Hodge, what are your orders in case of a North Korean attack across the border? Do I have the right to attack North Korean forces once they pass the border, or do I have restrictions on the use of force?”

That brought a forced smile on Hodge’s face.

“Unfortunately, I haven’t received any directives from above concerning our rules of engagement. It seems that everyone in Washington is simply holding his breath and hoping that nothing will happen. I am however ready to use my authority as commander of USAFIK and authorizes you to shoot at any North Korean force crossing south of the demarcation line, and this in defense of the American and Korean forces under my command. However, I cannot for the moment authorize any action north of the line of demarcation, even after an attack by the North Koreans.”

“I can live with that, General. Who is holding the demarcation line on our side at this time?”

“Four regiments of the Korean Constabulary, plus one infantry regiment from our 7th Division, along with some reconnaissance elements. I know that this may appear quite thin, but my hope is that your planes will be able to slow down sufficiently any enemy attack and allow time for General MacArthur to send me reinforcements.”

“That is a lot to hope for, General: my planes can’t completely stop a light infantry force widely dispersed on the ground. Solid ground defenses are needed to do that.”

“I fully realize that, Ingrid. I however have to make do with what I got and...”
The noise of a distant but powerful explosion then cut him off. Worry on his face, Hodge turned towards one of his staff officers.

“Captain, go find out what is happening outside.”

“Yes, General!”

The captain returned five minutes later, as Hodge was discussing with Ingrid the command hierarchy in Korea.

“General, some communist saboteurs have blown up some tanker cars full of gas in the port of Inchon. We can see the flames from the roof of our building.”

“Damn! That’s fuel I could have used.” Said Ingrid on a bitter tone. She then faced Hodge, her face hard. “General, this illustrates a dilemma that I have since arriving in Suwon. The airfield there is totally opened, with no security fence or proper ground defense unit to protect it. Saboteurs could thus easily access it and destroy my

planes on the ground. To lower that risk and also to relocate my bigger aircraft to a field with better ground support facilities and fuel stocks, I am asking for your permission to move tomorrow my transport and electronic reconnaissance planes to the K-1 airfield near Pusan. I know that K-1 is supposed to be reserved for our troop airlift, but it will be impossible for me to ensure the safety of my heavy aircraft here in Suwon.”

Hodge thought for a few seconds before nodding his head.

“Your request is both reasonable and justified, Ingrid. Let’s go see my assistant for air operations.”

A few minutes were sufficient to take care of that question, with Hodge then calling in person the commander of the K-1 airfield to make sure that he would cooperate in this matter. Satisfied, Ingrid then took the time to procure from Hodge’s staff stocks of local maps before departing the USAFIK headquarters with her officers in their M20 armored cars. As their vehicles were about to cross the bridge spanning the Han River in order to return to Suwon, Ingrid had her armored cars stop for a moment to look at the tall flames in Inchon harbor, easily visible in the night.

“This is not going to be our last setback in this war.” She grumbled to herself. Rain then started to fall, a few drops at first but quickly turning into a downpour. Thankfully, her M20s had been equipped with overhead canvas covers to protect their normally open-top passenger compartments. The rain somehow reinforced the stench from the human feces that were widely used in Korea as fertilizer for agriculture.

“What a lousy country!” Said Evelyn Sharp, sounding disgusted.

“Wait until Winter.” Replied Ingrid. “Then, you can freeze as much as in Russia.”

“Great!”

04:04 (Korea Time)

Friday, June 25, 1948 ‘C’

Tents of the Korea Air Task Force

K-13 airfield (Suwon), South Korea

A distant, weak rumble awoke Ingrid, making her sit up in her camp cot. For the average person, the noise would have been mistaken as being a simple thunderstorm in the distance. For Ingrid, who had lived for months near the frontlines in both the Pacific

and Europe, that noise meant something a lot more dangerous and sinister. Looking at her watch, she saw that Sunrise was only one hour away: the ideal, traditional time to start an artillery barrage meant to precede an attack at dawn. Getting up from her camp cot, she went to shake up Teresa James, who shared her tent, making her wake with a startle.

“Uh...what?”

“Wake up, Teresa! I can hear artillery fire from the North.”

Ingrid then started putting on quickly her flight coverall as Teresa listened with growing unease. Teresa finally swore to herself and threw away her blanket, getting up to dress as well.

“You are right, Ingrid: that’s artillery fire up North, lots of artillery. What do we do now?”

“Let me just look outside first.”

While still zipping up her flight coverall, Ingrid exited her tent and looked North. Even though it was very distant, the brief but repeated flashes of light visible on the horizon looked definitely like artillery fire. At the risk of appearing like an idiot if she was mistaken, Ingrid started running past the rows of tents of her unit while shouting.

“EVERYBODY WAKE UP! ALL PILOTS AND MECHANICS TO THE PLANES!
THE WAR HAS STARTED!”

The tent lines of her task force quickly came alive with hundreds of women getting dressed in a hurry or running towards their planes or ground support vehicles. On their part, the men of the 68th Fighter All Weather Squadron reacted in a decidedly lethargic manner at first, many still hung over from their last drinking session, or refusing to believe that the rumble was anything else but a thunderstorm. Ingrid even had to go to their squadron leader’s tent in order to get him up. Then assembling her group and squadron commanders around her in the middle of the dirt road passing through the tent village, Ingrid passed around orders, first looking at Teresa James.

“Teresa, scramble the Witches to go establish an air cover over Kimpo Airfield and the city of Seoul. The F-82s of the 68th FAWS will on their part take off to provide air cover to this airfield. The 339th FAWS, on its part, will provide air cover to Kimpo Airfield as soon as I can get them to scramble. You will lead with me the Walkyries, who will provide an escort for our bombers. We will follow our Task Force War Plan Alpha, with our reconnaissance RP-38s flying ahead to visually check the expected enemy axis of advance. If the enemy is really attacking across the border, I want to have photographic

proof of that, in case some idiot gets to think that we jumped the gun. Two more of our EC-142s will lift off as well to go relieve our EC-142 on station over Seoul, which should now have only two hours of fuel left after its night patrol. I want those two EC-142s to stay widely separated and to cover as much of the length of the armistice line as possible.”

Ingrid next looked at Colonel Helen Richey, her small but feisty and highly experienced bomber group commander.

“Helen, your Hell Raisers will go strike any enemy ground forces along the three main western expected axis of advance, with emphasis on the main Pyongyang-Seoul road and rail corridor. Your Hells Angels will cover the four eastern expected axis of advance. The AC-142G heavy gunships of the Dragon Ladies will stay in flying reserve, ready to hit the biggest concentrations we will find.”

The next one she faced was Jenny Kawena, her beautiful Polynesian-Japanese intelligence officer.

“Jenny, you fly out with Fox One to establish a patrol pattern over Seoul. Stay above 35,000 feet to avoid any possible enemy fighters. Your job will be to coordinate our groups of fighters and bombers, to detect any possible enemy air intrusion and to paint as accurate a picture as you can of the enemy invasion force along the demarcation line, with the view of handing over that intelligence to USAFIK and USAFFE headquarters. As soon as we have confirmed that the North Koreans are invading, then send the alert by radio to our higher headquarters.”

“Got it!”

Ingrid’s last directives were for Colonel Vance Hemmingsworth, the head of her maintenance and technical services.

“Vance, you will be in charge here on the ground while I’m up in the air. Reinforce to the maximum the security perimeter of our airfield while having your mechanics ready to rearm our planes for multiple ground strike missions. All our personnel will stay armed at all times, even when using the shitters.”

“The good old Pacific routine, then.” Replied Vance, making Ingrid sigh.

“Yes, but I wish that our helicopter group would be here today, instead of arriving by sea tomorrow. Something tells me that our AH-4 VIPER attack helicopters would have had plenty of targets today. Well, we will all do our best. LET’S GET IN OUR PLANES, GIRLS!”

Vance Hemmingsworth, feeling dread, watched on as Ingrid ran towards her parked P-38NC twin-engine fighter-bomber. The graying engineer secretly loved Ingrid like his own daughter and had only admiration for her. Now, she was going to start fighting her second war in her young life.

The Sun was barely up over the horizon when Ingrid, leading one RP-38N, four P-38NC fighters and four B-25NG medium bombers, arrived over Sariwon, the South Korean town closest to the demarcation line and to the Pyongyang-Seoul main road. She could now see clearly the ground impacts of a dense artillery barrage hitting the forward positions of the infantry company of the American 7th Division, which was dug in between Sariwon and the demarcation line. Farther away but still visible and clearly south of the demarcation line, she could see long columns of vehicles moving towards Sariwon.

"A general can't do wrong if he marches to the sound of guns." Whispered Ingrid to herself, quoting a saying from the Napoleonic Wars. She then spoke on the radio.

"Fox Four, this is Lady Hawk. Do your photographic pass along the main road. Hell Raiser Blue will then strike the enemy ground forces. Green Witches, you hold in reserve for now on and watch for enemy planes. Good luck to all, out!"

05:16 (Korea Time)

Forward command post, Foxtrot Company

2nd Battalion of the 17th Infantry Regiment, 7th Division

Area of Sariwon

"CAPTAIN, WE HAVE TANKS COMING AT US!"

The panicked shout from the young soldier, who had just risked a quick look above the lip of their trench, attracted a horrified look from his captain: their company didn't possess any antitank weapons. Despite the dense artillery fire still falling on his positions, the infantry officer raised his head to have a look himself. What he saw was enough to tie his guts: a long line of Soviet-made T-34/85 tanks were effectively advancing in extended line towards his company positions. There were enemy infantrymen mounted on the tanks, plus more infantrymen following on foot behind the steel monsters. He could count at least twenty tanks and over 500 enemy soldiers, now less than 400 meters from his forward trenches. To face such a force, the captain had a

grand total of 112 men, most of them conscripts without any combat experience and with limited training, no antitank weapons and only three medium machineguns. The small farm near the road that had been his company command post was now a burning ruin, with his company trucks parked behind the farm now burning merrily. The enemy tanks then started firing their 85mm main guns at his men, making the captain lower his head. The officer looked at his signaler, sitting at the bottom of the trench while attempting to call by radio their battalion command post.

"Have you been able to establish radio contact, Corporal?"

"I'm still trying, Captain!" Replied the radio operator, bordering on panic: this was his first experience of real combat. After another minute of frenetic calls, he suddenly shouted.

"I have the battalion, Captain!"

The officer immediately grabbed the radio handset, pressing the microphone switch.

"Blue Two, this is Foxtrot Six, do you hear me, over?"

"Go ahead, Foxtrot Six!" Answered the voice of the deputy commander of the battalion, making the captain sigh with relief.

"Blue Two, we are under attack by T-34 tanks and by enemy infantry and we are under artillery fire as well. I can count a minimum of twenty tanks and 500 enemy soldiers advancing on my positions. They are now only 350 yards away from my trenches. I need fire support now, over!"

"Foxtrot Six, we have nothing at this time: our own artillery is under enemy shelling and is in the process of changing positions. What are the South Korean units to your flanks doing, over?"

"They fled after the first shells, Blue Two!" Replied the captain, his tone bitter. He had witnessed ten minutes earlier the South Korean infantry on his flanks flee in utter panic. There was a short silence on the radio before his major answered him.

"Foxtrot Six, you must still hold your positions."

"And with what, Blue Two?" Asked angrily the captain. "I have no antitank weapons and...wait one, Blue Two!"

He then looked at his signaler, who was trying to tell him something.

"What?"

"The artillery barrage has stopped, Captain."

Looking cautiously over the lip of the trench, the officer saw that his corporal was right. However, the enemy tanks and infantrymen were still advancing, shooting at intervals.

The captain could see many of his men now leaving their trenches and running towards the rear, abandoning their machineguns. He then spoke again in the handset.

“Blue Two, I will have to abandon my positions if I want to save at least some of my men, over.”

As the battalion was again ordering him to hold at all costs, a twin-engine propeller plane flew over his trench, flying northward at an altitude of about 800 meters, directly towards the enemy tanks. Intrigued, the captain watched the plane, a P-38, as it simply overflew the main road without firing a shot or dropping a single bomb. He was asking himself what kind of game the pilot was playing when four twin-engine medium bombers swooped over the tanks, flying east to west. Sixteen large cylinders fell in sequence from the planes, hitting the ground at intervals of fifty meters. The line of advancing tanks then disappeared in enormous fireballs that rolled over them and their escorting infantry. The American captain shouted with joy on seeing the North Korean soldiers mounted on the tanks jump to the ground, burning alive.

“Blue Two, Blue Two, this is Foxtrot Six! Our planes have just arrived and are using napalm on the enemy, over!”

“Which planes, Foxtrot Six?” Asked the battalion deputy commander, both surprised and confused. “We haven’t had the time yet to call for air support.”

“I don’t know, Blue Two, but they are here!”

After releasing their napalm canisters, the four bombers then performed wide turns, coming back at the enemy foot infantry that had survived the napalm strike. Their noses lit up when their massive nose armament of eight heavy machineguns opened fire, raining heavy slugs on the North Korean soldiers and ripping apart their ranks. The bombers then targeted the few enemy tanks still rolling forward, this time firing their fixed nose 75mm guns at the T-34s. Fired at the thinner upper armor of the tanks, the 75mm armor-piercing shells easily penetrated the T-34s, putting them on fire or blowing them up one after the other. Once the original assaulting line was utterly destroyed, the four bombers turned towards the enemy truck columns approaching on the main road, strafing them as well. The American captain used that chance to shout orders to his men and to encourage them in staying in their trenches. Some men continued to flee but most took back their positions and opened fire on the few surviving enemy soldiers within range. Now ecstatic, the captain grabbed back the radio handset.

“Blue Two, this is Foxtrot Six! Our planes have completely stopped the enemy tanks and infantry and are now strafing more enemy troops to the North. I however still need support and, particularly, antitank weapons, if I am to hold my positions, over.”

“We will send what we can, Foxtrot Six.” Answered the battalion on a tone that told the captain that he shouldn’t expect much to come to him.

05:29 (Korea Time)

‘Fox One’ EC-142E electronic reconnaissance and command aircraft 10,600 meters above Seoul

Jenny Kawena was working frantically with her radar and radio operators onboard ‘Fox One’, flying high above Seoul, receiving and collating the in-flight reports coming from the RP-38Ns as they photographed their various objectives. She was also listening to the radio conversations from the P-38NCs and B-25NGs of the task force as they attacked enemy columns on the ground. Four major invasion axis of advance had already been identified by the RP-38Ns of Captain Ann Baumgartner, but three more possible invasion routes were still left to be reconnoitered further east along the demarcation line. There was however no doubt left that this was a lot more than just a simple raid.

Jenny had started writing a short but concise message, to be sent by radio to the USAFIK headquarters of Lieutenant General Hodge in Seoul and to the USAFFE headquarters of General MacArthur in Okinawa, to warn them of the invasion, when one of the radar operators of the EC-142E shouted a warning.

“TWO GROUPS OF AIRCRAFT COMING FROM THE NORTH-NORTHWEST ARE APPROACHING THE DEMARCATION LINE AT A SPEED OF 240 MILES PER HOUR!”

Jenny went at once to the station of that radar operator and looked over her shoulder at the radar scope as the woman gave more information.

“I see two distinct groups of aircraft following each other and flying towards Seoul. The first group counts sixteen aircraft and the second one twenty aircraft. They are flying at an altitude of 9,000 feet.”

“A typical altitude for fighter-bombers on a strike mission, according to Soviet air doctrine.” Said softly Jenny, who then looked at the nearby senior radar operator in

charge of directing air interceptions. "Alert the planes of the 172nd, 68th and 339th Squadrons flying cover over Kimpo, Seoul and Suwon. Direct them for intercepts of these bogeys. Call as well the control towers of Kimpo and Suwon to warn them."

Looking at another operator, she gave her another curt order.

"Advise Lady Hawk of this, so that she can be prepared in case her fighters on strike missions will be needed. Also, advise our task force ground headquarters in Suwon and tell them to sound the air raid alert."

"Understood, Major!"

Jenny then went back to her coordination station and finished writing her message, adding a paragraph about the detected enemy planes. She then gave her draft message to a radio operator.

"Encode this and send it as quickly as possible to the headquarters of both USAFIK and of USAFFE."

"Right away, Major!"

Jenny then continued to closely watch the situation, also asking her electronic warfare operators to monitor the radio frequencies for possible radio traffic from the enemy aircraft. As a radar operator was announcing that one of the groups of enemy planes was splitting in two, an EW operator looked at Jenny, shock showing on her face.

"Major, I am now intercepting radio conversations from those enemy planes...in Russian."

"WHAT? Record those transmissions at once and put them on loudspeaker!"

The operator obeyed her immediately, allowing Jenny to hear what were effectively radio conversations in Russian. She felt dread as the implications of a direct Soviet intervention in Korea hit her. The senior radar operator then spoke up.

"Major, eight enemy aircraft are now heading towards Kimpo, while eight other aircraft are heading towards Seoul Airfield. The group of twenty aircraft are heading towards Suwon. Our P-38NC and F-82G fighters are now on their way to intercept them, but our planes protecting Suwon will be badly outnumbered."

"Alert Lady Hawk to this! Ask her to send P-38s from her strike force to assist the Suwon cover force."

A nervous wait then followed as Jenny awaited the result of the interceptions. A radar operator shouted a report a few minutes later.

“The pilots of the 68th FAWS are now in sight of the enemy planes heading for Suwon. That group is composed of eight YAK-9 fighters and twelve IL-10 SHTURMOVIK attack aircraft. The 68th FAWS is starting to dive on them. Lady Hawk and three more P-38s are about to hit that group as well in the rear.”

“YAK-9s and IL-10s? Damn! Those are about the best propeller planes the Soviets have in service right now. We are still recording the Russian radio traffic on the enemy frequency?”

“Yes, Major!”

“Good!” Said Jenny before switching her headset to the air interception frequency and listening anxiously to the short but violent air battle that had just started.

To Jenny’s relief, all of the P-38s came out intact from the battle, while two F-82s ended with damage but were able to land back at their airfields. On the Russian side, 32 of the 36 attacking planes ended being shot down, the Russian pilots having obviously been taken by surprise by the strength of the American air opposition. Two particularly brave and determined Russian aircrews still had managed to push their IL-10s through to Suwon but had been shot down by the self-propelled quad .50 caliber heavy machineguns of the KATF’s antiaircraft battery, with at least three Russians parachuting out only to be captured nearly at once on landing. All in the while, frantic calls in Russian coming from north of the demarcation line proved that the enemy air controllers were also Soviet personnel. Jenny looked gravely at the loudspeaker plugged to the enemy frequency.

“Damn! This could turn out to be a very dirty war. Let’s hope that our politicians will have guts strong enough to face the Soviets. If not, we could end up having to fight with one hand tied in our back.

14:17 (Okinawa Time)

USAFFE headquarters, Naha

Okinawa, Ryukyu Islands

General Douglas MacArthur stood besides the large map table, flanked by Lieutenant General Stratemeyer, Commander of the Far East Air Force, or FEAF, and by his main staff officers, when a female aviator in her mid-thirties was introduced in the

operations center. The major, who carried a briefcase and a set of rolled maps, came to attention in front of the elderly general and saluted him crisply.

“Major Kathryn Bernheim, of the 107th Reconnaissance Squadron of the Korea Air Task Force, sir! Brigadier General Dows tasked me to carry by hand to you the information and intelligence we have on the enemy attack this morning, General.”

“At ease, Major! Please show me what you’ve got. I am afraid that Washington still has a hard time believing the reports of Soviet direct implication in this conflict.”

Kathryn Bernheim hid her frustration at that last sentence and opened her roll of maps on the table, revealing on top a map of Korea with red and blue symbols on it, plus eight air photo mosaics. Before starting her presentation, Kathryn took out of her briefcase a file and a number of film rolls, which she presented to Major General Willoughby, MacArthur’s intelligence officer.”

“Here are copies of our reconnaissance cameras’ films and of our pilots’ mission reports, General.”

“Thank you, Major!” Said Willoughby before signaling to one of his officers to take the lot. “Hughes, register at once those films and reports and have them analyzed at once!”

As the captain walked out of the center with the precious films and the file, Kathryn pointed at a series of symbols on the map spread on the table, speaking to MacArthur.

“As you can see on this map, General, the North Koreans have attacked at dawn this morning along seven main ground axis of advance, plus effected a coastal amphibious landing in force on the East Coast of South Korea. Each ground axis force comprised one infantry division reinforced by T-34/85 tanks and dozens of SU-76 self-propelled howitzers. The exception was the Sariwon axis, where two reinforced infantry divisions led the attack. In the air, a total of 46 Soviet planes tried to strike our airfields around Seoul, but were intercepted by our air task force before they could cause any damage on the ground. Out of 46 enemy planes, 41 were destroyed, with only two planes damaged on our side.”

“How could you say for sure that those planes were Soviet ones, Major?” interrupted Stratemeyer, the commander of the Far East Air Force. “I know that you intercepted radio conversations in Russian, but we will need more than that to accuse the Soviets of aggression in Korea.”

Kathryn calmly faced the lieutenant general, not intimidated by his rank.

"How, General? Our forces were able to capture a total of fourteen enemy aviators after they parachuted out, three of them right over Suwon Airfield. All of these aviators are of Caucasian type and speak Russian, but no Korean at all. We also have tape recordings of radio conversations in Russian between the enemy planes and their ground air controllers in North Korea. Here are tape copies of those conversations, plus copies of the interrogation reports made on the captured enemy aviators, including photos of those aviators."

MacArthur looked over Stratemeyer's shoulder at the photos of the prisoners contained in Bernheim's file, finally nodding his head.

"Decidedly, your air task force has done a superb job this morning, Major. With this intelligence, our State Department will be able to push the Soviets' face in the mud at the United Nations. Where are those captured aviators, Major?"

"Here in Naha, General." Replied calmly Kathryn, making more than one staff officer jerk in surprise. "They were brought in my plane and are now in the temporary custody of the MP detachment at the Naha Airfield. The internal security situation in South Korea is very precarious and Brigadier General Dows didn't want to risk losing such precious prisoners to communist partisans or saboteurs. Our air task force also doesn't have Russian-qualified interrogators."

Major General Willoughby then reacted without waiting for MacArthur's order.

"I will go take care of those prisoners at once, General."

Taking the interrogation files and tapes from Stratemeyer, Willoughby then left the operations center at a hurried pace. Kathryn, using her air photo mosaics, then took fifteen minutes to brief in detail General MacArthur about what her air task force had encountered in the morning. At the end of it, MacArthur nodded again his head.

"Really excellent work, Major. The actions of your air task force have probably saved Seoul from capture, apart from making some big holes in enemy units."

"But there is still a lot left to be done, General, and our pilots can't be everywhere at the same time."

"Noted, Major! What is your air task force doing right now, Major?"

"Our fighters and bombers are conducting strike missions continuously on the enemy forces we can find south of the demarcation line, General. Brigadier General Dows however has three requests that Lieutenant General Hodge did not have the authority to approve."

"Name them!" Said MacArthur at once.

"First, General Dows would like to be authorized to fly air reconnaissance missions over North Korea, to photograph the enemy bases and airfields. Second, she is asking for permission to strike ground targets inside North Korea. Third, in view of how quickly our frontlines are falling apart, General Dows requests permission to relocate the maximum of aircraft and ground equipment to Pusan. She considers Suwon too exposed and too close to the advancing enemy columns."

"I am afraid that you will need to wait another day or two before authorization to overfly North Korea comes from Washington, Major. As to relocating to Pusan, what do you think, General Stratemeyer?"

The commander of the FEAF looked for a moment at the map of Korea before answering.

"Suwon is effectively quite close to the frontlines and runs a real risk of being overrun in the next few days. As long as General Dows can continue operating tactically from Suwon, I see no problems for her to relocate her second line equipment to Pusan. It will be anyway much easier to resupply Pusan with fuel and bombs than to resupply Suwon, especially if the enemy continues to advance."

Stratemeyer then looked at MacArthur.

"What are your orders concerning Korea, General?"

"Well, theoretically, I can't do a thing until General Hodge and his forces will be placed directly under me. Presently, he answers directly to the Secretary of War and to the Secretary of State. However, I want you to be ready to transfer quickly extra squadrons of fighters and bombers to Korea as soon as we get Washington's permission. On my side, I will put my army units on full alert and see what the Marine Corps can spare in support. Major Bernheim, you can now return to Suwon. Pass on to General Dows and her pilots my thanks for a job very well done."

"Thank you, General!" Replied Kathryn, swelling with pride, while saluting.

09:35 (Korea Time)

Saturday, June 26, 1948 'C'

K-13 Airfield (Suwon), South Korea

The female mechanics that rushed to check Ingrid's plane on her arrival from a strike mission were embarrassed to find their commander crying silently as she stayed in her cockpit seat. Not daring to ask questions, the technicians concentrated on

inspecting the P-38NC and refill it with fuel, five inch rockets and 20mm cannon ammunition. Thankfully, they found no bullet or shell holes in her plane. Ingrid finally came out of her cockpit and jumped on the ground after she had dried her tears. Vance Hemmingsworth, who was personally checking visually every plane coming back from missions, noted her sad expression and asked her a question on a guarded tone.

“How did the mission go, Ingrid?”

“We struck hard again at the enemy column north of Kaesong, but we lost Captain Lawler to ground fire. How are we doing in terms of stocks of five inch rockets, Vance?”

“We are nearly out of them, Ingrid. One C-142 has left for the Philippines to go get more rockets from the hidden war stocks of the 99th Wing, since our bases in Okinawa have little reserves of ammunition and fuel themselves. It is a good thing that Evelyn Sharp acted on your suggestion at the end of the war and secretly stockpiled reserves of equipment and supplies that would have otherwise been destroyed or scrapped in the Philippines as surplus. By the way, USAFFE headquarters now has full control of all American forces in Korea, including us, following a directive from the Pentagon. General Hodge and his units are now directly under the command of General MacArthur, while we are now under General Stratemeyer. General MacArthur has ordered the immediate evacuation of all the American civilians in Korea towards Okinawa and the Philippines. The 68th FAWS is presently providing air cover to the first cargo ship taking on American civilians in Inchon. Other civilians may also come to here and Kimpo to be evacuated by air.”

“Any authorization yet for us to strike inside North Korea?”

“Not yet! We can only wait and hope about that.”

“In that case, I will go do some planning in our operations tent complex, if someone looks for me.”

Going at a tired pace to the tent complex sheltering her air task force's operations center, Ingrid entered it and stopped first in front of the blackboard showing the meteorological predictions for the region. Today's cloudy sky was going to turn to rain tomorrow and possibly slow down or prevent most air operations. That was both good and bad for Ingrid. Good because that would give a chance to her tired pilots to rest a bit. Bad because that would give a chance to the North Koreans to advance further without fear of being hit by airstrikes. Ingrid then checked with her logistics

officers the list of ammunition stocks, fuel, rations and other vital supplies left in Suwon. Without further resupply, her air task force would have enough to fight for another four days at the most. However, at the rate the North Korean troops were advancing, Ingrid suspected that the enemy was going to get to the gates of Suwon before that. Despite the heroic efforts of Ingrid's pilots, the American and South Korean ground units holding the frontlines had a maddening tendency to withdraw without orders and without warning anybody about their changes of positions, and this often without firing a single shot at the enemy before fleeing. The precarious security situation of her two airfields, Kimpo and Suwon, also preoccupied greatly Ingrid. Sitting at her work table in one corner of the tent complex, she wrote down quickly a list of materials and munitions, which she then brought to her assistant air movement officer.

"Lieutenant Perkins, have this list sent by hand directly to Colonel Gillies via our next C-142 milk run from Pusan. She is to send two C-142s to Clark Field, to collect there the weapons and ammunition on this list. Those items will then be distributed discreetly under my control to the personnel of our task force. Only the officers of our task force will know about this list and those weapons and ammunition. Do you understand me?"

Lisa Perkins, a woman who was already in her thirties and was a veteran of the War in the Pacific, nodded her head at once.

"Perfectly, General! You think that we will need those weapons soon?"

"The Oracle says so, Lieutenant." Replied Ingrid on a most serious tone, making Perkins nod her head again. The fact that Ingrid had been educated by Nancy Laplante about future events and history was widely known to the members of the 99th Wing, something that had earned Ingrid her nickname of 'The Oracle'. In return, when Ingrid said something while mentioning The Oracle, her subalterns knew at once that her actions or orders were based on historical hindsight, which in turn tended to keep the questions or recriminations to a minimum. As Perkins walked away with the list, a clerk approached Ingrid at a rapid pace, to stop in front of her.

"General, General Hodge is calling for you from Seoul."

Ingrid followed at once the clerk to the office of the duty officer, who gave her the receiver of her telephone. Ingrid then spoke in a calm voice.

"Brigadier General Dows!"

"Dows, this is General Hodge. I will need the services of your transport squadron to help evacuate to Okinawa American civilians. A first group left by sea from

Inchon this morning, but I still have about 700 persons to evacuate in Seoul and I was hoping for them to be flown out of Suwon.”

“I can effectively provide transport aircraft for these people, General, but I have no facilities here to house them. They will thus have to show up in Suwon at the most a few hours before their departure hour.”

“And when could you get your planes from Pusan?”

“Uh, let me check my aircraft availability list, General. It won’t be long.”

Putting down the receiver on the table, Ingrid quickly went to the air movement section, returning to the telephone after less than a minute.

“General, I can have seven C-142 here in Suwon for five O’clock this afternoon. Could you bring those evacuees under escort to Suwon for four O’clock?”

“I will make sure that they will be there in time. Thank you, Ingrid: you are taking a big weight off my shoulders. Arrangements will be made for these people to be properly taken care of in Naha.”

“My pleasure, General. We will be ready for them.”

Ingrid sighed after putting down the receiver: having a crowd of panicky civilians on her airfield was the last thing she needed now, but she would have been wrong to refuse Hodge’s request. On the other hand, this would give her an occasion to quickly get her secret list of weapons and ammunition to Betty Huyler Gillies. Her mind kicking into gear as she thought about what this evacuation of civilians implied, she went back to the air movement section to plan and organize their reception in Suwon.

17:14 (Korea Time)

Suwon Airfield

“Uh, are you sure that General Hodge didn’t make a mistake about the departure hour, Ingrid?” Asked Betty Huyler Gillies after looking at her watch. Ingrid, who was starting to feel irritation, looked again in the distance at the road leading to Seoul before answering.

“I am positive! I hope that this delay is not due to some enemy action, like communist partisans attacking their convoy.”

“We would have heard shots then, no?”

“Not if an ambush happened near Seoul, Betty. After all, we are a good twenty miles to the south of Seoul. Too bad, I’m sending a reconnaissance patrol!”

Turning towards Major Angie Dickinson, who stood ready with a strong contingent of female MPs to guide and herd the American refugees, Ingrid shouted an order.

“MAJOR DICKINSON, SEND AN ARMORED PATROL UP THE ROAD AND SEE IF YOU CAN FIND WHAT IS DELAYING THE REFUGEES’ CONVOY.”

“RIGHT AWAY, GENERAL!” Shouted back the tall ex-roller derby player. Shouting orders to her MPs, Dickinson soon left the airfield at full speed with four M20 GREYHOUND armored cars. Those M20 armored cars were part of the materiel that the 99th Wing shouldn’t possess according to official lists, but which had been kept from the vast surplus of equipment and supplies due to be officially scrapped or disposed of at the end of World War Two. Some would have called those M20 armored cars extravagant and unjustifiable for an air wing, but for Ingrid those vehicles only compensated for what was in her mind one of the serious deficiencies in the organization of air units concerning airfield perimeter security. In fact, the list of weapons to be brought in from the Philippines would further help take care of those deficiencies.

Over twenty minutes later, with Ingrid becoming frankly worried, a long convoy of mixed vehicles finally appeared on the road, escorted by the M20s.

“Damn! It took them long enough! I wonder what caused such a delay.” Said Gillies.

“I think that I can guess what it is, but I prefer to bite my tongue for the moment.” Replied Ingrid. She waited until the lead M20 stopped besides her, with Dickinson jumping down on the ground, to ask the question burning her tongue.

“So, Major, what was the problem?”

Dickinson answered in an exasperated tone.

“The lack of escort in Seoul, General. The convoy waited more than one hour in Seoul for the South Korean unit that was supposed to escort it, but that unit never showed up and it now seems that it probably deserted. The leader of the convoy, fearing to miss our planes, then decided to leave with only one jeep and four soldiers as escort.”

Ingrid took a deep breath to stay calm then. However, this fit perfectly with the picture of the Korean War that Nancy had made for her in 1941.

“Very well! Let’s have these refugees unload from their vehicles and organize them in groups of 110 passengers. The women and children will get first in the planes.”

“Yes, General!”

As Betty Huyler Gillies returned to her transport plane, Ingrid looked at the refugees as they stepped out of the assortment of private cars, buses and trucks they had used for their short trip. Most were the dependants of military personnel serving with USAFIK, while others were government employees. There were also a few military personnel in uniform but, judging by their age and physical shape, were probably staff officers more qualified to handle paperwork than combat. She suddenly heard loud voices in the column of vehicles, prompting her to walk quickly in the direction of the altercation. She found Major Dickinson in a verbal confrontation with a man in a civilian suit standing beside a big car carrying a diplomatic license plate.

“SIR, I DON’T CARE ABOUT YOUR TITLE! YOU WILL NOT BRING THIS CAR ABOARD ONE OF OUR AIRCRAFT.”

“THIS IS A DIPLOMATIC VEHICLE CONTAINING HIGHLY VALUABLE CLASSIFIED DOCUMENTS, MAJOR. YOU BETTER LET MY CAR IN, OR YOU WILL BE ABLE TO KISS YOUR RANK GOODBYE.”

Ingrid walked briskly to the civilian and stopped less than one pace in front of him, jabbing him in the chest with her right index.

“YOU WILL SHUT YOUR MOUTH AND OBEY MY OFFICER, MISTER, OR YOU WILL STAY HERE WITH YOUR DAMN CAR.”

The man in the suit glared at her with outrage.

“I am Richard Garber, personal representative of Secretary of State Hull for Korea, General. If that car doesn’t get in one of your planes, then you will have to answer for it.”

“And I am Brigadier General Ingrid Dows, Commander of the Korea Air Task Force. All the passengers for Japan will embark with only what they can carry by hand. Your car would take the place of at least thirty other persons, thus it will stay here. Choose what you want to carry in priority and burn the rest. And if you threaten me again, then you will be left here with your precious car.”

“This is totally unacceptable! Those files are vital to the State Department and...”

“I don’t give a shit about your State Department, Mister Garber! Martial law has been declared since yesterday and you don’t run things here. I do! You now have ten minutes to take what you can before I put your damn car on fire.”

“You can’t do that! I will have your head for that!”

The diplomat suddenly found the muzzle of Ingrid's pistol pressing under his chin. While still fixing Garber in the eyes, Ingrid gave an order to Angie Dickinson.

"Major Dickinson, get me an incendiary grenade, then move this car away from the other vehicles of the convoy."

"Yes, General!" Replied happily the MP officer. Going to her armored car, she soon came back with a phosphorus grenade and gave it to Ingrid before getting behind the wheel of the diplomatic car. With Garber sweating hard now and not daring to protest, Dickinson started the engine and drove the car to an open space fifty meters away, then parked it and got out to return at a run to Ingrid.

"Thank you, Major. Mister Garber, you and your assistants now have ten minutes to select what you want to save out of your car. After that, I will personally destroy your car. If you continue to interfere with this evacuation, then you will be put under arrest and sent back to Seoul. Do you understand me?"

"Ye...yes!"

The diplomat nearly collapse to his knees when Ingrid withdrew her pistol but kept it in her hand. She then pointed at the car.

"Ten minutes, no more!"

Garber didn't dare object and ran to his car with his driver and an aide, opening the trunk and starting frantically to select its content. After looking at her watch, Ingrid got up in one of the M20 armored cars and took position behind the heavy machinegun of the vehicle, arming it and chambering a round. After nine minutes, and seeing that Garber and his two helpers still were taking things out of their car, she shouted a warning.

"ONLY ONE MINUTE LEFT!"

With a gesture of frustration, Garber took one briefcase and two suitcases in his hands, letting his two aides dealing with the rest. The three men, their arms and hands full, barely had time to get away from the car before Ingrid shouted again.

"YOUR TIME IS UP, MISTER GARBER."

She then fired three short bursts in quick succession, turning the big diplomatic car into a sieve under Garber's furious eyes. Then jumping out of the M20, Ingrid approached the car on foot and stopped twenty meters away from it before pulling out the safety pin of her grenade and throwing it. The grenade rolled under the car and burst, igniting the gasoline coming out of the punctured fuel tank and creating a spectacular fireball that engulfed the car in flames. Going to the diplomat, Ingrid again jabbed him with her index.

"Next time, Mister Garber, review what martial law means. Now, follow Major Dickinson, who will assign you to one of my planes."

Betty Huyler Gillies, who had watched the show from the cargo hold of her aircraft, smiled to one of her machine gunners.

"That's the Ingrid I like! I could follow her in Hell."

"Aren't we there already, Colonel?" Replied the machine gunner with a grin.

16:51 (Korea Time)

Sunday, June 27, 1948 'C'

Combat positions of 2nd Battalion, 5th U.S. Marine Regiment

Munsan area, 32 kilometers north-northeast of Seoul

Lieutenant Colonel George Winslow nearly yelled in delight when three P-38s with napalm canisters loaded under their wings showed up, coming from the South and flying low. This was the fourth time in the day that P-38s or B-25s from the KATF were coming in support of his embattled battalion and knocking hard the communist forces that had been trying to penetrate his positions. Winslow's mission was to stop and delay as long as he could with his unit the communists bent on taking Seoul and he had been doing just that for over a day now, with invaluable support provided by the pilots of the Korea Air Task Force, more commonly called 'Kat Force' by his Marines. Eighteen enemy T-34 tanks already lay smoking or immobile in front of his positions, most of them victims of airstrikes. The enemy was however persistent and kept the Marines' positions under nearly constant artillery and mortar fire. If the last night was any indication, they could probably expect a massed infantry assault late tonight, something Winslow was dreading.

Winslow's men yelled as well when the three P-38s, led again by the ever-present 'Lady Hawk', started their rocket-firing and bombing runs against enemy mortar positions hidden behind low hills facing the marines. The yells redoubled when a big secondary explosion marked the destruction of an enemy ammunition point. Winslow smiled at that sight: maybe his men were going to be able to enjoy a few hours of rest free of mortar fire tonight. The enemy was however not taking the air attacks lying down and was firing with what seemed to be dozens of heavy machineguns at the P-38s. The planes still kept diving in though, until they ran out of ammunition. Their leader

performed personally the last strafing pass behind the line of low hills. When it emerged from behind the hills, it had one engine on fire and was trailing thick black smoke. Followed by the eyes of the anxious Marines, the P-38 tried to gain altitude while still pursued by machinegun fire. Its second engine was then hit as well when it was only 200 meters from the ground. In desperation the pilot entered a vertical climb, trying to gain as much altitude as possible before the P-38 fell back down. At the top of the climb, as the P-38 seemingly stayed suspended in midair for a second, the pilot jumped out and opened her parachute. The pilot was not out of trouble yet, though. While the doomed P-38 fell down and exploded on the ground, the pilot and her parachute drifted over the no-man's-land between the communists and the American troops.

“Come on, come this way, dammit!” Wished out loud Winslow while watching anxiously the parachutist. The pilot ended landing smack in the middle of an open field separating the combatants. Winslow immediately picked up the field telephone linking his dug-in command post with his most forward company.

“Echo Company, this is Six. I want a patrol out right now to recuperate that fallen pilot.”

He then grabbed a second field telephone and called his battalion mortars.

“Ed? Fire four smoke rounds past that pilot: I want a smoke cover for the patrol going out now to get her...yes, I did say ‘her!’”

His orders passed, Winslow put down his telephone: the only thing he could do now was to wait and watch.

Ingrid ran for her life as soon as she was able to get rid of her parachute and grab her pistol. She had no time to grab her M2A2 carbine from its cockpit rack before having to jump out. The enemy was now firing at her with heavy machineguns, using her parachute as an aiming point. Her heart beating furiously and with adrenaline rushing through her body, she ran to the right of her landing point, thus getting out of the zone beaten by most of the enemy fire, and then ran as fast as she could towards the hills occupied by the Marines of the 5th Regiment. The soft, nearly inaudible whistle noise of incoming mortar rounds then made her throw herself flat in the long grass. The four explosions she heard when they impacted behind her sounded too weak for explosive shells, so she looked behind her and saw thick white smoke starting to form. Thanking whoever had provided her that smoke screen, she got up again and ran as if she was bent on breaking an Olympic record, which she actually did unconsciously

thanks to her superhuman strength and speed as a Chosen of The One. A near miss by a burst of heavy machinegun forced her to throw herself to the ground again as she had covered maybe 250 meters. Letting a second burst pass over her head, she then got up and ran again. With machinegun fire now chasing her, she ran in a zigzag pattern, performing short dashes followed by jumps to the ground and then by a few rolls down in the tall grass to put off the enemy's aim. She took a good two minutes of this pattern before arriving at the southern edge of the open grass field, tired and partly out of breath. While the enemy was still firing at her, the distance now made their aim inaccurate but the bullets still kept flying around her from time to time. She then spotted a soldier waiving at her from behind a bush. Seeing that he was American, she dashed to him with all the speed she could muster, throwing herself behind the bush as bullets narrowly missed her head. Three Marines immediately dragged her out of sight of the enemy, with the sergeant in charge of them speaking to her anxiously.

“Are you alright, maam?”

Sweaty, covered with dust and pieces of grass and breathing hard, Ingrid still managed a smile to the Marines.

“You three are the best looking guys I saw in the last hour! Yes, I think that I'm alright.”

She then shook hands with the sergeant.

“Brigadier General Ingrid Dows, Commander of the Korea Air Task Force. It is a pleasure to meet you here, Sergeant.”

“And I'm Sergeant Jim Rourke, from the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment. Welcome to the world of ground pounders, General. At least you are armed.”

Ingrid smiled while showing them her pistol.

“I do have the best in terms of handgun: a 13-shot .45 caliber GLOCK 21 made in 2010. I inherited it from my adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante. I also have a smaller, backup pistol.”

Rourke whistled softly as he eyed quickly the futuristic pistol in her hand, which had some sort of weird scope on top of its frame and a small box fixed under its barrel, forward of the trigger guard. He then glanced towards the enemy with concerned eyes.

“Let's get back to our lines, General. I will feel better when you are safely in Colonel Winslow's command post.”

“I will second that motion, Sergeant.” Replied Ingrid, her heart finally starting to slow down by now. With Rourke ahead of her and the two other Marines guarding her

back, the small group ran at a crouch towards the trenches held by the battalion, using whatever cover was available on the way.

Enemy artillery shells started to fall on the American positions as Ingrid was delivered to Winslow's command post, a narrow dugout surrounded by walls of sandbags topped with a thin overhead cover of wooden beams and earth. Winslow eyed with interest the small but beautiful young woman, who was wearing a futuristic and colorful flying helmet with a gold-plated visor, before coming to attention and saluting on seeing her rank insignias.

"Lieutenant Colonel George Winslow, Commander of the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment. I am pleased to see you alive and in one piece, General. You and your pilots have been doing a sterling job of supporting us."

"Thanks, Colonel. I'm Brigadier General Ingrid Dows, Commander of the Korea Air Task Force. Do you have a radio I can use to advise my unit in Suwon that I'm alive and well?"

Winslow nodded his head and pointed at one of three radio operators huddling with him in the dugout.

"That radio is used to communicate with the tactical fire support coordination center in Taejon. Your unit should get the word about you within the hour, General." He then looked at the radio operator, speaking loud to be heard over exploding shells.

"Call the TFSCC and tell them that Brigadier General Dows, the commander of the KATF, was shot down near our positions but was retrieved safely and is now with us. Ask them to pass the word to her unit in Suwon."

"Yes sir!" Replied the operator before starting to pass the message on his radio. Winslow then smiled apologetically to Ingrid, who was taking off her helmet in order to brush with her hand her medium length reddish-brown hair. She was indeed very beautiful but her youth somewhat disturbed the Marine senior officer: she could have been his daughter, yet was two ranks above him.

"If you were going to ask when you would be able to join back your unit, I am afraid that I can't give you an answer on that, General: our land communications to the rear were cut off by communist infiltrators last night and the Army's Task Force Smith, which was holding our right flank, folded up and withdrew in disorder early this morning. In essence, we are surrounded on three sides, with our remaining free flank giving on the sea. You may be here for a while, playing grunt for a change, General."

Ingrid seemingly took that in stride, staying calm at those news.

“Then, do you have a spare rifle or some other weapon bigger than my pistol that I could use to make myself useful, Colonel?”

Winslow gave her an approving look: he liked her attitude, which was a far cry from the prima donna attitude one expected from fighter pilots. He then looked at the young private he used as a runner.

“Go get an assault rifle and a magazine bandoleer from our reserve of weapons recuperated on our dead, then give them to the General.”

The private nodded and ran out of the dugout without saying a word. Winslow then looked back at Ingrid.

“Do you know how to use a CAR-41 rifle, General?”

She smiled at his question.

“Colonel, I was married to a Marine Corps major and your CAR-41 rifle was designed by my adoptive father, Major Mike Crawford, with the help of my adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante. My late husband made me practice extensively with a CAR-41 in the Philippines in 1941 before and after the Japanese attacked there. My husband was unfortunately killed in combat in the Philippines.”

“I am sorry to hear that, General. Just out of curiosity, how old are you?”

“I will be 25 in September, Colonel.” Answered Ingrid, making Winslow and his radio operators stare at her with disbelief. She went on to explain herself. “I enrolled in the U.S. Army in 1941 in Manila, when I was eighteen. Before that, I was a female auxiliary in the German Luftwaffe, which I joined just before becoming seventeen. I am a bit of a fighting Lolita, if you could describe me that way.”

Winslow blew air out quietly as he eyed her with renewed interest.

“I can imagine the number of army regulations you must have broken to become what you are, General. However, in view of the splendid job you have been doing in Korea and in the previous war, nobody will dare dispute your competence. Have you shot down any communist planes yet in this war, General?”

“Nine up to now, Colonel. Those are to be added to the 127 enemy planes I shot down in the previous war, for a grand total of 136 air victories to date. I’m still the best at my job in the USAAF, Colonel, and I’m certainly intent on not being a dead weight while being in the care of your unit. Don’t hesitate to put me on duty in the forward trenches if need be, Colonel.”

“Uh, that would be a waste of your talents, General. How about replacing my Fire Support Coordination Officer, who was killed last night? You certainly know how to pass a request for air support and your map reading should be tops.”

“That would suit me just fine, Colonel.” She replied with a warm smile. A shell then burst closer than the others, sending a cloud of dirt and smoke through the observation slits of the dugout and making its occupants cover their heads. Ingrid then put back her helmet after dusting off her hair.

“I better keep this on, since I probably won’t have a chance to have a shampoo for a while. Could you show me where your various positions are while there is still daylight, so that I don’t call an air strike on top of your men’s heads? I would also need a list of the call signs and code words your previous FSCO used.”

“Sergeant Martinez, the radio operator for the FSCO, is just to your left, General. He will give you the info you need after I describe the terrain to you.”

Ingrid took the time to shake the hand of her new radio operator before going with Winslow to one of the observation slits. The marine lieutenant colonel then pointed a wide dirt road that paralleled a double railway track on their right flank.

“This is the main Pyongyang-Seoul-Pusan road and rail link, a vital strategic route for both us and the enemy. Our present main task is to deny both the road and the railway to the enemy so that he can’t use it to get to Seoul. This command post and its surrounding trenches and dugouts actually became part of our frontline positions when Task Force Smith bugged out without warning on our right flank. From here, we can cover the road with machinegun and mortar fire. We also have a few anti-tank launchers and anti-tank rifle grenades left to deal with enemy armor but, to be frank, your planes were a lot more effective in that role.”

“Glad to be of help.” Replied Ingrid, smiling. Winslow also smiled and then pointed at a network of trenches and foxholes to their front and to their right.

“These are the positions of Echo Company. Foxtrot Company is to our left, facing both north and west. The battalion’s mortar platoon and the supply and support company hold our rear.”

“You have only two rifle companies, Colonel?” Asked Ingrid, somewhat surprised. Winslow shrugged in a fatalistic gesture.

“That is the most that could be mustered on short notice, General. The Marine Corps, like the Army and Navy, has been hit hard in the last three years by massive demobilization and downgrading of its units. The rest of our regiment is still being

reconstituted in a hurry in Hawaii with personnel and equipment from other units in California. The enemy could not have started a war at a worse time for us. To be frank with you, General, while the quality of the men in the Marine Corps is still fair to good, I am not so sure that the Army has the kind of soldiers it needs anymore. That Army battalion on our right flank folded a bit too quickly to my taste.”

Ingrid eyed Winslow critically: from what she had seen up to now in this war, she would tend to agree with him on the poor state of the American forces. The young soldier Winslow had sent out earlier then ran back in the dugout, covered with dirt and dust. Out of breath, he handed an assault rifle, a bandoleer with six spare rifle magazines and an army haversack to Ingrid.

“Here you go, General! I also took the liberty of bringing you this haversack: it has a few C-rations, a water bottle and a set of mess tins and field utensils in it.”

Ingrid gave the young soldier her warmest smile and took the weapon, bandoleer and haversack.

“That was very thoughtful of you, Private. Thank you very much.”

“My pleasure, General.”

Watched discreetly by Winslow, who wanted to assess how familiar she really was with her new weapon, Ingrid checked out quickly her CAR-41 assault rifle, a compact bullpup design with the magazine and ejection port behind the pistol grip and trigger action. It was fed with a 30-round box magazine and had a light folding bipod under its barrel to steady its aim when firing from prone position. It was in essence a lighter, shorter variant of the old and proven BAR automatic rifle. Performing her rifle check in exemplary manner, Ingrid then slung across her shoulders the ammo bandoleer and the haversack, then went to sit close to Sergeant Martinez to review FSCO procedures with him. Satisfied with her, Winslow then returned his attention to the enemy positions to his front and right. He knew that he could expect trouble from there once night fell.

Trouble did come as Winslow expected it. The first hint of it was when Ingrid Dows, who had volunteered to take the night command shift, awakened him at one O'clock in the morning.

“Colonel, our forward trenches are reporting movement across our front and right flank. There has been no firing yet, though. I suspect that the enemy is trying to sneak in for a night assault.”

Shaking himself awake, Winslow got up from the corner of the dugout where he had been sleeping as best he could in a sitting position and looked carefully through the observation slits. He saw nothing in the darkness but that didn't mean that the enemy was not coming. He thus grabbed one of his field telephones and called his mortar platoon.

"Ed? I want you to fire two illumination rounds in two minutes: one to our front and the other over our right flank...yes, two minutes!"

He then called in succession his two rifle companies and his support company to order them to stand to and waited for the illumination rounds to light up the sky. They came up at an interval of four seconds and shone above the open fields to their front and along the road and railway to their right. What he and Ingrid saw, along with the soldiers of the battalion watching anxiously from their firing trenches, froze their blood for a second: advancing silently towards them on both their front and right flank were well over 2,000 soldiers, deployed three ranks deep. The moment that the enemy was illuminated, the sound of multiple bugle calls came out from the communists' ranks and the soldiers rushed in while screaming ferociously. Ingrid had been scared often in her years of war, but that initial look at a massive infantry charge rushing towards her from less than 300 meters terrified her. To add to the visual effect of the charge, enemy heavy machineguns started firing over the heads of their troops, sweeping the slopes of the hill held by the Marines. Ingrid needed a couple of seconds to shake herself out of her paralysis. Then, on her own initiative, she jumped to her FSCO radio and called the American artillery unit designated in support of the Marine battalion, while at the same time grabbing her map.

"Shellburn Six, this is India Mike Two, urgent fire mission, over!"

To her growing fury, she had to repeat her call four times before the artillery unit answered. Even then, the answer she got was not at all the one she wanted.

"India Mike Two, this is Shellburn Six. We're sorry but we are taking small arms fire now and can't provide support at this time. We are about to reposition our guns further to the rear and will call you back when we are in position at our new location. Out!"

She looked at her handset with disgust, muttering to herself.

"...We are about to reposition further to the rear... Is that the new way to describe a hasty retreat?"

She then tried to think of alternative solutions, knowing that she had little time to find some: the enemy was already closing in on the forward American trenches. Calling in one of her heavy gunships and getting it here would take time, time that they didn't have. Going through the list of supporting units and their call signs quickly, she then saw a possible source of support and looked at Winslow, who was giving orders on a field telephone. She waited until he had put down his handset to speak urgently to him.

"Colonel, the 57th Artillery Battalion is relocating and can't provide support. I will need to skip a few command echelons and call directly the Navy for support if we are to get any fire support quickly."

"Hell, if we don't get support within the next few minutes, we will be run over by the enemy. Get anything you can, General. I don't care what that is as long as it shoots fast and on the mark."

"Agreed!" Replied Ingrid, who then switched the frequency on her radio. "Neptune Four, this is India Mike Two, come in, over!"

The answer came after her second call.

"India Mike Two, this is Neptune Four, I believe that you are on the wrong radio net, over."

"Neptune Four, I am effectively outside of my assigned radio net but this battalion's bacon will be fried if we don't get some kind of fire support now, over."

There was a short silence before the navy operator answered again.

"India Mike Two, describe your situation, over."

"Neptune Four, we are dug in immediately West of the main Pyongyang-Seoul road and railway line and are under attack by over 2,000 enemy infantrymen closing in on our trenches. I need suppressive fires along the foot of the hill we occupy. I am now sending you the coordinates for the target zones..."

Ingrid looked outside through an observation slit before reading the coordinates she wanted hit. The navy operator then told her to wait for a moment. That moment felt very long to Ingrid, as she could now see a second massive wave of enemy troops following a mere 200 meters behind the first wave. That first assault wave, despite spirited small arms fire and support from the battalion's mortars, was now less than a hundred meters from the wire perimeter of the American positions. The navy operator finally called her back, making her heart jump.

"India Mike Two, this is Neptune Four. We have authorization to provide you with fire support. We are ready to fire one registration round to the east of your position.

Once that fire is adjusted, we will fire a registration round to the north of your position, over.”

“Neptune Four, fire first registration round now!” Said Ingrid in her handset before looking at lieutenant colonel Winslow. “Colonel, Navy registration fire incoming on our right flank.”

“Thank God for the Navy!” Said Winslow fervently. He and Ingrid then watched anxiously to see where the registration round would fall. A bit over a minute later, what sounded like a freight train passing overhead was followed by a huge explosion just eighty meters in front of the farthest American trenches on the east flank. Even from 200 meters away, the blast nearly shook the command dugout’s overhead cover to pieces. Winslow looked at Ingrid with disbelief.

“Who the hell did you call, General?”

“The battleship USS MISSOURI, sir.” Answered Ingrid before speaking in her radio handset. “Neptune Four, this is India Mike Two: add a hundred yards, then fire for effect. Am ready to spot your registration round to our north, over.”

“Neptune Four, adding one hundred yards and firing for effect. Registration round to your north on its way.”

The enemy infantry to the east, shaken by the first powerful battleship shell, had stopped to take cover and was only resuming its advance when six more sixteen-inch caliber, one ton shells came in. While the American Marines could and did crouch down in the bottom of their trenches for some protection against the crushing blast waves, the KPRA soldiers were standing in the open and were blasted away by the hundreds. Half a minute later, a second salvo of six giant shells slammed in the ground east of the Marines’ positions, killing more KPRA soldiers and initiating the start of a retreat. The third salvo caught the men running in open fields, causing a mass butchery. During that time, Ingrid adjusted the battleship fire on the north side of her position, a more complicated task due to the different orientation of the target zone. After three registration rounds, the first salvo fired for effect was enough to convince the attacking KPRA infantry to the North to turn around and flee before it experienced the same fate as the regiment that had attacked the right flank of the Marines. Calling for successive lines of barrage fire, Ingrid made a total of 72 16-inch shells fall on the enemy, with the last two salvos targeted at the hidden enemy positions behind the hills facing the Marines. Ingrid’s ears were still ringing when she ended the fire mission and thanked

the battleship by radio. The marines around her were now looking at her with a mix of disbelief and pleasure, prompting her to shrug and smile to them.

“What? I like playing with big things!”

“I’m sure you do, General.” Replied Lieutenant Colonel Winslow, himself grinning.

07:15 (Korea Time)

Monday, June 28, 1948 ‘C’

Positions of 2nd Battalion, 5th U.S. Marine Regiment

Munsan area, Korea

“My God, look at all those dead commies!” Said Winslow, who had left the command dugout with Ingrid and was surveying visually the battlefield from the positions of Echo Company. Ingrid didn’t speak as she looked grimly around her. To see how many deaths her actions had brought, even when they were enemy deaths, was sobering. Bodies and parts of bodies littered the open fields in front and to the right of Echo Company. Ingrid could roughly estimate the enemy casualties at easily over a thousand dead. Winslow saw her long face and spoke softly to her.

“I know what you are thinking, General. War is never pretty and clean, but you did your job and did it damn well. If not for your initiative to call the Navy, it would be our bodies littering the ground now.”

“Still, this is something I would rather forget, Colonel.”

Winslow eyed her in silence for a moment and then lowered his voice to a near whisper, so that the soldiers nearby couldn’t hear him.

“General, I will make a confidence to you. When I first saw you, my reaction was to think that you were way too young for your rank and position. Now, I would gladly accept you as my direct superior without hesitation, if it came to that.”

Ingrid smiled weakly, feeling a bit better now.

“Thank you, Colonel. The main thing is that our men are alive, I guess.”

“That’s right, General! Fortunately, we lost less than a dozen men in that night battle. We were damn lucky indeed.”

“What’s next, Colonel? This battalion cannot be expected to hold on here forever. We are already cut off from our other units and our artillery support withdrew out of range.”

“That is something I am soon going to clarify with my higher echelon, General. Our big problem is that, apart from being surrounded, we have no more motor transport: our vehicles were destroyed to the last by enemy artillery and mortar fire. If and when we withdraw, we will have to do it on foot, across enemy lines.”

“But, what about your wounded? We can’t abandon them here to the mercy of the enemy.”

“I know!” Replied softly Winslow, who seemed to suddenly age by twenty years. “If we leave them behind, they will certainly be massacred, especially after causing so many casualties to the enemy. On the other hand, bringing them on a march will make them suffer a lot and will slow down the battalion considerably. Do I risk the lives of 326 men to try saving 24 wounded men, who could die anyway if the enemy catches up with us because of our slow pace? You know that the enemy will pursue us the minute he sees that we left this position.”

Ingrid lowered her head, sullen: nobody should ever be forced to make such a cruel choice. However, that was the kind of dilemma that quickly separated good commanders from bad ones.

“If it would be me, Colonel, I would bring everyone along: abandoning our wounded would destroy the morale of the men and kill unit cohesion. Besides, I would not be able to look myself in a mirror if I abandoned wounded men.”

Winslow looked at her with renewed respect.

“My feelings exactly, General. That however leaves us with the same tactical dilemma: how do we escape enemy pursuit while slowed down by our wounded?”

“The military answer would be to leave behind a small delaying party, Colonel. That would keep the appearances of an occupied position and would let us hold the ground in order to give a chance to the main body of the unit to take some distance from the enemy.”

Winslow shook his head at those words.

“A correct solution by the book of tactics, but any small force left behind would be quickly overwhelmed by the enemy, who would then go on the pursuit at once. The delay gained would not be worth sacrificing those men, General.”

“Not if that delaying force can rely on strong air or artillery fire support. Besides, that small force could run away quite fast once enough delay has been gained.”

Winslow suddenly understood where Ingrid was going and pointed an accusing index at her while raising his voice.

“General, forget that! There is no way that I’m leaving you behind, even if it is to help cover our withdrawal.”

That angered Ingrid, who shouted back at him.

“Now, you listen to me, Colonel! Stop looking at me as a girl and start treating me like any other flag officer. I’m sick and tired of men who would take unnecessary risks just to protect me because I have a vagina instead of a penis between my legs. I fought hard to become what I am now and, to me, a male butt is as precious as a female butt, so don’t throw away a perfectly acceptable tactical solution simply because you don’t want to leave a girl behind.”

Ingrid then realized that all the soldiers around them were staring at her and Winslow. The latter then replied in a firm tone.

“General, you may outrank me but you are not part of the Marine chain of command and I am in command here. I am not leaving you behind, end of discussion. Before we keep shouting at each other in public, maybe we should check with higher command to see what their plans for us are, General?”

“That would be a logical step, but you won’t be able to force me to accompany you if I refuse to, Colonel.” Replied Ingrid, not ready to concede the argument to Winslow. The latter rolled his eyes in exasperation.

“Fighter pilots!”

He then walked back towards his command dugout with Ingrid, leaving the soldiers and NCOs who had witnessed the exchange to smile at each other.

“Damn, I like that young redhead!” Said an old, scruffy first sergeant.

At first, all Winslow could get from the American Joint Operations Center in Taejon was a laconic ‘wait, out’ reply to his urgent request by radio for instructions. After a half hour wait, he called Taejon again, only to be told that a decision had not been made yet and that he would have to wait until the army commander had returned from a tour of another frontline unit. Rain then started falling heavily around the dugout as he put down the radio handset. He looked outside and made a sourly face.

“Well, at least the weather is agreeing with my mood. Those idiots at the JOC don’t seem to know what they really want. Damn, I can’t withdraw without orders or authorization!”

“That didn’t seem to bother other units, Colonel.” Replied Ingrid. “At least, with this rain, we could now all withdraw with a good chance of not being noticed by the enemy.”

“Hell, I didn’t think of that! Let’s hope that the JOC will call back soon.”

Three things happened in the next six hours: first, enemy artillery fire started falling at a slow but steady cadence on the American positions; second, the rain stopped after six hours, leaving the open fields around them water-logged and muddy; lastly, the JOC didn’t call back. By noon, Lieutenant Colonel Winslow was ready to explode.

“Damn these idiots at JOC! We just wasted our best chance to leave quietly because of their indecision, for crying out loud!”

The radio operator manning the radio set tuned to the JOC’s frequency then presented his handset to him.

“JOC on the line for you, sir.”

Putting his anger under control first, Winslow then took the handset and spoke in it with a calm, even voice.

“India Mike Two Six here! Go ahead, Zulu Charlie!”

He then recognized the voice of Major General Leven Allen, the chief of staff of the 8th Army.

“India Mike Two, in what state are you, over?”

“Zulu Charlie, I am at about seventy percent of my initial strength and I lost all my motor vehicles to artillery fire. A strong night attack by over 3,000 enemy soldiers was repelled only thanks to timely fire support from the Navy. I am surrounded on three sides and I won’t be able to last long if I stay in position. I request permission to withdraw to Seoul, over.”

“That is not a viable option for you anymore, India Mike Two: the enemy is already closing on the suburbs of Seoul and the bridges on the Han River are being prepared for demolition. Your best bet would be to bypass Seoul to the West and cross the Han River via the bridge leading to Kimpo, over.”

Winslow was appalled by this: the bridge in question was more than thirty kilometers away, with enemy troops now between him and the bridge. With wounded men to carry, he was going to take forever to get to the Han River, by which time the bridges would probably be blown out already. Besides, with all the time wasted by the JOC, he would

now have to wait until nightfall before abandoning his positions, thus making it even more unlikely that he would get to the bridges in time.

“Zulu Charlie, there is no way that I can get to that bridge before at least a good 36 hours. That’s if I can manage to get through enemy lines. Could an evacuation by sea or air be arranged instead, over?”

There was some delay before Winslow got an answer.

“We will study that option, India Mike Two. We will call back as soon as something is arranged. Zulu Charlie out!”

Winslow nearly threw the handset to the ground in frustration.

“Those idiots will make us wait until we are all dead.”

He was still trying to calm down when Ingrid noticed something.

“Colonel, the enemy artillery seems to have switched to smoke shells.”

Winslow hastened to one of the observation slits of the dugout, only to see that Ingrid was right. That could only mean one thing.

“STAND TO! PREPARE FOR AN ENEMY ASSAULT!”

He then distributed orders and directives to his companies, using runners, radios and field telephones. In the meantime, Ingrid looked outside through the observation slits, watching the thickening clouds of white smoke cover and mask everything around, cutting the visibility to mere meters. The enemy tactic was obvious and simple but also very effective: since fire support from aircraft or artillery was so crucial to American troops, the communists were making the coordination of the said fire support impossible by cutting observation capabilities to zero. Now, it would be down to very close range fighting, in which the heavy numerical superiority of the enemy could be exploited to the maximum. A chill went down Ingrid’s spine when she realized that: she was going to be lucky if she or any other American survived this day here. Right now, she could not see further than a few meters outside the dugout. Worse still, the communists were now mixing a few explosive shells with the smoke shells now blanketing the American positions, thus making any shifting of American forces very risky. Ingrid’s usefulness as a FSCO had just been reduced to zero, forcing her to become a mere rifleman for this fight. She thus grabbed her CAR rifle and grimly chambered a round, then took position at one of the observation slits of the dugout, her ammunition bandoleer and haversack slung across her shoulders. Her radio operator, Sergeant Martinez, took position besides her, covering the entrance of the dugout. Lieutenant Colonel Winslow stayed

with his field telephones, while the two other radio operators in the dugout manned the two other observation slits.

The enemy attack became evident only fifteen minutes later, when KPRA soldiers who had advanced quietly under the protection of the smoke started encountering American trenches. Wild exchanges of fire from very close range then erupted around the perimeter, with more exchanges starting as KPRA soldiers advanced deeper and deeper inside the American positions. Soon the hill held by the Marines was the scene of hundreds of desperate firefights, each pitting two or three American Marines against groups of four to five KPRA soldiers, all firing at each other from distances of five meters or less. Even when a pair of American soldiers managed to win a firefight against one group of communist soldiers, another group of KPRA soldiers would show up and start another firefight. While the Americans had the edge in individual firepower thanks to their CAR-41 rifles, the KPRA had an overwhelming advantage in numbers and quickly gained the upper hand, albeit at a heavy cost in casualties. Wounded American Marines were either bayoneted or shot dead in their trenches and foxholes, with very few of them in the outer trenches surviving for more than a few minutes at the most.

Ingrid saw her first enemy soldier ten minutes after the start of the fight, emerging from the smoke less than three meters away. Her heart jumping in her chest, she barely had time to shoot before the KPRA could point his own rifle. She didn't have time to celebrate, as three more communist soldiers appeared from the smoke before the first one had crumpled to the ground. Firing in semi-automatic mode to save her ammunition, Ingrid fired frantically shot after shot, with the KPRA soldiers shooting back with a mix of Mosin-Nagant bolt-action rifles and PPSH41 submachine guns. The other Americans in the dugout, save for Lieutenant Colonel Winslow, who was relaying information to the JOC in Taejon by radio, were similarly engaging more KPRA soldiers. The protective walls of sandbags of the dugout proved invaluable to Ingrid and her comrades, with the worst she suffered in her wild exchange of fire with the three KPRA soldiers was dirt blown in her face. One of the radio operators was less lucky, being killed by a submachine gun bullet in his forehead. Sergeant Martinez saw the radioman fall and turned around in time to take his place and kill the communist soldier who was by then kneeling just outside the dugout and preparing to throw a grenade inside. The

fight was not over yet, however, as more KPRA soldiers kept showing up in small groups. Soon, Ingrid had so many dead enemy soldiers piled in front of her observation slit that she had no effective field of fire left. Her dilemma about what to do about that was cut short when a grenade was thrown in through one of the slits and actually ricocheted against a wall and then against her side before falling one meter away from her. She looked in horror for half a second at the fused grenade, which was promptly joined by two more lit grenades, then shouted at the top of her lungs while climbing the stairs out of the dugout at a run.

“GRENADE!”

The others, with Sergeant Martinez right behind her, started a mad scramble out of the dugout. Ingrid, Martinez and one radioman made it out safely before the grenade exploded. Badly shaken but with her reflexes helped by the flow of adrenaline rushing through her body, Ingrid fired her rifle from a kneeling position as two KPRA soldiers ran out of the smoke. The two men collapsed before they could fire back. Sergeant Martinez then grabbed her by her back and roughly forced her on her feet while shouting frantically at her.

“TIME TO GO! FOLLOW ME, GENERAL!”

“WHAT ABOUT THE COLONEL?” Protested Ingrid. Martinez shook his head.

“HE’S A GONER! COME!”

With Ingrid sandwiched between Martinez and the other radio operator, both of which carried their radios on their back, the trio fought its way southward, towards the trenches of the mortar platoon. What they found there was lots of dead American soldiers and many roaming KPRA soldiers. One encounter with a group of five enemy soldiers cost the life of the radioman following Ingrid before she and Martinez could kill the KPRA infantrymen. Firing had by now slackened considerably behind them, which could mean only one thing: the KPRA soldiers were finding less and less living American soldiers to kill. At that point, Martinez made Ingrid crouch with him behind the burned out hulk of an American truck and spoke in a low voice to her.

“General, there is nothing we can do for the others back there now. The useful thing we can do is to escape to the South and evade the enemy as much as we can.”

“Sergeant, we should at least look for survivors on our way out and not simply run away at full speed.” Protested Ingrid, feeling guilty at being still alive while so many were now dead. Her innate sense of responsibility taking over, she then got up and took the lead, walking quickly at a crouch through the fallen American positions and trying to

spot American survivors through the thick smoke. Twice she and Martinez encountered marauding enemy soldiers and shot them. As she stepped around the bodies of four dead American soldiers surrounded by a dozen dead KPRA soldiers, Ingrid stopped and picked up spare rifle magazines from the dead men to replenish her own ammo supply. Martinez nodded in approval and imitated her. He grabbed as well a few hand grenades, tossing two of them to Ingrid, who put them in her haversack. They then moved on cautiously through the slowly dissipating smoke, heading southward with the help of Ingrid's pocket compass. They thought that they were nearly out of immediate danger when they collided with a group of three soldiers. Ingrid barely stopped herself from firing when she recognized in a flash the soldiers as Americans.

"Hold fire! We're friends!" She said urgently. The man facing her and pointing a CAR at her, a staff sergeant, blew air out in relief.

"Hell, that was hard on my poor heart!"

"Tell me about that later, Sergeant." Said Ingrid in a low voice, herself badly shaken by the near shootout. "Fall behind me and Sergeant Martinez with your two men: we are getting out of here. Keep quiet!"

The three soldiers didn't argue with her on that and followed behind Martinez. After another five minutes of cautious walking, the five of them finally emerged from the clouds of white smoke, allowing Ingrid to orient herself with the help of her map. Seeing a shallow ravine that led in the correct direction, she pointed it to the Marines.

"We run for that ravine, then keep moving south under cover. Let's go!"

They all ran at a crouch, hoping and praying that communist soldiers would not see them. To their collective relief, they made it safely to the ravine and dove under the cover of bushes and high grass, their hearts pumping hard. Ingrid had tears in her eyes as she looked one last time at the smoke covered hill they had just escaped from.

"So many good men...gone. I feel like I abandoned them."

Alvaro Martinez spoke softly while looking himself at the hill.

"You did all that you could humanly do, General. If anyone calls you a coward for running out of that trap, I will kill him with my bare hands."

She gave him a thankful look, then pointed down the ravine.

"Thanks, Sergeant. Now, let's put some distance between ourselves and the enemy."

"Uh, shouldn't we tell the JOC by radio that we are alive, so that they could wait for us before blowing up the bridges on the Han River, General?"

“Hmm, not a bad idea actually, Sergeant Martinez. Give me that handset, please.”

Taking the handset offered by the radio specialist, Ingrid was about to speak when she realized that there was no static on the air, as if the radio was dead. She made Martinez turn around so that she could check if the set was switched on or not, only to see that two bullets had pierced the radio.

“Damn, your radio was shot up, Martinez! We can’t communicate with anybody anymore.”

“Aw, shit!” Said the Puerto Rican in frustration before looking apologetically at Ingrid. “Uh, sorry for the vulgarity, General.”

Ingrid smiled and spoke softly to him.

“Sergeant, just behave as if you are with your Marine officer and forget that I am a girl. You and the others can swear and cuss as much as you want around me, it won’t bother me Jack shit. I am not exactly an innocent virgin anymore. Well, no point in lugging that radio set around anymore, Sergeant Martinez. You might as well dump it now.”

Cursing their bad luck, Martinez quickly took off his backpack radio set and hid it under a bush. The group then hurried away southward, using the available cover as much as they could.

17:03 (Korea Time)

Korea Air Task Force command complex

Suwon Airfield, Korea

“Yes, I understand... Thanks for the call.”

Colonel Evelyn Sharp, Ingrid’s deputy, slowly put down the telephone receiver as tears started coming out of her eyes. She then sat heavily in the empty chair besides the command center’s telephone switchboard, with Vance Hemmingsworth, Peter Shmelling, Teresa James and Evelyn Hudson waiting anxiously for her to tell them what had happened. Evelyn Sharp finally overcame her grief enough to pass the bad news.

“That was the 45th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron calling. They flew a photo mission with a RF-51 three hours ago over the positions of the 2nd Marine Battalion near Munsan, with the pilot making a low altitude visual pass to confirm the information. The commies were walking all over the position and were looting the bodies of our dead

men. The Marines, with the help of Ingrid, however made the enemy pay very heavily for that hill, as hundreds of dead commies are lying on and around the hill. According to the JOC in Taejon, they lost contact with the Marines' command post in mid-sentence, when someone was overhead above the noise of a firefight, shouting about a grenade. Ingrid was in that command post. There has been no radio contact of any sort with the Marines since then."

"But, Ingrid could have escaped, along with some other survivors." Suggested Teresa James, clinging to any possibility for hope. Evelyn Sharp shook her head slowly.

"That's unlikely, Teresa: the RF-51 pilot saw over 2,000 live enemy troops on and around the hill and the commies have been controlling the whole area around that hill for over a day now. That hill was nothing more than one big trap for our Marines. I will officially declare Ingrid missing in action, but we shouldn't hold any realistic hope of seeing her again."

"What if she was captured and led away?" Said Shmelling.

"No way!" Replied abruptly Evelyn, snapping her head up. "Ingrid told me many times that, in view of the treatment she expected from the enemy, she would never let herself be taken alive. Don't forget that she was the adoptive daughter of Nancy Laplante and that, as such, she had knowledge that would be considered vital by the Soviets. She knew that and had vowed to me to commit suicide rather than let them take her."

"Then, what do we do now?" Asked Vance Hemmingsworth, bordering on tears.

"What Ingrid would want us to do: keep on with our mission. Let's make those commies pay for Ingrid and all those poor Marines. I expect the enemy to push convoys down the main road towards Seoul, now that the Marines' position is no longer an obstacle. I want an airstrike package ready with cluster bombs in one hour, with enemy supply convoys between Munsan and Seoul as targets of opportunity. I will lead Angel and Red Flights on that mission. Let's get moving, people!"

18:49 (Korea Time)

24 kilometers south of Munsan

It took everything for Ingrid not to run in the open and wave at the seven P-38s when the planes swooped down on a convoy of enemy trucks moving southward on the main road, less than a kilometer away from their hiding place. She had made her group

stop for a well deserved rest besides a small stream well off from the main Pyongyang-Seoul road and rail line and had been there for ten minutes when the convoy had rolled in sight, forcing them to hide in nearby bushes. Her group watched with quiet glee as a shower of dual-purpose bomblets from the cluster bombs dropped by the P-38s turned the convoy into a long line of burning wrecks.

“Ain’t that a sweet sight?” Said Staff Sergeant Jim Bigelow, getting a proud nod from Ingrid.

“That’s only the first part of the payback, Sergeant. You can rest assured that my girls will keep clobbering those commies as long as they have serviceable planes, fuel and ammunition.”

She then looked at the four Marines hiding in the bushes with her.

“Alright, we might as well use this interlude to take stock of our situation. How are you guys making out on food and ammunition?”

The Marines quickly surveyed their web gear and, in the case of Staff Sergeant Bigelow and his two men, their backpacks. While the ammunition was still aplenty, the amount of rations the Marines had was pretty limited, with an average of two meals per man. Ingrid thus took out of her haversack three of the five C-rations she had and put them on the ground near the marines.

“Save what you have for later: we will have supper on those three rations. Don’t waste anything: I plan to save our remaining rations for as long as possible. Once we have eaten and refilled our water bottles at the stream, we will resume our walk as soon as night falls. I intend us to walk all night, then hide during daylight, as we can’t afford any direct encounter with the enemy. Does anyone have a problem with that plan? Don’t be afraid to speak up: I may be a brigadier general but you are the specialists when it comes to ground combat.”

Bigelow appreciated her common sense and openness: many other officers would have assumed that they knew better just on account of their rank. That magnificent young redhead was turning out to be quite an agreeable surprise as field craft and tactics went.

“I concur with your plan, General.”

“I concur as well, General.” Added Alvaro Martinez. “Well, let’s see what delicacies you put on the table for supper.”

Ingrid giggled at that: C-rations could be called a lot of things, but delicacy was not one of them. They then shared the content of the C-rations and ate their meal cold. The cigarette packs inside the rations were eagerly grabbed by the Marines, who lit

cigarettes after eating. Martinez offered one to Ingrid, who refused politely while staying away from the smoke.

“No, thank you, Sergeant: I never smoked and my adoptive mother made me promise never to smoke because of the health problems tobacco brings.”

“What health problems, General?” Said Bigelow, amused. “Bullets are certainly unhealthy for you, but tobacco?”

“Smoking increases greatly the risk of cancer and pulmonary diseases in the long run, Sergeant. In 2012, tobacco products had to have health warnings on their packaging and were heavily taxed to make up for the public health costs they caused. Since we are speaking of that...”

Ingrid then took the two remaining C-rations in her haversack and took out of them the cigarette packs inside them, giving them to the Marines. She then put back her rations in her haversack and let the Marines finish their cigarettes before calling a resumption of their trek.

“Alright, men, time to go! Remember: keep quiet and stay under cover as much as possible. Also, no smoking at night: the lit ends can be seen from far away.”

“Oh, I never thought of that.” Said Private Vance Steele, still a mere teenager. That got him a hard look from Staff Sergeant Bigelow.

“Hell, who gave you your basic training, Steele, an Army sergeant? As a Marine, you should know better.”

“Uh, sorry, Sarge!”

Ingrid smiled at the display of inter-service rivalry but didn't add to it, even if she was tempted to crack a few jokes of her own. By now the Sun was setting behind the hills to their west and night was falling fast. However, her incredible eyesight proved to be a major advantage, letting her pick her way with ease while the Marines struggled through the bushes just to see each other once night fell for good.

Ingrid accelerated the pace somewhat once darkness had fallen, since they were now much less vulnerable to visual observation. She did however take care not to make unnecessary noises, attracting an appreciative comment from Staff Sergeant Bigelow, who was following directly behind her.

“Hell, General, you do know how to go around silently for a mere fighter pilot.”

“My late husband was a major in the Marine Corps, Sergeant. He showed me a few tricks. The husband of one of my Filipino maids in Manila was also a good hunter and often took me on jungle treks.”

Bigelow nodded in appreciation at that: he had served in the Philippines in 1939 and 1940 and had seen how skilled the Filipino natives were at jungle field craft. That girl had received some good teaching indeed. He thus didn't dispute her taking the lead on this night trek, especially since she was proving to have cat's eyes.

They walked along valleys and up and down hills for hours, always staying within sight of the main road in order to use it as a navigational aid. Despite the difficult terrain they were doing some good time, partly because they were a small, lightly equipped group and partly because of the map skills of Ingrid, who did not lose time by selecting wrong directions or going through impossible terrain, something Bigelow had seen young Marine second lieutenants do too often. It was near eleven O'clock at night when they saw a small campfire by the side of the main road, spotting it from 400 meters as they crested a low hill that cut their direct path southward. Ingrid, imitated by the marines, quickly lay down in the grass and observed and listened for a few seconds. About half a dozen men were visible around the campfire, talking loudly and laughing from time to time. Bigelow took his small binoculars and pointed them at the fire, telling in a low voice to Ingrid what he saw.

“Definitely commie soldiers, General. I can count seven of them around the fire, seemingly cooking their late meal. One of them is now going towards that small tree to the right of their camp, probably to relieve himself. Wait! There are two persons attached to that tree: prisoners!”

“Americans?” Asked Ingrid anxiously. Bigelow's first answer was a swear word.

“Fuck! One of them must be a woman, as that commie soldier is now belly to belly against that prisoner and doing his thing. Both prisoners are naked.”

“Give me those binoculars!” Ordered Ingrid, contained rage in her voice. Looking through the binoculars, she had to stop herself from shouting in rage and frustration: the enemy soldier was effectively in the process of raping a woman tied standing to the tree with her hands above her head. Another woman, also naked, was similarly tied on the opposite side of the tree. A second communist soldier then went to the tree and started raping the second woman while the other soldiers around the

campfire laughed and encouraged the rapists loudly. Ingrid gave back the binoculars to Bigelow, a furious urge to kill taking hold of her.

“Bastards! They won’t get away with this.”

“But, that could give us away to the enemy forces in the area, General.” Objected Martinez. Ingrid snapped her head towards him and answered in a cold, resolute voice.

“Even if those women are not American, I am not going to stand and watch this without doing anything. We will have to simply work quickly and silently. Let’s get closer quietly. We will approach from the right flank, along that small ditch running parallel to the road. Follow me!”

While Martinez believed this to be unwise tactically, he didn’t object further and followed her, taking the safety off his rifle: he also was burning to make the enemy pay for all the things they had done and wouldn’t have felt a proper man if he had let these rapes go on with impunity. The other Marines were equally fired up and ready to deal out some swift justice as they quietly advanced along the ditch towards the enemy campfire. It took them half an hour for them to get within fifty meters of the fire, by which time two enemy soldiers had replaced the two first ones and were taking their turn at raping the sobbing, pleading women. It was too obvious by now from the women’s pleas that they were Americans, something that made the Marines even more resolved to kill the communist soldiers. As they crouched in the ditch, ready to fire on the enemy, Bigelow saw Ingrid lower her head and cry quietly. On an impulse, he touched her shoulder, speaking very softly and quietly to her.

“Come on, General, get over this: we are about to make those bastards pay. We need you to help kill these commies.”

“Those two women: I know them.” She said between sobs. “They are American Army nurses.”

Bigelow had a hard time then not to simply jump out of the ditch and run at the enemy to kill them right away. He however managed to control himself and looked her in the eyes.

“General, I need you to be cool now. We will take care of the men around the fire. You can kill the bastards raping your friends. Now, get ready!”

Bigelow then looked at the other Marines to his left and spoke in a very low voice.

“Pick up an individual target from left to right, in the order you are in extended line. We will fire single shots, on my command. Get ready!”

As they pointed their rifles and Ingrid got ready to run to the women, one of the rapists, finished with his victim, stepped away from the tree and pulled up his pants before returning to the campfire with a big grin on his face. Another communist soldier was getting up to take his place when Bigelow shouted once.

“FIRE!”

Illuminated by their fire and plainly visible to the Marines, who were shooting from prone positions maybe forty meters away, the enemy soldiers around the fire didn't stand a chance and were quickly shot down with single bullets each. Ingrid jumped out of the ditch as the Marines were starting to fire and ran flat out to the tree, less than twenty meters away. The single enemy soldier still raping one of the nurses froze where he was and snapped his head around, a look of surprise and horror on his face. Ingrid, her pistol pointed at his head, kicked him away from the nurse before shooting him repeatedly, her first shot going to the man's exposed groin. She then looked around to make sure that all the enemy soldiers were dead. Seeing that the Marines were already swarming over the enemy bodies, she then holstered back her pistol and took out her pocket survival knife, cutting the ropes holding both naked women to the tree. The nurses collapsed to the ground, sobbing hysterically and prompting Ingrid into hugging them both at the same time while speaking to them, her own voice shaky.

“Juanita, Eunice, it will be alright now: you are safe with us.”

Juanita Redmond, a young and small beauty with Latino blood in her veins, held on frantically to Ingrid.

“Ingrid, my God, you are like an angel. It...it was horrible!”

Eunice Hatchitt, a tall, pretty and athletic Texan woman, also hugged Ingrid tightly.

“It is so good to see you, Ingrid. Thank you! Thank you!”

Ingrid kissed them both before stepping back slightly to look at them, tears still in her eyes.

“I wished that we could have found you earlier, my poor friends. Now, lay down and spread your legs: I will wash you up quickly.”

The two nurses obeyed her without discussion, desperate to wash away the shame of their rapists' contact. Ingrid emptied her water bottle over their groins, while the nurses frantically wiped away the semen in and on them. Martinez and Kupinsky came in at that time, the uniforms and boots taken off the nurses by the enemy bundled in their hands. Both men, on seeing what Ingrid was doing, dropped the clothes near the nurses and, looking away, left them alone with Ingrid. Once cleaned up, Redmond and Hatchitt

put their clothes back on while Ingrid kept caressing their heads and uttering soothing words to them. Both nurses got up once fully clothed, by which time Staff Sergeant Bigelow approached them, a pair of web belts supporting water canteens and Colt pistols in their canvas holsters in his hands. He handed one belt each to the nurses.

“We found these on the enemy soldiers. They are probably yours, maam.” Eunice Hatchitt, who was recovering more quickly from her ordeal than Juanita Redmond, shook her head.

“Those actually belonged to two of our corpsmen, Sergeant. Our medical convoy was ambushed yesterday as we were approaching Kimpo airfield with wounded men to be evacuated by air. The commies killed all the medical staff and the wounded except for us. That group was escorting us back to their rear lines but was taking its sweet time doing it, so that these bastards could have plenty of fun with us. Thank you for saving us, Sergeant. I am Captain Eunice Hatchitt, U.S. Army Medical Corps, and this is Major Juanita Redmond.”

Bigelow saluted both women.

“Did you have anything to eat lately, maam? We found some looted C-rations on these bastards.”

“We haven’t eaten in a day, Sergeant.” Said weakly Redmond, making Ingrid nod her head and look at Bigelow.

“Sergeant, collect as much food and water from the enemy soldiers as you can find, then we will move off and walk at least a couple of miles before stopping to let the major and the captain rest and eat.”

“Right away, General!” Replied Bigelow before leaving the three women alone together. Eunice eyed Ingrid, who was wearing her now dirty flight suit and her flight helmet, plus her web belt, bandoleer, haversack and rifle.

“How did you happen to be around, Ingrid? Were you shot down?”

“Yes! I was shot down by ground fire yesterday while flying in support of the Marines’ position near Munsan but was able to link up with the Marines. I then stayed with them until the enemy overran their hill. Only four Marines from the 2nd Battalion were able to escape with me and we are now heading south to try to link up with our troops. Don’t worry: we will escort you back to safety.”

Eunice and Juanita then hugged her again, this time less desperately but still in a most emotional way. They stayed in each other’s arms for a long minute, exchanging human

warmth to soothe their nerves and hearts. They then walked away into the bushes with the Marines once the latter's' scavenging work was done.

02:53 (Korea Time)

Wednesday, June 30, 1948 'C'

North shore of Han River, two kilometers west of Seoul

Ingrid, with her six companions hiding in the bushes on each side of her, looked with bitterness at the dark shapes of the bridges crossing the Han River and connecting Seoul with the South Shore: all of them had been blown up, with at least two spans missing from each of the bridges. Suwon was less than 32 kilometers to the South, on the other side of the river, yet was now seemingly unreachable for them. Furthermore, if Kimpo had fallen two days ago, as the attack on the medical convoy would indicate, that meant that the South Shore might now be partly in enemy hands. Even if they could cross the river, that wouldn't mean that they were safe yet. Juanita Redmond resumed the general feeling when she whimpered at the sight of the destroyed bridges.

"What do we do now? The river is over half a mile wide."

"Keep your voices down!" Admonished quietly Ingrid, seeing a number of enemy troops and vehicles dispersed along the shore, facing south. One small group with a light truck was actually less than a hundred meters away, tucked between trees and bushes and about fifty meters from the waterline. Borrowing Bigelow's binoculars again, Ingrid inspected carefully that group and smiled to herself: the four communist soldiers were actually sleeping around their vehicle, which seemed to be a truck specialized in laying field telephone wires, with big spools of wires on dispensing drums on the back of the vehicle. There were no sentries visible near the vehicle. Ingrid gave the binoculars back to Staff Sergeant Bigelow and pointed at the truck and the sleeping soldiers.

"Sergeant, I think that I have a plan."

She described what she had in mind for half a minute, attracting a grin from Bigelow.

"That might just work, General. Who will swim across, though? That is one long swim. I may be a Marine, but I am not much of a swimmer."

"I will! I still have my aviator's flotation vest. Now will be a good time to use it. Can you take care of those men quietly?"

"They shouldn't be a problem, General. Wait here with the nurses while I go with my Marines to visit those commies."

As the four Marines moved off quietly towards the sleeping enemy soldiers, Ingrid went to reassure Juanita and Eunice, who were very close to total discouragement.

“Look, girls, what we will do is this: once those commies are dead, I will jump in the river with my flotation vest on and swim to the South Shore while towing a telephone wire behind me. Once on the other side, I will tie the wire to a tree and you will then be able to use that wire to keep from being washed away by the current and to pull yourself to the opposite shore. You both know how to swim, I hope?”

“No problems with that, General!” Replied Eunice, a born athlete. Juanita was less sure of herself but said that she would manage. Ingrid smiled in encouragement to both of them and then watched the progress of Bigelow and of his men. The Marines actually had no trouble killing quietly the sleeping enemy soldiers, covering their mouths before stabbing them in the heart with their bayonets. Ingrid patted Juanita’s shoulder when she saw Bigelow wave in her direction.

“Time to move! Follow me and be quiet, for God’s sake!”
The three women took only a few minutes to arrive by the side of the truck. The nurses looked with incomprehension when they saw Kupinsky and Steele busy taking off one of the truck’s wheels.

“What are they doing?” Asked Juanita, getting a grin from Ingrid.
“Tires float, don’t they? We will use them as flotation aids and will put you and our weapons on them. If you will excuse me now, I have some swimming to do.”
Taking off her rifle, bandoleer, flying helmet, boots and haversack, she tied them solidly to her flotation vest, which she inflated and then wrapped with a khaki shirt taken from a dead enemy soldier in order to hide the yellow fabric of the vest. The end of a telephone wire was next tied securely to the vest and a loop of wire was tied to it as well. Ingrid’s last preparation was to empty four water bottles and close them back tightly, then she put her web belt, to which the water bottles and her pistol were clipped, on around her chest. Thus ready, she carefully walked at a crouch to the waterline and entered the water, wearing around her torso the loop tied to the vest and towing the thin but very strong telephone wire behind her. She was able to cover a good 150 meters by simply walking on the muddy bottom before losing her footing and having to start swimming. Back on the North Shore, her comrades anxiously watched her disappear in the night,

with Alvaro Martinez dispensing the telephone wire from the truck so that Ingrid would not be held back.

“Damn, if she makes it I swear that I will never say anything again against women in the Army!” Muttered Bigelow. Eunice Hatchitt heard him and elbowed him gently in the ribs.

“And what were you saying before about women in the Army, Sergeant?”

“Uh, nothing, maam. If you will excuse me, I will get our improvised raft ready.”

Ingrid soon was thankful for the empty water bottles around her torso, as the current was not negligible and the weight of the wire started to be felt by her despite the flotation vest. At least spared from swimming just to stay on the surface, she was able to put all her strength and endurance into reaching the other shore. Alternating between crawl and breaststroke, she took nearly forty minutes to swim across and find back some footing. Shivering and exhausted, she cautiously walked out of the water, dragging the wire behind her. Next, holding solidly the telephone wire now looped around her and with her pistol in her right hand, she walked eastward along the shore, staying in the high grass and intent on straightening the wire after having drifted down the river for an appreciable distance. When she was approximately facing the spot on the North Shore where the captured enemy truck was, she looped her wire four times around the base of a tree near the waterline and tied it solidly in place. She was about to take her flashlight out in order to signal to her comrades that they could cross when she was suddenly grabbed from behind and brutally pulled down to the ground, with a hand covering her mouth. A soldier then jumped astride her while two more men solidly pinned her down on her back. The man on top of her was raising a bayonet in order to stab her when he hesitated, then spoke in English.

“Hell, that’s a woman!”

“What?” Said one of the men holding down Ingrid before putting a hand on her chest and feeling one of her breasts. “Christ, you’re right! Do commies use women in combat?”

“I don’t know!” Replied the man astride Ingrid. He then put his bayonet across her throat and made the man covering her mouth withdraw his hand, then spoke to her in a low, menacing voice.

“Alright, who are you? You better be American or I will slash your throat open!” Ingrid, as terrified as she had ever been before, swallowed hard.

“I’m Brigadier General Ingrid Dows, Commander of the Korea Air Task Force and am better known as ‘Lady Hawk’. I was shot down near Munsan three days ago and there are six more Americans, including two nurses, who are waiting my signal to cross the river along the wire I dragged across. If you don’t believe me, just look at my flying helmet tied to my flotation vest.”

Disbelieving her at first, the man with the knife picked up with one hand her flying helmet, painted the colors of the American flag and with the name ‘Lady Hawk’ painted on. He then smiled and got off her.

“Excuse us, General, but we thought that you were an enemy scout preparing an enemy crossing.”

“That was the prudent thing to think, mister.” Said the shaken Ingrid while sitting up. “Just let me signal the others first, then we will talk further.”

Taking her flashlight, she sent the prearranged signal to staff sergeant Bigelow, repeating it after ten seconds and then getting the return signal back. Blowing air out in relief, she then spoke to the man with the knife while untying her things and the telephone wire from her flotation vest.

“Can you arrange for some kind of smoke cover to be prepared, to be fired if my comrades are spotted by the enemy while crossing?”

“I’ll get the company commander on the phone.” Volunteered one of the men who had held her down, then running away up the bank of the river. Ingrid looked up at the man with the knife.

“Could you tell me to which unit you belong and whether Suwon Airfield is still occupied by our planes?”

The soldier hesitated for a moment but then decided that she could not possibly be an enemy infiltrator.

“We are from the 7th Reconnaissance Company of the 7th Infantry Division, General. I believe that our planes are still using Suwon. Our unit is holding the river bank in this sector but the enemy is pushing hard and we may have to pull south soon.”

“Then, I must get a vehicle to bring my group to Suwon before my task force pulls out.”

“We can see to that once your friends are safely across. That was one hell of a trek you did, General.”

“Tell me about that, Corporal! I never thought that I would play ground pounder like this.”

She then stayed silent while watching anxiously across the river, imitated by the two infantrymen besides her. Twenty minutes later, as they were still watching and waiting, hurried footsteps came from their back, followed by the appearance of two men. One was an Army captain who quickly saluted Ingrid before shaking hands with her.

“General Dows, I am Captain Andrew Merrick, in charge of the 7th Reconnaissance Company. I just had your identity passed back to the divisional headquarters, which confirmed that you went MIA over Munsan three days ago. They in turn contacted Suwon Airfield, who went nearly nuts when we told them that you were safe and sound. The HQ told us to provide a vehicle for you and also told us that they were placing an artillery battery on standby, ready to fire smoke shells.”

“Thank God! I owe you and your men a big thank you, Captain.”

“It’s a pleasure, General. Who are the six other Americans with you?”

“Four Marines from the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment and two Army nurses. The Marines and me are the only ones that were able to escape when the enemy overran the 2nd Battalion’s positions. During our trek back south we bumped into an enemy squad that was escorting north two nurses taken prisoners two days ago. We killed the bastards and took the nurses with us.”

The infantry captain smiled at her story, obviously impressed.

“You and your people did damn good, General! Crossing the Han River while towing a wire behind you was also quite a feat. I will have to be careful that the enemy does not try that same trick later on.”

“They may very well do just that, Captain. The commies may be real bastards but they are very good infantrymen.”

Urgent words from a soldier then got her attention and that of the captain.

“Sir, I see something moving on the water, about 150 yards away.”

Getting up and entering the water again, Ingrid nearly ran while following the wire she had towed in, stopping when the water came to her waist. She now could see a dark mass approaching, while the noise of men breathing hard and of rifle butts splashing repeatedly in the water could be heard.

“You are nearly there, guys! Just another fifty yards and you will be across! I found friends on this side.”

“Thank God!” Answered fervently the voice of Eunice Hatchitt. The nurse soon became recognizable, sitting astride the first of five inflated truck tires tied together in a line. Eunice and Juanita were actually holding on to the wire and pulling their improvised

raft along, while the four Marines were paddling hard with their rifles. Ingrid grabbed the front of the first tire as soon as she could get to it and then helped pull the raft towards the shore. Two soldiers soon joined her and the raft touched the shore a minute later. The infantry captain shook his head in disbelief at the sight of the improvised raft and its occupants.

“Hell, this will make a story to be remembered! Welcome to the American lines, people.”

To his delight, Eunice and Juanita’s answer to that was to hug and kiss him, so overjoyed they were of having attained relative safety. On his part, Staff Sergeant Bigelow simply made sure that all the weapons and kit were taken from the raft, then pushed it back in the current and cut the telephone wire with a wire-cutter taken from the vehicle they had captured. The infantry captain, with his men acting as escorts, then led Ingrid’s group up the bank and across a field sparsely covered with small trees and bushes. A jeep and a Dodge $\frac{3}{4}$ ton light truck were waiting for them 200 meters away from the river, behind a clump of trees. Going to the jeep, the captain grabbed a radio handset and made a quick call to report in, then turned to face Ingrid while pointing at the light truck.

“This vehicle will transport you and your group to Suwon Airfield, General. Good luck to you in this war and keep hitting the bastards hard.”

“I certainly will, Captain. Good luck to you and your men as well.”

She returned the captain’s salute and then patted the backs of Eunice and Juanita.

“No more walking for the time being, girls: get in the back of this truck and you will soon be flying out of Suwon, hopefully towards a safer place for you. As for you, men, I am sure that the Marine Corps will be happy to see your faces again.”

“The feeling will be mutual, General.” Replied Bigelow, grinning. “If I may say so, you would make a really half decent Marine...for a fighter pilot!”

“Come on, kids! Get in the truck!” Said playfully Ingrid while patting Bigelow’s bum and making him whoop in surprise. “The school break is over.”

05:20 (Korea Time)

Suwon Airfield

“GENERAL DOWS IS BACK!”

The shout from a mechanic made everyone within earshot rush towards the light truck approaching the lines of the KATF. Ingrid stepped out of the front cab when the truck stopped besides the task force's command complex, only to be hauled on a forest of extended arms and carried enthusiastically to the entrance of the complex, where Evelyn Sharp, Teresa James, Helen Richey, Peter Shmelling and Vance Hemmingsworth were waiting with big grins on their faces. Ingrid was then put down gently, allowing Evelyn and Teresa to hug her frantically.

"Ingrid, you crazy girl! You scared the shit out of us!"

"You think that I wasn't scared, Evelyn? Hell, I nearly needed my brown panties!" Replied Ingrid before pointing at her comrades coming out of the back of the truck. "Say hello to my companions: Staff Sergeant Bigelow and his three Marines from the 2nd Battalion, plus Major Juanita Redmond and Captain Eunice Hatchitt, both from the Army Medical Corps."

Evelyn and the others shook hands with them, following which the group was invited in the complex. Evelyn Sharp spoke quietly to Ingrid while leading her and the others to Jenny Kawena's section for an intelligence debriefing.

"It's a good thing that you didn't come back later, Ingrid: we were about to evacuate the airfield today and to relocate to Pusan's K-1 Airfield."

Ingrid gave her a worried look at those words.

"How many flyable planes do we have right now? Will we have to leave some of them behind?"

"We have presently 29 P-38NCs, five RP-38Ns, 21 B-25NGs and nine F-82s operational aircraft here in Suwon. Four more planes are under repair right now but should be ready to fly by this afternoon. The rest of our planes, including the F-82s of the 339th FAWS, are in Pusan, while our helicopters should be due to arrive here this morning. Their trip by sea has run late. I halted all support missions for the moment in order to save our planes for our relocation to Pusan. We have four C-54s on hand to help evacuate our ground personnel and surplus pilots and a truck convoy will take the rest to Pusan by road, along with our ground equipment. Six of our C-142 GLOBEMASTER heavy cargo aircraft are due in at around ten this morning to load our vital spares and tools."

"Good! At least the FEAF HQ is not letting us down and by ourselves for that move. I would like you to make sure that the two nurses and four Marines that came with me have a spot on the first C-54 out of here. They went through a lot, believe me."

“And you, Ingrid? You look like hell!”

“I’m fine, Evelyn, really! I’m just tired, hungry and dirty.”

Her deputy eyed her CAR rifle, ammo bandoleer and haversack.

“You certainly look like a grunt, Ingrid.”

“I feel like one.” She replied in a tired voice. They then arrived at the intelligence section. Before the two nurses could enter it, Ingrid whispered into Kawena’s ear.

“Major Redmond and Captain Hatchitt were repeatedly raped during their short captivity. Mention it in your written intelligence report but, please, be delicate about your questions to them.”

Jenny gave a sorrowful look at the nurses and then whispered back to Ingrid.

“Understood. I hope that the bastards who did that paid.”

“Oh, they did!”

They then all sat down to be debriefed as a group by Jenny, who knew that the Far East Command’s headquarter in Okinawa would be expecting her report on this with great impatience: the loss of the 2nd Marine Battalion had shocked many complacent staff officers back to reality and had reportedly angered greatly General MacArthur. Jenny thus spent a lot of her debrief on the subject of the resistance and fall of the Marines’ positions and comparatively little on the group’s trek back to American lines. However, even for someone like her accustomed to Ingrid’s crazy antics during the last war, Jenny couldn’t help look at Ingrid with disbelief a number of times as she recounted her actions. The crazy part was that the Marines, especially Sergeant Martinez, backed up her story completely. Jenny was also aware about the request for fire support made to the USS MISSOURI, which was now part of the official war records, so her story was fully backed up by facts. The two nurses, who had comparatively little to say, also looked at their friend with wide eyes and gaping mouths a number of times. After nearly an hour of detailed debriefing and with pages of notes, Jenny finally wrapped up her questioning, which let Ingrid lead the others away so that they could wash, eat and sleep a bit. Evelyn Sharp succeeded then in convincing Ingrid into getting some sleep herself, no mean feat considering Ingrid’s usual pigheadedness. Sharp also intercepted Jenny afterwards and read quickly her debriefing report before pointing a finger firmly at her.

“I want you to have your assistant fly out in the first C-54, so that she can bring this report in person and by hand to the USAFFE headquarters in Okinawa.”

"Will do, Evelyn!" Answered Jenny. Somehow, she suspected that her assistant wouldn't regret leaving this airfield one bit.

14:09 (Korea Time)

K-13 Airfield, Suwon

Ingrid, standing in front of her operations center complex, was watching the last C-142 loaded with her aircraft spares and specialized tools take off when her sharp vision detected in the distance a convoy of vehicles coming from the nearby town of Suwon. Suddenly worried, she eyed the vehicles with her binoculars but calmed down on seeing that they were American. There was however something strange with the convoy, starting with the haphazard mix of vehicle types that contrasted with the appearances of normal military convoys. Intrigued, Ingrid went to her jeep, parked nearby, and jumped in the driver's seat to start the engine. Driving off at maximum speed, she went to meet the convoy, to stop her vehicle on the side of the road ahead of the lead truck. Getting out of her jeep, she then stood squarely in the middle of the road and signaled the convoy to stop. The Dodge WC56 light truck that was in the lead stopped less than three meters from her, with an agitated American colonel shouting at her from the front cab of the truck.

"I NEED YOUR PLANES AND HELICOPTERS TO EVACUATE MY MEN. THE ENEMY WILL BE HERE SOON."

"WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? THE LAST RECONNAISSANCE FLIGHTS FROM ONLY ONE HOUR AGO SHOWED THAT THE ENEMY HAS STILL NOT CROSSED THE HAN RIVER."

"THAT'S NOT WHAT THE MEN OF THE THIRD BATTALION TOLD US WHEN THEY WENT THROUGH OUR LINES. WE MUST FLY OUT AT ONCE BEFORE THE ENEMY TANKS ARRIVE HERE."

Smelling a rat, Ingrid walked quickly around the truck to go talk with the colonel from up close, glaring at him and letting him see her rank insignias.

"So, Colonel, you are telling me that you ordered your unit to retreat on the strength of what a bunch of stragglers told you about the enemy supposedly approaching. Have you thought about fighting and resisting, instead of fleeing at once?"

"With what, General? None of our weapons can pierce the armor of the T-34 tanks. What would you know anyway about ground combat?"

A spark of anger came to her eyes as she hardened her tone.

“Colonel, you are talking to a Medal of Honor recipient who fought on the ground in Guadalcanal and in Papua New Guinea and who can recognize a coward when she sees one.”

“WHAT? ME, A COWARD?”

“YES, YOU A COWARD! IF YOU ARE STILL ABLE TO GET MAD, THEN GET MAD AT THE ENEMY FOR A CHANGE. NONE OF YOU WILL GET IN MY PLANES. NOW, TURN AROUND AND GO PROVE THAT YOU ARE REAL SOLDIERS BEFORE I ARREST YOU FOR COWARDICE AND ABANDONMENT OF POST IN FRONT OF THE ENEMY.”

Ingrid, ignoring the now reddening colonel, went back to her jeep and sat back behind the wheel. She was about to put her jeep into gear when a truck from the column suddenly rolled off the road and started speeding towards the helicopters of her task force, parked in the open some 500 meters away. Panic then seemingly seized the whole convoy, with the column breaking up in small packets of vehicles heading towards the helicopters, including the infantry colonel's truck. Swearing at that disgraceful sight, Ingrid grabbed the microphone of her onboard radio and called her operation center.

“Fifinella Zero, this is Lady Hawk! Urgent message, over!”

“Go ahead, Lady Hawk!”

“Fifinella Zero, tell our airfield security patrols to go immediately block the access to our helicopters to a large group of deserters intent on fleeing in our machines. I give the express permission to shoot to kill if it becomes necessary to protect our helicopters and crews, over.”

There was a slight delay before the stunned duty operator answered her.

“Understood, Lady Hawk. We will alert our patrols at once.”

Without listening more, Ingrid accelerated towards her operations center complex. She soon was braking to a stop in front of its entrance and jumped out at once, running inside and going to the back of her main command radio truck, which was linked to the tent complex.

“CONTACT USAFIK HQ AT ONCE AND GET ME GENERAL HODGE, QUICKLY!”

“Yes, General!” Answered the duty radio operator. After a minute of trying, the woman looked at her with embarrassment.

"I'm sorry, General: we are not getting any response from the USAFIK HQ in Suwon."

"None? Dammit, this is turning into a bug out epidemic! Very well, I will be in my jeep. If General Hodge answers you, relay the call to me."

"Understood, General."

Jumping again in her jeep, Ingrid sped towards the tent lines of the personnel of her helicopter group, stopping near the first tents before shouting an order.

"TO ALL THE PERSONNEL OF THE HELICOPTER AND TRANSPORT GROUP, GRAB YOUR WEAPONS AND GO IMMEDIATELY TO OUR HELICOPTERS TO DEFEND THEM FROM DESERTERS."

Not waiting for the reactions of her personnel, Ingrid then drove at top speed to the parking area of her helicopters, arriving there just in time to block the way of three light trucks full of American soldiers. Getting up on the driver's seat, she then took out her pistol and pointed it at the driver of the first truck.

"LEAVE MY AIRFIELD NOW OR I WILL SHOOT YOU!"

The soldiers in the truck, who appeared to be panicking, in turn pointed their rifles at her. Thankfully for Ingrid, none of them fired, apparently not having the nerves to do so. As they hesitated about what to do next, the female mechanics that had been working on the helicopters arrived at a run and lined up on each side of Ingrid, their M2A2 carbines pointed at the trucks. Realizing that a deadly shootout could easily be triggered in an instant, Ingrid slowly lowered her pistol but kept it at the ready, then shouted at the soldiers in the trucks.

"LISTEN TO ME CAREFULLY, BECAUSE I WON'T REPEAT MYSELF. I AM BRIGADIER GENERAL INGRID DOWS AND I ASSURE YOU THAT THE RUMORS ABOUT ENEMY TANKS HAVING CROSSED THE HAN RIVER ARE FALSE. IF YOU TURN AWAY NOW AND RETURN TO YOUR UNIT'S DEFENSIVE POSITIONS ALONG THE SOUTH SHORE, THEN I WILL FORGET THAT I SAW YOU HERE. BUT IF YOU STAY AND TRY BOARDING THOSE HELICOPTERS, THEN YOU WILL GO NOWHERE, APART FROM ENDING IN FRONT OF A COURT MARTIAL FOR ABANDONNING YOUR POST IN FRONT OF THE ENEMY, A CRIME PUNISHABLE BY THE DEATH PENALTY. YOU NOW HAVE FIFTEEN SECONDS TO DECIDE. AFTER THAT, I WILL ALL PUT YOU UNDER ARREST."

As the soldiers looked at each other, undecided, a fourth truck managed to break through the cordon of armored cars of Ingrid's MPs and rushed towards the helicopters. That one, contrary to the others, was loaded with South Korean soldiers, judging by their uniforms and weapons. Jumping out of her jeep, Ingrid ran in order to cut its path and signaled it to stop. Instead of obeying her, the driver of that truck accelerated, while three soldiers standing in the rear pointed their rifles at Ingrid. A first shot rang, barely missing Ingrid and making her jump and roll to one side, something that saved her from two other bullets. Ingrid's mechanics then opened fire on the Korean truck, peppering it with automatic fire while the Korean soldiers fired back. While two mechanics fell, wounded, the driver of the truck was killed by a bullet to the head and fell limply on his steering wheel. The truck decelerated gradually before coming to a stop only thirty meters from the nearest helicopter, while the soldiers in the back of vehicle were being peppered by hundreds of bullets. Her heart beating hard, Ingrid approached cautiously the Korean truck, her pistol pointed and with seven female mechanics in support. Seeing a movement in the back, Ingrid pointed her pistol at a wounded Korean soldier who was moaning with pain. That soldier, on seeing her approach, then tried to grab a grenade at his belt, hatred visible on his face. Two bullets from Ingrid finished him before he could pull out the safety pin of his grenade. Now suspicious about the real identity of those soldiers, Ingrid climbed in the back of the truck and started searching the bodies of the six dead Koreans. She quickly found a number of North Korean uniforms rolled into balls and hidden inside a crate, apart from finding on the dead men red identity booklets bearing the insignia of the KPRA. Ingrid swore to herself and gathered the booklets and one North Korean uniform before jumping down on the ground and giving an order to the nearest mechanics.

"Drive this truck out of the airfield and dump the bodies in a ditch: they are North Korean soldiers."

She next went to examine the two mechanics that had been wounded in the firefight, which were being treated by five other women. One of those women looked at her gravely.

"They will live, General: their wounds are not critical and an ambulance is already on its way."

"Good! Tell the medics that I want those two women evacuated by air today." Returning to her jeep, she glared at the three trucks full of American soldiers, which had not moved yet.

“YOUR FIFTEEN SECONDS ARE OVER! GO BACK TO THE FRONT: THE RUMORS THAT YOU HEARD CAME FROM NORTH KOREAN INFILTRATORS.”

Looking like beaten puppies, the soldiers finally turned their trucks around, while Ingrid got in her jeep and started it to go see the infantry colonel that had been leading the convoy. That officer and his men were now surrounded on three sides by M20 armored cars, with heavy machineguns pointed at the trucks by hard-faced female MPs. Ingrid stopped her jeep near the colonel's truck and jumped out, walking resolutely to the cab of the light truck and opening its passenger door. With a strength that surprised the colonel, Ingrid grabbed him by the collar and brutally pulled him out of the cab, sending him face down on the ground. She then threw on the ground near his head the North Korean uniform and identity booklets.

“Colonel, you withdrew your unit without orders and abandoned your post on the strength of rumors circulated by North Korean infiltrators. I thus put you under close arrest for abandonment of post in front of the enemy and for cowardice. General Hodge will decide your fate. MAJOR DICKINSON, PUT THIS MAN UNDER CLOSE ARREST! HE WILL FACE COURT MARTIAL FOR COWARDICE AND ABANDONMENT OF POST.”

“YES, GENERAL! STEINBERG, GARRET, ROBERTS, WITH ME!”

As the four female MPs cuffed the colonel and pulled him back on his feet, Ingrid went down the column of vehicles, ordering the stragglers to turn around and return to their combat positions along the Han River. While doing so, she noted down the unit markings on the vehicles in her pocket notepad. She however had to stop after covering sixty meters while eyeing a group of vehicles with scandalized eyes: the headquarters' staff of Lieutenant General Hodge were in the column! Walking quickly to a jeep, she pointed an accusing finger at the highest ranking officer sitting in it.

“Lieutenant Colonel Smithers, what are you and your officers doing in the middle of those cowards?”

Sweating hard, the small Signals Corps officer tried to justify himself, stuttering as he spoke.

“But, General, with those units out of their positions, there was nothing left between the enemy and our command post.”

“Except the Han River, I believe. And where is General Hodge?”

"He went to Osan with Brigadier General Church, General MacArthur's envoy. They wanted to use the telephone relay station there to have a direct line with General MacArthur. He should be back soon, in fact."

Ingrid stared at Smithers with barely contained fury: that such a senior group of officers could act like this was beyond her comprehension.

"In that case, Colonel Smithers, I suggest that you and your men return at once to your command post in Suwon before the return of General Hodge. Be assured however that he will learn about the sordid details of this affair from me."

A captain that seemed more ashamed than the others and who was sitting in the back of Smithers' jeep then confessed something to Ingrid.

"Our command post in Suwon is gone, General: it burned down to the ground when we tried to burn our classified documents. We also lost our radios in that fire²." Now truly furious, Ingrid gave a loud kick on the side of the jeep before glaring at Smithers.

"SO, ON TOP OF ABANDONING YOUR POST WITHOUT ORDERS, YOU FOUND THE WAY TO DESTROY THE EQUIPMENT THAT ALLOWED YOUR HEADQUARTERS TO FILL ITS FUNCTION IN KOREA? GO BACK TO WHAT'S LEFT OF YOUR C.P. AND WAIT FOR GENERAL HODGE THERE, COLONEL!"

Having nothing to say back, Smithers saluted Ingrid before ordering his driver to turn their jeep around and return to Suwon. Ingrid watched him and his five vehicles, trying without much success to calm down. As she was about to return to her jeep, the four war correspondents that had arrived from Okinawa in the morning with General Church surrounded her, microphones in hand and tape recorders playing. Marguerite Higgins, of the New York Herald Tribune, was the first to ask her a question.

"General Dows, how would you comment the incident that just happened?"

"Very simply: no comments!"

"General, how do you explain the poor combativeness of our troops in Korea?"

Asked Keyes Beech of the Chicago Daily News.

"No comments!"

² This particular incident, along with other shocking incidents of cowardice and abandonment of post by American soldiers described or related in this novel actually happened during the Korean War. Please refer to South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu, by Roy E. Appleman, and to The Korean War, by Max Hastings.

"But, the American people will be scandalized when it will learn about this incident, General. It will want answers."

Ingrid then raised both hands up to stop the barrage of questions.

"Listen well, lady and gentlemen: what just happened here will have to be dealt with at a level much higher than me. After all, I am an Air Force officer and do not command those Army troops, only my air task force on this airfield and in Pusan. Keep your questions for Lieutenant General Hodge or for Brigadier General Church. As for the enemy, I can assure you that no North Korean tank has crossed the Han River to date. My planes are continuously patrolling up and down the river and have not seen any enemy crossing to date. While I have started to move my stocks of spares, ammunition and fuel back to the rear, my planes will continue to strike at the enemy from this airfield as long as we will be able to use it."

"Do you know if press censorship has officially been put into effect, General?"
Asked Marguerite Higgins.

"Normally, in times of war, press censorship automatically kicks in, for obvious reasons. However, Washington has not yet declared this officially as a war involving the United States, declaring it instead to be an international police action."

Marguerite smiled at the discreet message given to her by Ingrid: she was going to be let free to send her articles as long as Washington would not take this crisis more seriously. Knowing Ingrid well, Marguerite understood that her intention was probably to use her press reports to force Washington to look squarely at the problem.

"Thank you, General. Could I ask you when the next plane to Pusan or Japan will leave from here?"

"There is still a regular daily shuttle run between here, Pusan and Okinawa. The next flight will depart Suwon tonight at seven. You and your colleagues are more than welcome to use that air shuttle service as much as you want."

"Thank you, General! You are most generous."

"That's nothing, Miss Higgins. After all, my own adoptive mother was herself a war correspondent."

Returning to her jeep, Ingrid then rolled towards her operations center while dark thoughts went through her mind. To date, the performance in combat of the American troops and their officers in Korea had proved simply unacceptable in her opinion. If the level of that performance did not improve drastically very soon, then the days and even hours her air task force was going to be able to stay in Suwon may be counted indeed.

Ingrid had been back to her operations center for maybe one hour when Lieutenant General Hodge showed up. The latter seemed understandably furious.

"Those cowards!" Grumbled Hodge as he sat in front of Ingrid's work table. "If I didn't need them so much, I would send all of them right away in front of a court martial."

"Where is General Church, General? I was told that he was with you."

"He is presently leading back our men to their original positions along the Han River. I sincerely hope that the enemy did not use that occasion to cross the Han in force."

"Not according to the latest reports from my pilots, which are only ten minutes old, General. This incident however has decided me to ask you the permission to start relocating my air task force towards Pusan and K-1 Airfield. If another similar debacle happens and allows the enemy to cross the Han, then this airfield will become indefensible. I however intend to continue flying close air support missions from Pusan." Hodge hesitated only for a short moment before nodding his head.

"Go ahead, Ingrid. I can't risk losing your air task force now."

Hodge was then silent for a moment, obviously thinking, before looking Ingrid in the eyes and lowering his voice.

"Ingrid, this whole thing could easily stain my professional reputation. You are reputed to be a top strategist. Could I have done things differently here in Korea?"

"General, you may not like what I will say."

"Go ahead and speak frankly, Ingrid."

"Very well, General. Frankly, I believe that you could not do much more than what you did in a tactical context. The poor quality of your troops and the enemy numerical superiority put you at a severe disadvantage right from the start. On a strategic and political point of view, however, your past actions in Korea partly created this crisis. A military crisis most often equates a political crisis. In turn, a political crisis often comes from a social crisis. Let me explain that quickly. On your arrival here in 1944, you found the Japanese forces still in control of the local administration. In fact, the Japanese had started to use local popular committees in order to govern the country. Those local committees had the support of the general population and mostly worked to improve the lot of the Korean people. However, because Washington didn't like the leftist leaning of those committees, you had them replaced with collaborators associated with the Japanese Imperial regime and controlled by Japanese administrators. You also

helped by your directives and policies to protect the interests of the large land owners, which had been exploiting Korean peasants for generations. By those actions, you killed any possibility of reforms of the Korean economy and also insulted the Korean people by denying them the right to choose themselves their own government. By associating with the big, corrupt landowners, you also repeated the same mistake that Washington did in China, by supporting leaders whose only interest was to enrich themselves at the expense of the general population. You should thus not be surprised to see how the Korean people distrusts the United States, or why the South Korean troops under your command are so unreliable. Unfortunately, we can now only do our best to repair the damage if we want to stay in Korea. Don't feel bad, General: you are far from being the first to make such mistakes. In fact, you are the norm as American foreign policies goes. The State Department is the real culprit in this crisis."

"You do realize that many people in Washington would crucify you if they would learn about your opinions, Ingrid."

She stared hard at Hodge as she replied to him, unrepentant.

"I know, General, but the fact that so many generals and politicians could show such an ignorance of the geopolitical situation in Asia truly irks me. Their lack of vision and poor judgment have reduced our army to its present pitiful state. If someone should pay for the present disaster, it should be our leaders and superiors in Washington, not you or me. And if they don't face reality soon, then we can expect more military humiliations in the days and weeks to come. You can still relieve me of my command if you don't like my opinion, General, but I will not change it. However, I am an American officer and I will continue to obey my orders as long as they are lawful, General."

Hodge stared at her in silence for many seconds before slowly shaking his head.

"I won't relieve you for two reasons, Ingrid. First, I desperately need your competences as an air unit commander here. Second, I must say that you are probably right. I have no doubt about your courage or your patriotism and you still have my complete confidence. Move your air task force to Pusan tomorrow and make sure that your planes continue to support my troops."

"You can count on my command, General."

Apparently satisfied, Hodge got up from his chair, imitated by Ingrid, and exchanged a handshake with her before departing, leaving Ingrid thinking. She had expected Hodge to explode on hearing her opinion, but he had proved more open-minded than expected.

He had however been quite right in saying that many in Washington would not have tolerated her views.

16:07 (Japan Time)

Thursday, July 1, 1948 'C'

U.S. Far East Command headquarters

Okinawa, Japan

“You wanted to see us, sir?” Asked general Walton Walker, who was accompanied by Lieutenant General Stratemeyer and by Vice Admiral Turner Joy. General Douglas MacArthur, standing behind his desk near a map of Korea and its surrounding area, returned their salutes and looked at them severely, visibly unhappy.

“I certainly do! We need to talk, gentlemen. Close the door, General Walker.” The three field grade officers sat uneasily, preparing for the storm that was undoubtedly to come. MacArthur, smoking from his trademark corn pipe, tapped firmly the map of Korea, fingering Munsan.

“Four days ago, a battalion of some of our best troops, the 2nd of the 5th Marine Regiment, was wiped out by the enemy while holding what was by then a tactically useless position. Nobody from the JOC headquarters in Taejon bothered to tell the Marines that the enemy was already just outside Seoul until it was too late for them to withdraw. Furthermore, the Marine battalion commander asked repeatedly by radio permission to withdraw but was basically ignored by the JOC for crucial hours that cost him his only chance to withdraw at night. Even worst in my mind, the army battalion group that was holding the line on the right flank of the Marines withdrew without orders and without informing the Marines that they were leaving. The Marines basically realized that Task Force Smith was not on its flank anymore when commie troops started attacking them from their right flank. When the Marines requested artillery fire support at a crucial moment, the army artillery unit assigned in direct support of the marines was unavailable because they were relocating to new positions. That unit then proceeded to withdraw so far back that they were basically out of range and useless to the Marines. I had a staff officer check on the reasons why that artillery unit withdrew. What he got as an official explanation was that the artillerymen had come under small arms fire and could not stay in place. What he found after some digging is that the only fire they were getting was from a single hidden sniper that they were not able or willing

to find and flush out. The only ones who didn't fail the Marines were our fighter pilots and our naval gunners on the USS MISSOURI."

MacArthur's finger then tapped on Kimpo.

"Also four days ago, a convoy of ambulances was going to Kimpo Airfield with wounded soldiers to be evacuated by air. Nobody warned that convoy that enemy infiltrators were roaming the area and the convoy, without any escort provided to it, was basically ambushed and the medical staff and the wounded massacred on the spot save for two nurses, who were taken prisoner and gang-raped before being later delivered by survivors from the 2nd Marine Battalion. It took over twelve hours before anyone in Kimpo or at the headquarters of the 7th Infantry Division noticed that this convoy was missing and another six hours before anyone was dispatched to check on it, by which time Kimpo had fallen."

MacArthur's finger moved yet again, pointing at Suwon Airfield.

"This morning, just after our last aviation unit had vacated Suwon Airfield, an enemy column that had pierced our front undetected was stopped just short of the airfield thanks to the good works of two of our pilots. The JOC and the TACG didn't know about that enemy armored column until it was spotted by the two pilots who strafed it. I just found out that this enemy force was able to penetrate our lines because one army unit withdrew too early, ignoring the timetables and not bothering to warn the other units around it until its withdrawal was actually completed."

MacArthur then walked to his desk and took a document on it, waving it angrily at his commanders.

"After reviewing these incidents and the actions taken by our various units and commanders in Korea, I was left with no choice but to have some heads roll. Major General Allen, for failing consistently to properly coordinate the actions of our ground units in Korea and for fatal indecision that cost us our 2nd Marine Battalion, is relieved of command and will be sent back to the States with a severe reprimand. I don't want him anymore as part of my Far East Command. The commander of the 7th Infantry Division, for utterly failing to keep control of his units and for enforcing piss-poor rear area security, is also relieved of command. So is the commander of the artillery unit that failed to support the Marines at Munsan. He can consider himself lucky that I don't simply court-martial him for cowardice. General Walker, those are your troops and you should have remedied those deficiencies, not me. I will expect a firmer grip from now on, General. What I want is infantrymen that stand and fight, artillerymen that provide

fire support when requested and headquarters staff officers that pass on information and properly coordinate troop movements. I want fighting men, men who are proficient in combat, not civilians in uniform who flee at the first shot! At the rate things are going, we will lose this war through sheer incompetence and lack of fighting spirit. General Walker, you have two weeks to complete the deployment of the 24th and 25th Infantry Divisions to Korea, in fighting trim and positioned to stop the enemy from advancing past the Kum River and Taejon. Then, I want the enemy pushed back to the Chinese border.”

MacArthur next faced Vice Admiral Joy, who controlled Marine Corps units as well as naval units in the Far East Command.

“Admiral Joy, I want the 1st Marine Division reequipped, reformed and moved to Korea as quickly as possible. Thank the captain of the USS MISSOURI in passing for his excellent support of the 2nd Marine Battalion in Munsan.”

“Putting back together the 1st Marine Division will be a huge task, sir: its units are all barebones and the 2nd Battalion of the 5th Regiment was basically the only one of its sub-units that was anywhere near combat strength. I will however give this top priority, sir.”

Next in line in MacArthur’s sights was Lieutenant General Stratemeyer, Commander of the Far East Air Force.

“Stratemeyer, there are still too few fighter units on the ground in Korea and we still don’t have a single jet aircraft operating from there. Beef up your squadrons in Korea and make it quick! Up to now, they are about the only thing slowing down the enemy advance and they richly deserve some backup. Empty some airfields in Okinawa if need be. We simply don’t know what the Soviets will throw at us next in the air but I suspect that it won’t be flowers.”

“Yes sir!”

“Then you are dismissed, gentlemen!”

Their ears still ringing from the lambasting administered by MacArthur, the three generals saluted him again, then turned around and left his office, wondering what would strike them next.

13:21 (Japan Time)

Wednesday, July 7, 1948 ‘C’

Air operations building, Kadena Airfield

Okinawa Island, Japan

The eyes of all the bomber aircrews and enlisted personnel present in the readiness lounge of the air operations building went to the three young women in flying suits the moment they entered the large room. The women carried parachute bags stuffed with flying gear and wore shoulder holsters with pistols or, in the case of the leading woman, a web belt supporting a low-slung pistol holster strapped to her right upper leg. One of the bomber pilots relaxing in the lounge looked at the cover of the just-delivered TIME weekly magazine he was reading, then whispered to his copilot, sitting beside him.

“It’s her, it’s ‘Lady Hawk!’”

The copilot, a young lieutenant who had missed out on the previous war, gave a dubious look at the beautiful young redhead now walking towards the operations clerk’s counter.

“Brigadier general at 24? I wonder how many generals she gave blowjobs to in order to rise this fast.”

A major sitting in front of him in the opposite row of chairs heard the copilot’s remark and gave him a hard, warning look.

“Lieutenant, once you will have earned the CMOH, the DSC, the Silver Star and the DFC, then you may be able to talk about her. Right now, you either pay proper respect to her rank or I will have you hauled in front of the squadron commander for insubordination. Am I clear on that?”

“Uh, yes sir!” Answered sheepishly the lieutenant. While keeping quiet from then on, he still thought little of the female fighter pilot and of her comrades: war was no business for women in his opinion.

The air operations chief clerk, a master sergeant, greeted Ingrid at the reception counter with a polite smile as she took out of a leg pocket of her suit her written orders.

“What may I do for you, General?”

“I am here to pick up four refurbished P-38NCs just taken out of mothball. There is also one replacement pilot assigned to the Korea Air Task Force that was supposed to arrive this morning from the States.”

The chief clerk looked briefly at the air movement board and gave her an apologetic smile.

“The regular C-54 flight from San Francisco and Honolulu was delayed by minor mechanical problems in Hawaii, General. We are expecting it any time now. As for your

four reactivated P-38NCs, they are ready and waiting to be picked up in front of the base maintenance hangars.”

“Are they loaded up with cannon ammo and rockets?”

The master sergeant thought for a moment and then picked up his telephone while looking at Ingrid.

“I am not sure, General. Just let me check quickly on that.”

“If they are not armed yet, tell the maintenance chief to fill their ammo boxes and to put fuel drop tanks on them: we never know what to expect over Korea these days.”

The chief clerk nodded in understanding, then spoke briefly to the base maintenance chief mechanic, a first sergeant, who had just answered his call. Passing on the requests from Ingrid, he then put down his receiver and looked back at her.

“Your planes were not supplied with ammo yet but the chief mechanic will put a crew on that right away, plus will have drop tanks fitted, General.”

The chief clerk then saw through one of the large windows of the readiness lounge a C-54 touching down on the main runway, which ran past the operations building.

“You are in luck, General: I believe that the plane with your replacement pilot just landed.”

Ingrid, along with Nancy Batson and Shirley Slade, turned around and watched the four-engine transport aircraft as it slowed down along the runway. Ingrid then looked back at the chief clerk.

“Where would this C-54 normally unload its passengers, Sergeant?”

“At the base cargo and personnel reception terminal, General. It is about 400 yards down the flight line, to your left when going out of this building.”

“Thanks, Sergeant. If the base maintenance chief calls back about our planes, tell him that we will be back here once I have collected my new pilot.”

“Understood, General.”

Ingrid was about to leave when she thought of something and stopped her comrades, making them come back to the reception counter.

“Sergeant, could we leave our things with you until we come back?”

“No problems, General! Just pass me your parachute bags over the counter.”

Ingrid smiled in appreciation and passed four bags to the chief clerk, one after the other. The master sergeant was surprised by the weight of each bag as he took them and stored them behind the counter.

“Hell, General, what do you have apart from parachutes and flying helmets in those bags?”

“Automatic carbines and spare ammunition. Every member of my task force, including the pilots, lugs a long arm around, on top of their pistols. When we had to evacuate Suwon Airfield, we took off with an enemy armored column only two miles away and with artillery pounding the airfield.”

“Damn!” Said the chief clerk, impressed. “And the fourth bag?”

“That’s for our incoming replacement pilot. Thanks for taking care of our bags, Sergeant.”

“You’re welcome, General!”

Leaving the air operations building with her two pilots, Ingrid walked briskly to the reception terminal, in front of which the C-54 that had just landed was now rolling to a stop. By the time they arrived at the terminal, passengers were already coming down the mobile staircase that had been pushed in place against the side of the transport aircraft. Ingrid and her two comrades waited in front of the entrance to the terminal, hoping to recognize their replacement pilot in the lot. The problem was that the message from FEAF headquarters had only mentioned the date and place of arrival of the pilot but not its name. Most of the over thirty passengers were actually Army soldiers or officers, with a few USAAF officers in the lot. The identity of their pilot was immediately evident to Ingrid and her pilots when a woman in her late twenties and wearing the dress uniform of a USAAF captain stepped down the mobile staircase.

“BABETTE!” Shouted Ingrid joyfully before running towards the female captain, imitated by Nancy and Shirley. The newcomer, a trim, medium height brunette of Belgian descent, also ran towards them with her kit bag and carrying bag, shouting their names. They fell into each other’s arms and exchanged hugs and kisses before calming down somewhat and looking at each other. Babette DeMoe, a 99th Wing veteran from the last war with nine air victories to her credit in the Pacific, saluted Ingrid while eyeing her rank insignias.

“Brigadier General...you certainly prospered in the service, Ingrid.”

“And you, Babette?” Said Ingrid, returning her salute. “I thought that you were flying commercial airliners these days?”

“I was, but I was also still a member of the reserves. When I saw how desperate the situation appeared to be in Korea, I inquired with USAAF headquarters in

Washington to see if they were in need of fighter pilots. They took me on my offer right away and I was processed through in record time. So, here I am!”

“You can’t know how happy I am at seeing you again, Babette. I hope that your civilian job is kept safely for you while you serve in Korea.”

“Northwest Airways couched that on paper, actually. So, how is your air task force doing?”

“We are certainly kept busy in Korea, Babette. What we are facing are Soviet pilots and aircraft disguised as ‘volunteers’ serving with the KPRA..”

“Really? You will have to tell me all about your new adventures later on.”

“We certainly will! First, let’s get you through the reception process. Then we will go back to the air ops building with you and will take a vehicle from there to go take delivery of our new P-38s.”

The four of them were back in the air operations building fifty minutes later, taking their parachute bags and taking the time to let Babette DeMoe change into a flying suit before ordering a vehicle to go to the base maintenance hangars. Another twenty minutes later they were dropped in front of four P-38NCs, their aluminum alloy skin free of paint except for national insignias and serial numbers. The four women, watched with curiosity by the mechanics working around on other aircraft, wasted no time in performing themselves a thorough inspection of their refurbished P-38s. They were in decent shape and had been well maintained but Ingrid found that the base mechanics, while they had filled the ammunition boxes for the 20mm cannons, had not chambered rounds in the weapons, something that could have caused grief if they encountered enemy aircraft on arrival over Korea. That was however remedied quickly enough by the pilots themselves. Ingrid ordered as well the chief mechanic to have the retractable rocket launch tubes of the P-38s loaded with five inch rockets, with a team of armorers getting to work on that at once. After reviewing with the base chief mechanic the service and maintenance histories of each of the planes, Ingrid officially took delivery of them and signed the transfer forms. Babette DeMoe was nearly jumping with joy as she sat in the cockpit of her P-38 after stuffing her kit in the plane’s small storage compartment.

“At last, a real airplane! I didn’t realize how boring flying a DC-3 had become for me until now.”

Even after over two years out of a P-38 cockpit, she quickly got back the feel of it and had no problem running her pre-flight checklist. The sense of power she got when she started her engines and then pushed up her throttles to start taxiing behind Ingrid's plane was exhilarating. The four P-38NCs took off for their three-hour flight to Pusan at 16:11; flying out of view of Kadena Airfield in a tight, perfect flying diamond formation and heading north.

19:02 (Korea Time)

Korean coastline 95 kilometers south of Pusan

"Angel call signs, this is Angel Leader. We should now be about fifteen minutes away from Pusan's K-1 Airfield. Switch now to Pusan Ground Control's frequency." Changing herself to the new radio frequency, Ingrid then called her three pilots again, making sure that they had switched to the correct frequency. She next called the Pusan control tower and advised it of their imminent arrival. She was then back talking with her pilots.

"Keep your eyes wide open from now on, girls: we are back into a war zone." Five minutes later, the control tower in Pusan called them back.

"Angel Leader, this is Pusan Control, over."

"Go ahead, Pusan Control." Answered Ingrid, suspecting that they would be needed somewhere. She turned out to be right.

"Angel Leader, switch to the tactical air control frequency number one, over."

"Understood, Pusan Control. Angel call signs, change frequency to your preset channel number four, now!"

The voice of the main air controller in Taegu sounded worried when Ingrid got into contact with him.

"Angel leader, state your fuel and ammo status: we may be in need of close air support from you, over."

"Kingpin, we are still flying on auxiliary tanks, with our internal fuel tanks full and with our cannons and rocket tubes fully loaded. Where do you want my four aircraft, over?"

"Angel Leader, things are going badly for Deuce Delta Three near Chonan, with the enemy attacking with massive infantry forces supported by tanks. All the other

available aircraft have already expended their ammunition and are heading back to base for rearming and refueling. Do you accept the mission, over?"

The question made Ingrid pause briefly: that tactical air controllers were asking instead of ordering her to go attack the enemy indicated in her opinion a troubling state of mind for a combat force.

"Kingpin, give me the coordinates and a rough heading from Pusan, along with the call sign and frequency I am to contact on the ground, over."

Ingrid nearly heard the air controller blow air out in relief as he gave her the requested information. Consulting her map, she verified her heading and flight time and then called her pilots.

"Angel call signs, this is Angel Leader. Turn to heading 320 and accelerate to 350 knots. We are now on a close air support mission destined to the area of Chonan. We have friendly ground positions under massive attack by enemy infantry and tanks. Welcome back to war, Angel Three!"

"Angel Leader, you certainly attract trouble!" Replied Babette DeMoe in an amused tone.

Ingrid reviewed mentally the known tactical picture as her formation sped towards Chonan. Deuce Delta Three was the current call sign for the 34th Infantry Regiment of the 24th U.S. Infantry Division, the unit blocking the road leading south from Suwon to Taejon. It was in fact the only available American regiment defending the approaches to the Kum River defensive line. If the 34th Regiment was pushed away or defeated, the enemy would then have an open road to Taejon at a time when American combat forces were still being flown into Korea, with few units yet fully ready for combat. Ingrid hoped at once for the 34th Regiment that they were not facing the same kind of attack under a cover of smoke that had obliterated the 2nd Marine Battalion. Looking at her watch, she realized that they would barely have time to get to Chonan, shoot away their ammunition and then return to Pusan before complete darkness fell. Looking next at her fuel gauge, she saw that her drop tanks still had enough in them to provide her fuel for a high-speed dash to Chonan. She thus called her pilots again.

"Angel call signs, go to full power now and accelerate to 450 knots! We will run our drop tanks dry, then will switch to internal tanks two minutes away from Chonan, out!"

Ingrid was pressed into her seat as she pushed forward her two engine throttles. She was now burning fuel like a thirsty camel but speed was the primordial thing in the present situation. Twenty minutes later, with her drop tanks nearly empty and being now in sight of Chonan, she ordered the auxiliary tanks dropped after switching to internal tanks. Next, she temporarily switched to her secondary radio, now set on the frequency of the USAAF ground forward air controller attached to the 34th Regiment.

“Deuce Delta Three Mike, this is Angel Leader, on approach from the Southeast with four P-38s, over.”

“Thank God, Angel Leader!” Replied the ground air controller, sounding frantic. “The situation down here is getting quite shaky. We are positioned just north of the town and of its main road junction, on hills flanking the road from Suwon from both sides. The enemy is presently pushing hard on the West flank of our battalion positioned west of the road with both infantry and tanks and we are also under heavy artillery fire. If the enemy succeeds in taking our left flank battalion, then it will be able to roll up our whole unit, over.”

“Understood, Deuce Delta Three Mike. Give me a final approach point and an heading for my first attack pass, over.”

“Stand by, Angel Leader!”

The ground air controller then came back on the radio after fifteen seconds, giving her the coordinates of a small bridge across a stream as an easily recognizable point from which to turn on their final attack heading. Ingrid immediately made her pilots head for that point, then made them all switch to the frequency of the ground air controller for ease of command coordination. They were about to drop to an altitude of 600 meters from their current altitude of 4,500 meters when Ingrid’s eyes caught a brief flash of sunlight as it reflected on the aluminum surface of an aircraft flying in the distance. Her eyes now scanning that part of the sky, she contacted again the ground air controller.

“Deuce Delta Three Mike, I just saw at least one aircraft flying approximately ten miles north of your position. Do we have other friendly aircraft in this area, over?”

“Negative, Angel Leader! All other friendly aircraft departed the area over fifteen minutes ago, over.”

Ingrid took only a second to take a decision.

“Angel call signs, there is at least one unidentified aircraft ten miles away at three O’clock high, flying from right to left. I will go investigate with Angel One. Angel Two, you will lead the first ground attack with Angel Three. Acknowledge, Angel Two!”

“Angel Two acknowledged!” Replied excitedly young Shirley Slade. Followed by Nancy Batson, Ingrid turned her aircraft towards where she had seen briefly the unknown aircraft, letting Shirley and Babette continue towards their final attack point. Then, fifteen seconds later, Ingrid’s eyes caught four dots flying fast across the sky. They were in fact way too fast for Ingrid’s taste.

“Angel One, I now see four probable jets to our one O’clock, distance five miles. I still can’t identify them, over.”

“Jet aircraft? Do the commies have jet aircraft, Angel Leader?”

“Not that I know of, but that is not impossible. If they are enemy jet aircraft, then our game is to slow down and force them into giving us targets for repeated frontal gunnery passes. At slow speed they won’t be able to dogfight us, over.”

“Got that, Angel Leader.” Replied Nancy, sounding nervous now. A fighter pilot never liked having to fight when suffering from a serious speed disadvantage, as it meant that the enemy basically had the initiative of breaking off combat at will and regroup at leisure. Thinking further along air tactics lines, Ingrid turned her aircraft towards the American position under attack and started taking some extra altitude.

“Angel One, we are going to park ourselves over our friendly ground positions. If those aircraft are enemy ones and want to interfere with our work or shoot up Angel Two, then they will have to fly straight at us. Take the safeties of your guns off now!”

“Guns ready, Angel One.”

Shirley and Babette had time to make their first ground attack pass, strafing copiously a thick wave of assaulting enemy infantrymen, before the four unknown jets reacted and turned towards them. By then Ingrid and Nancy were in position and circling at slow speed over the American ground positions. Ingrid was now able to detail the jets better and felt a chill down her spine: they were definitely not American jet aircraft. She briefly switched to her main radio, set on the frequency of the tactical air control group in Taegu.

“Kingpin, this is Angel Leader. I am over the positions of Deuce Delta Three and am about to be engaged by four enemy jet fighter aircraft. I say again, I am about to be engaged by four enemy jet fighter aircraft. They have highly swept wings, a single round nose air intake and a pair of swept stabilizers mounted high on a single vertical rudder. The cockpit has a teardrop canopy. I have to switch frequency now for air combat, out.”

By then the four enemy jets were closing in fast at a speed Ingrid estimated to be about 550 knots, flying in two loose pairs.

“Angel One, turn into the enemy now and take on the leader of the port side pair. I will take the leader of the other pair. Then, hold your position relative to the ground and don’t attempt to chase after the enemy. Good luck!”

“The same to you, Angel Leader.”

Her heart beating furiously now, Ingrid used the last seconds before they crossed path with the enemy jets to line up her gun sight on the leader of the starboard side pair, holding her fire until she was within medium range. This fight was going to be decided over who would shoot the most accurately. If the enemy pilots then decided to slow down and try to engage into a dogfight at low speed, then it was fine with her.

Down on the ground, the two USAAF junior officers making up the ground air control team watched anxiously from their jeep, parked and camouflaged in the rear positions of the 34th Regiment, as the four enemy jet fighters swooped down on the two waiting P-38s. One of the USAAF men was himself an experienced fighter-bomber pilot and was already mentally writing off the P-38s, who were hopelessly outclassed by the enemy jets. The P-38 on the right was the first to fire its guns, preempting the enemy pilots by half a second. To the ground air control officer’s stunned surprise, the first burst from that P-38 hit the mark head on from 800 meters, exploding the enemy jet into a fireball and forcing its wingman to abruptly turn away to avoid the flying debris. The P-38 on the left fired at the same time as its leading opponent, holding firmly its position while spraying copiously the incoming jet. The enemy pilot lost its nerves first and pulled up at the last moment to avoid a collision, but not before being hit by the P-38’s fire. That jet started trailing black smoke from its engine as it performed a wide high-speed turn to come back at the P-38s. None of the two enemy wingmen had a chance to fire a shot during that first pass. The air control officer got frantically on his radio connected to Taegu and shouted excitedly in his handset while following the air battle.

“Kingpin! Kingpin! This is Deuce Delta Three Mike! Our P-38s just engaged four enemy jet fighters and shot down one of them, plus damaged a second one that is now trailing smoke. I will continue reporting as the air battle goes on. Out!”

The wingman of the destroyed enemy jet, probably maddened by the loss of his comrade, came back at full speed at the waiting P-38, either ignoring or not seeing the two P-38s now conducting their second strafing pass against the communist infantry.

Showing incredible coolness and the accuracy of a Buffalo Bill, the waiting P-38 on the right fired again a single burst, this one longer than the first one though, cutting off the left wing of the enemy jet and sending it crashing to the ground. The air controllers, along with the soldiers around them, screamed wildly at that sight. The remaining two enemy jets, probably disgusted by such unexpected resistance from inferior adversaries, did not try to attack again and continued their wide turn towards the North. The P-38 on the left was not ready however to let them go so easily. It took them by surprise by going on maximum power and charging at the two jets, which were presenting their top sides as they were turning towards the P-38 blocking their path back to the North. The P-38 fired three bursts in quick succession, difficult deflection shots that most pilots would have missed. That pilot didn't miss however, hitting again the damaged jet fighter on its second and third bursts. The jet aircraft then turned into a flying torch and tumbled down to the ground, while its wingman fled at top speed, having had enough. The two P-38s doing the ground strafing were climbing out of their second attack passes as the ground air control officer shouted again in his handset.

"Kingpin, this is Deuce Delta Three Mike! You won't believe this! One P-38 shot down a total of two enemy jet fighters while another P-38 shot down another jet. The surviving enemy jet is now fleeing and letting our planes free to strafe the commie infantry, over."

"Are you serious, Deuce Delta Three Mike? Did you say that three enemy jet fighters were shot down by two P-38s?"

"I sure did, Kingpin! The P-38s are now peppering the enemy ground troops at leisure. Deuce Delta Three Mike, out!"

Back at the 6132nd Tactical Air Control Group in Taegu, the duty air control officer looked in stunned dismay at the senior operations officer, who was standing behind him and had listened on to the radio exchange.

"How could this be possible, sir? How could jets be shot down by propeller aircraft?"

"How? By having better pilots at the commands of the propeller aircraft. Still, this is one incredible feat of air combat if I ever saw one. The most important thing though is the fact that the enemy has a jet fighter aircraft type in service, something our intelligence had not told us. Those P-38s came from Pusan, right?"

“Actually, sir, they were coming from Kadena and were about to land in Pusan when we contacted them. They are from the KATF, sir.”

“Who are the pilots?”

“Uh, one moment sir.” Said the duty air control officer while consulting his lists. “Angel Leader is the present call sign of Brigadier General Dows, sir. From their voices, all four P-38 pilots actually over Chonan are women, sir.”

The senior operations officer shook his head in disbelief.

“Alright, contact Pusan and tell the intelligence officer of the KATF that we will want a full pilot debrief of this mission, with all the information about those enemy jet fighters passed on as a matter of top priority. Then, fire a flash message to FEAF headquarters warning it that the enemy has jet fighters over Korea.”

“Yes sir!”

20:16 (Korea Time)

K-1 Airfield, Pusan

As soon as her engines were shut down, Ingrid stepped out of her cockpit and jumped to the ground, then shouted at Elizabeth Whitlow , who was running towards her plane with other pilots and a number of mechanics.

“Major Whitlow, have all the pilots and Major Kawena assemble in the ready room in half a hour. Contact as well the commander of the 68th FAWS and tell him that he is also invited, along with his available pilots and his intelligence officer: I am going to brief the lot of you on a new enemy fighter jet that we just encountered over Chonan. Get on it now!”

Ingrid then saw Vance Hemmingsworth coming in as well, probably to inspect the four new aircraft brought from Kadena.

“Vance, we had to go on a close air support mission over Chonan and we may have a few holes in our refurbished aircraft. I want a thorough inspection done on those P-38s right away. You will find the aircraft maintenance and service records in my plane’s storage compartment. Tell the photo technician to be careful with the films from my gun camera and that of Nancy: we shot at a previously unseen enemy jet fighter and the senior intelligence officer in Taegu will certainly want copies of those films. Try to have those films developed and ready for viewing for the general briefing in thirty minutes.”

“Thirty minutes? Hell, I’ll see what we can do but I can’t promise anything.”

“Your best will be good enough for me, Vance.” She replied, partly to soothe Vance’s worries. The next person she grabbed was a junior administration clerk standing near the parking apron. Ingrid took the female corporal to Babette DeMoe, who was taking off her parachute by the side of her aircraft.

“Corporal Brubaker, this is Captain Babette DeMoe, our new replacement pilot. You will stay with her and escort her to the chief clerk so that she can be processed in the unit. You will then find her a place in one of our female pilots’ tents and show her around our facilities. Also, get her a M2A2 carbine and ammunition from the quartermaster. If Captain DeMoe needs anything, find it for her!”

“Yes General!” Replied the young woman while saluting Ingrid, who saluted back before looking apologetically at Babette.

“I’m sorry if I have to leave you like this, Babette, but I have a few urgent things to do right now.”

“Go right ahead, Ingrid.”

“I’ll see you later!” Shouted Ingrid while getting into a jeep to go to the command tent complex of the KATF. With her parachute, helmet and flotation vest still on her, she entered the complex a minute later and went to the telephone switchboard, getting the operator to connect her with the TACG in Taegu, where she asked to speak to the senior intelligence officer there. The man was on the line quite quickly indeed.

“Major Stewart here!”

“Major, this is Brigadier General Dows, calling from K-1. I want to pass on to you some information we got on a previously unknown enemy jet fighter aircraft we just encountered over Chonan. Do you have a pen and paper?”

“I sure do, General! I was already hoping for your call. Could you resume what happened over Chonan, General?”

“No problem, Major.” Replied Ingrid, who then spent some two minutes describing the encounter and also giving her first impressions on the enemy jet. She then promised to send to Stewart copies of her gun camera films, something that obviously pleased the intelligence officer.

Once her call to Taegu was done, Ingrid took a few minutes to relax and quiet down, taking off her flying gear and going to her cubicle to sit behind her desk and put some order into her tired mind. She then started filling her mission report, interrupting it

when she saw on her watch that it was time to go give her briefing to her pilots. The ready room was actually a large tent that formed an annex to the command complex, so it took her only a short moment before she got there and stood by the side of the corkboard on which a tactical map of Korea was pinned. The tent was already nearly full, with the squadron commander of the 68th FAWS and five of his officers mixed in with her female pilots. The intelligence clerk was also there, fighting with a small movie projector in order to prepare a film for viewing. Seeing that, Ingrid smiled and gave a thumbs up to Vance Hemmingsworth.

“Good job, Vance!”

“Thank the photo tech instead, Ingrid: I suspect that he just invented a new way to develop films quicker just for you.”

Ingrid nodded, then looked at the crowd sitting facing her.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I am afraid that the enemy has thrown a new, nasty surprise at us today. While we were responding to a snap request for close air support over Chonan, the four P-38s I was bringing back from Japan with Major Batson and Captains Slade and DeMoe encountered four enemy fighter jets of previously unknown design. Those jets probably just arrived over Chonan in order to provide air cover to the enemy troops making life hard for our 34th Infantry Regiment. Major Batson and me confronted these jets, while Captains Slade and DeMoe concentrated on strafing the enemy ground troops, since our main mission was to support our ground troops. Thankfully, while seemingly very fast and agile, the enemy jets made the mistake of coming for a head on pass at us, thus negating their speed advantage. On our part, we slowed down to 150 knots and flew tight circles over our friendly positions, turning on the enemy when it came straight at us. Our fire was more accurate than theirs and one jet was destroyed while another one was damaged on the first pass, with no damage to our aircraft. The...yes, Vance?”

Vance Hemmingsworth, who had thrown his hand up as Ingrid described the results of the first pass, gave her an apologetic smile.

“I am sorry to contradict you, General, but a cannon shell grazed the upper surface of your outer port wing, while another shell hit and went through the starboard outer tip of Major Batson’s horizontal stabilizer without exploding. From the size of the hole, I would say that the shell was either 20 mm or 23 mm in caliber.”

While Nancy Batson stared with dismay at Hemmingsworth, Ingrid smiled and shrugged.

“Well, I stand corrected. Anyway, the wingman of the jet that exploded turned around and came again head on against me and got shot down for his troubles, while Major Batson cut off the retreat path of the damaged jet and finished it off with frontal deflection shots. From the gun flashes, I would say that the enemy jets were armed with two or three cannons positioned under their nose air intake. I also noticed that they either didn’t have or didn’t use post combustion in their jet engines, as their jet exhaust was not prominently visible at any time during the encounter. Sergeant, are you ready with that projector?”

“I think so, General.” Said the intelligence clerk. “Here goes nothing!” To the clerk’s relief, the film went through the projector correctly and a picture showed up on the corner projection screen of the now dark tent. The pilots and officers present watched on with intense interest the first film, which was very short indeed, showing the two jet fighters facing Ingrid being each destroyed by single bursts. Ingrid shouted for the clerk to stop the projection and put back on the lights after six seconds, when the film started showing her ground strafing passes. While the clerk hurried up to put on Nancy Batson’s film, Ingrid looked around at the pilots present, who were now discussing excitedly between each other the film just viewed.

“As you could see, the enemy jet is basically a single-engine, highly swept wing aircraft with a round nose air intake and a teardrop-shaped canopy. A few minutes ago, as I was relaxing a bit at my desk, something came back to my mind. It was the picture of an aircraft that still didn’t exist in 1941, when Nancy Laplante showed it to me as being that of a very significant future Soviet fighter. That aircraft looked exactly like the ones we encountered today.”

“Was there a name for that aircraft, General Dows?” Asked the major in command of the 68th FAWS. Ingrid nodded her head once, her face grave.

“Yes! It was called the Mig-15.”

11:55 (Korea Time)

Thursday, July 8, 1948 ‘C’

Chonan area, Korea

“Here you are, Bravo November Six: the hills to the west of Deuce Delta Three are still crawling with vermin. Time for a good cleanup, over.”

“Don’t worry about that, Lady Hawk.” Replied the bomber squadron’s commander to Ingrid. “Vermin extermination is our specialty. We will now switch to the ground air controller’s frequency but will be listening to you on our secondary radios, out.”

With the B-26 bombers lining up for their bomb run, Ingrid contacted her four fighter pilots flying this escort mission with her.

“Witches Golf call signs, this is Lady Hawk: climb to 35,000 feet now. We will form top cover from there, out.”

As per a long-established habit, Ingrid scanned the sky around her continuously as she led her P-38s in a steep and steady climb. They were at 27,000 feet and still climbing when she spotted numerous small dots diving on them from high altitude, prompting her to shout in her mask microphone.

“BANDITS DIVING ON US FROM TEN O’CLOCK! ARM YOUR GUNS AND GO FOR HEAD ON BURSTS!”

It took her another three seconds while she turned to face the diving enemy planes before realizing what they were, something that made her blood freeze.

“MIG-15s! WE HAVE TWO DOZENS MIG-15s JET FIGHTERS DIVING ON US! BRAVO NOVEMBER SIX, GET OUT OF HERE, NOW!”

The B-26 light bombers, who still were a minute away from releasing their bombs, didn’t waste time arguing with her and turned back towards Pusan, gunning their piston engines for all their worth and hurriedly dropping their bombs while their commander started calling frantically the TACG in Taegu for additional fighter cover.

Above the bombers, Ingrid had little time to do anything but turn and line up her gun sight on the leading incoming Mig-15. Her own pilots had already deployed in loose combat formation out of experience and were lining up on their own individual targets, as per their standard air combat drills. The Migs split in six files of four aircraft each and started firing early as they dove on the P-38s. Their fire at first was wild, being from too far away, but they made up in volume what they didn’t have in accuracy. Ingrid won her first duel, turning her leading opponent into a flying torch, but then had to shake her aircraft around wildly to avoid the deluge of cannon shells from the three Migs following her first opponent. As soon as they dove past her, she did a half loop and dove after the Migs at maximum speed while shouting in her radio microphone again.

“ALL WITCHES CALL SIGNS, DIVE AFTER THOSE MIGS AND REPORT YOUR STATUS WHILE CHASING THEM.”

Ingrid swore as she realized that she would never be able to catch up with the diving Migs before they were on top of the bombers: the enemy jet fighters were simply too fast. More bad news came to her when captains Frances Dias and Ruth Thompson failed to report on the radio. Ingrid however had no time to check on them, as the Migs were now on the bombers and firing at the B-26s. The B-26 gunners fired back from their dorsal and tail turret guns but had little chance against the jet fighters and their cannons. One B-26 exploded, while another started trailing black smoke as the Migs completed their first diving attacks and pulled up, intent on coming back at the bombers. That was when Ingrid and her two surviving pilots caught up with them, catching the Migs as they were climbing and turning, which made them lose speed noticeably. With cold, killing rage filling her mind, Ingrid sprayed one of the Migs from above, making it explode. She then deployed her dive flaps as she pulled out of her own dive and performed a bone-crushing turn in order to face the other Migs. Her dive flaps nearly gave way, making her P-38 shake violently for a few seconds, but her plane decelerated sharply as a result and she was able to turn inside one of the Migs attempting to come back at the bombers. Her first deflection shot was followed by a head-on shot as the Mig-15 pilot, realizing that she was after him, let go the bombers and turned towards her. The Mig's canopy exploded into small shards as Ingrid's projectiles ripped through it, killing the pilot instantly. Ingrid then performed a fast barrel roll followed by a tight S-turn to avoid the fire from the two Migs following her latest victim. Seeing in a flash a Mig-15 that was turning past a B-26 after putting one of its engines on fire, she turned at the Mig and peppered it with three successive bursts as it came back towards her, cutting off one wing of the enemy jet fighter on the third burst and sending it spiraling downward. The remaining enemy fighter pilots, seeing how dangerous she was, then ganged up on her, leaving less than half of their surviving numbers to deal with the bombers and the two other P-38s.

Realizing that deflecting the attention of most of the Migs from the fleeing bombers was the best she could do right now, Ingrid went in pure defensive flying mode, turning and twisting around her plane continuously like a devil dunked into holy water and taking a few potshots when opportunities presented themselves. The eight Mig-15s swarming her kept coming at her continuously from all directions while firing mostly wild

and inaccurate bursts of cannon fire. The deadly aerial dance went on for a good ten minutes, taxing Ingrid's skills as a fighter pilot to the limit and exhausting her. Two Mig pilots who had not paid enough attention to each other collided together while trying to shoot her up at the same time. Both Migs tumbled down to the ground, losing parts as they fell. Finally, either because they were out of ammunition or were becoming low on fuel, the surviving Mig-15s broke off from both Ingrid and the bombers and fled north at top speed. Ingrid, who was nearly hyperventilating and was shaking from nervous and physical exhaustion, watched them go with immense relief and then looked around for her pilots. She found only an empty sky around her. Her heart sinking, she activated her radio.

"All Witches call signs, this is Lady Hawk. Report, over!"

She had to repeat her call before getting an answer from Captain Ann Baumgartner, the leader of Green Flight.

"Lady Hawk, this is Witch Golf. I am presently with Golf Two, whose plane is badly damaged and has no radio left. I also believe that Golf Two is wounded. I am presently escorting her back to Pusan, along with the surviving eight bombers, but am myself full of holes. What is your own status, Lady Hawk?"

Ingrid, haggard, looked quickly at her instruments, then at the outside surfaces of her plane. To her disbelief, she couldn't see a single hole in her P-38!

"Witch Golf, you may not believe this but I don't see any holes in my plane, even though the enemy tried really hard to get me this time. Do you know what happened to our two other call signs, over?"

"They are gone, Lady Hawk." Said Baumgartner, sadness and grief in her voice. "We did account for three Migs destroyed on our side and we saved most of the bombers. How did you manage on your side, Lady Hawk?"

"I...I got four of them. Two more Migs collided with each other and crashed while they were trying to swarm me. We will talk further once on the ground, out."

Ingrid then looked at the ground in order to locate herself and found that she was still right above the positions of the 34th Regiment near Chonan. She thus called the ground forward air controllers there.

"Deuce Delta Three Mike, this is Lady Hawk, over."

The answer came immediately, the voice of the USAAF forward air controller showing deep concern.

"This is Deuce Delta Three Mike. Are you okay, Lady Hawk?"

“Well, my plane seems to be okay but I am kind of burned out right now, over.”

“No wonder, Lady Hawk! You stood up alone to eight enemy jet fighters for twelve minutes. You should be long dead by now.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, Deuce Delta Three Mike.” Replied Ingrid, trying a half-hearted attempt at humor. “I still have some gun ammunition left. Do you need ground support at this time, over?”

There was a long silence on the radio. When she got an answer, it was from a new voice.

“Lady Hawk, this is Deuce Delta Three Six. Don’t worry about us for the moment and go home: I already asked for another air package, over.”

“I copy that, Deuce Delta Three Six. Over and out!”

Only then did Ingrid turn her plane towards Pusan.

13:04 (Korea Time)

K-1 Airfield, Pusan

Ingrid saw the burning remains of a crash-landed P-38 besides the main runway as she was about to land. Mortally worried about Jo Myers and Ann Baumgartner, she landed, then taxied to her unit’s parking area, immobilizing her plane inside one of the protective earth revetments she had field engineers build for her planes after redeploying to Pusan. A crowd of pilots and ground support personnel surrounded her plane as soon as her two propellers stopped spinning. Two of her mechanics were up on the wings in a flash and helped her undo her seat harness, extracting their exhausted commander from her cockpit and helping her down to the ground, where two more mechanics helped support her as the crowd pressed around her to comfort and congratulate her. Ingrid then saw Evelyn Sharp approaching her with gloom on her face and shouted at her.

“Evelyn, where are Ann and Jo? Did they make it back?”

“Yes, they did, Ingrid. Both of their planes are write-offs, though. Jo has a number of fragments in her left leg and side and is to be operated on but is not in critical state. Ann is okay but she is badly shaken by the loss of her two pilots. We may have saved most of the B-26 bombers, but this was a costly day for us. How are you yourself?”

“Just exhausted, Evelyn. I just don’t know how I managed that but I don’t think that I was hit even once in that battle.”

Her deputy commander left her for a moment to inspect her aircraft, then returned near her, shaking her head in disbelief.

“You are right, Ingrid: not a single hole in your P-38. Your guardian angel must have been watching over you today.”

“If only it could have watched over Frances and Ruth as well.” Said weakly Ingrid. She then sat down and started crying quietly. Out of a common, silent accord, her subordinates save Evelyn Sharp dispersed, leaving her alone with her deputy. Evelyn sat beside her and passed a protective arm around her crying friend and commander, speaking softly to her.

“We will honor them the way they deserve, Ingrid. They died like heroes, saving the lives of dozens of our bomber aircrews. Come, go eat something, then go rest a bit: I will take care of things in the meantime.”

“Thanks, Evelyn!” Said weakly Ingrid between sobs. She let Evelyn help her to get up, grateful for her support. They were walking together towards a waiting jeep when the commander of the B-26 bomber squadron arrived in a jeep and came towards them. Stopping in front of Ingrid, he saluted her before shaking her hand firmly, eyeing her with respect.

“General Dows, I want to personally thank you and your pilots for protecting my bombers today. When I saw those two dozen enemy jet fighters, I was sure that I was going to lose my whole squadron. Instead, eight of my planes made it back, all thanks to you and your pilots. Be sure that your unit’s deeds will be described in my report.”

“Thank you, Colonel Anderson.” Replied Ingrid, trying her best to steady her voice. “I am sorry for your lost crews.”

The bomber pilot lowered his head at those words.

“That is what war is all about, I guess: pain and grief. Again, thank you, General.”

Anderson then left, following which Evelyn whispered into Ingrid’s ear.

“You see, Ingrid: our pilots did not die for nothing.”

“I just wish that they didn’t need to die at all, Evelyn.” She replied, tears in her eyes.

15:08 (Washington Time)

Saturday, July 10, 1948 'C'

House of Representatives, Congress Building

Washington, D.C.

U.S.A.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the young Democrat Representative for Massachusetts, shook his head in discouragement as the Republican majority leader, Charles Halleck, launched the fifth verbal attack of the day against President Truman, accusing him of having emasculated the American forces with repeated budget cuts and unrealistic defense policies. The New York Herald-Tribune article on what was now popularly called 'The mass fleeing towards Suwon', published in the United States on July 3, had immediately created outrage across the country and had deeply embarrassed both the White House and the Pentagon. Two more stinging defeats inflicted on Army units in Korea, first on July 5th in Osan, then in Chonan just yesterday, along with a series of blunt articles about the shocking lack of preparation of the American Army, had deeply tarnished the image of the Pentagon in the eyes of the public, which was now asking for heads to roll. The worst part for John F. Kennedy, who was a Navy Pacific veteran of World War Two, was that the Republicans' accusations against President Truman concerning his neglect of the American armed forces were generally justified, even if they were stained with some hypocrisy. Truman had been systematically cutting military budget for years now, so that he could finance his social programs. Many generals and admirals at the Pentagon were equally guilty in this, having stayed silent in order to protect their own military careers. The only one to pay for the present situation to date had been Lieutenant General Hodge, who had been relieved of command in Korea on July 6th and had been replaced by the commander of the 8th Army, Lieutenant General Walton Walker. However, President Truman and, by extension, the Democratic Party, was certain to pay a high political price for this in the next presidential elections in the coming November.

John, who was listening to Halleck with one ear, suddenly stiffened on his seat, alarmed: someone had just suggested out loud to use the atom bomb in order to stop the North Koreans. The idea seemed to catch for a moment, until the leader of the House Democratic minority, Sam Rayburn, made all understand what such a move

would imply. Even after Rayburn's intervention, spirits stayed hot and agitated until the assembly broke for supper just before six O'clock. His fragile back now hurting after sitting for hours on the benches of the House, John Kennedy slowly got up, grimacing with pain, then returned slowly to his office to go get his crutches. As he was about to leave the imposing building housing the United States Congress, John saw an opened newspaper left on top of a telephone table. Grabbing it, he saw on the opened page a large cartoon above an article by the famous and also feared journalist Drew Pearson, who specialized in the character assassination of Washington politicians and government officials. The cartoon showed an American soldier dressed in rags and holding an antique rifle while asking for charity on a street corner. President Truman was pictured throwing him a single penny as he passed by. Cringing at the sight of the cartoon, John then read Pearson's article, which could only be described as corrosive towards President Truman, accusing him of criminal neglect of the American armed forces. John, disillusioned by the recent disasters in Korea, was forced to recognize that Pearson was not mistaken. At the rhythm things were happening, Harry Truman was quickly becoming toxic to the Democratic Party, a bad thing indeed for his election campaign.

19:22 (Washington Time)

Cabinet Room, The White House

Washington, D.C.

President Harry Truman needed only one look at the gloomy faces of his Service Chiefs to know that things were bad indeed in Korea. The worst part was that he felt some guilt personally for listening to those who had advocated that the advent of nuclear weapons had rendered conventional military forces obsolete and had thus encouraged severe reductions in Army, Navy and Marine Corps capabilities. Now, after sending his conventional forces to fight what had appeared at first to be a minor war in Asia, he was seeing these forces being severely mauled by communist forces, while the full extent of the Soviet Union's involvement and duplicity was becoming painfully obvious. The growing amount of casualties in Korea was also inflaming popular opinion in the United States, with many calling for the government to teach a lesson to the Soviets and their Korean allies by dropping the atomic bomb on them, while others called the presence of

American troops in Korea unjustified and were asking for a complete withdrawal. Truman's first question was to General Eisenhower, the Army Chief of Staff.

"So, how bad is it on the ground in Korea, General?"

Eisenhower got up from his chair at the conference table and, taking a pointer offered by an aide, approached a large map of Korea that was overlaid by a sheet of clear plastic bearing a number of red and blue symbols.

"Yesterday, despite heavy and continuous support by our air assets, the 34th Infantry Regiment in Chonan was overrun by a massive communist night attack, with less than 200 survivors able to escape south towards our main defensive lines along the Kum River. Then, less than twelve hours ago, I was informed that the enemy had succeeded in breaching the Kum River line in force and that our ground forces were now in full retreat towards Pusan, where a hasty defensive line is being prepared along the Naktong River. The retreat of our ground units has also forced the crash relocation of many air supporting units, which in turn helped the enemy by taking off some pressure from the air on him. The 7th Infantry Division, our original force in Korea at the start of the war, has by now been basically wiped out, with losses of over seventy percent casualties and with thousands of men taken prisoner and too often being executed by the enemy afterwards. The 24th Infantry Division, to which the 34th Regiment belonged, has suffered losses of over thirty percent by now, while the 25th Infantry Division is still in the process of disembarking from ships in Pusan and is not ready yet for full operations. The units of the 25th Division already on the ground are actually busy establishing a wide defensive perimeter around Pusan. The Marines' 1st Provisional Marine Brigade, which has just started disembarking in Pusan, will also help defend that perimeter. We are assembling and reequipping other army divisions as fast as we can but, if the perimeter around Pusan doesn't hold fast for at least another month, we then could lose every unit we have presently in Korea, be they Army, Marine or Air Force units."

"This is the best that the Army can do, General?" Asked Truman, shocked and disbelieving. "This is grossly insufficient! Where are your tanks and artillery guns?"

Eisenhower, who had done his best to stay diplomatic for more than twenty minutes now, threw a hard look at his President.

"That is the best the Army can do after three years of arbitrary budget cuts, Mister President. I had to swallow since the end of the war Army budgets representing seventy percent or less of the sums requested by me and deemed strict minimums in order to keep our forces operational. My tanks and guns were mostly either scrapped or

simply abandoned in the jungles of the Pacific, and this because of the lack of funds to allow for their proper mothballing.”

“But, General MacArthur did succeed in finding quickly 118 SHERMAN tanks and 58 medium and heavy artillery pieces in the Philippines, according to your own report. Why can’t you find more?”

Eisenhower did a heroic effort to stay polite then.

“You want to know where those tanks and guns in the Philippines came from, Mister President? They were actually in secret storage there, following a local initiative at the end of the last war that had been approved by General MacArthur.”

Robert Patterson, the Secretary of War, looked at Eisenhower with wide eyes, indignant.

“Who took such an illegal initiative and to what purpose? To resell those weapons on the black market?”

“Not at all, Mister Secretary. The idea came from Brigadier General Dows, then serving in Germany as military governor of Karlsruhe, as insurance against future hard times. Dows then communicated with the commander of the 99th Wing in the Philippines, who in turn got the permission of General MacArthur to put into long term storage at Clark Air Force Base the surplus war equipment due to be scrapped in the Philippines. I understand that some surplus equipment was also sent from Germany to be put into storage in the Philippines. The equipment stored in the Philippines also included many combat aircraft.”

“That young bitch! She grossly abused her rank by acting like this.” Exclaimed James Forrestal, the Secretary of the Navy. “Why didn’t you sack her, General?”

“Because I have no intentions to do so, Mister Secretary.” Shot back Eisenhower, surprising the politicians around the table. “Brigadier General Dows simply showed initiative and resourcefulness and saved lots of valuable equipment from mindless destruction, at no cost to the taxpayers. Now, thanks to her, we are able to reequip some more units to be sent to Korea. In this she proved to have more vision than all of us here. And you want to punish her for that?”

“That’s not her place to make such long-term predictions on the future needs of our forces, General. We have officers for that at the Pentagon.”

“Officers that completely failed in their responsibilities, Secretary Forrestal. I also failed personally in my responsibilities, by not insisting harder on the need for more substantial budgets for the Army.”

"I have the last word concerning military budgets, General." Cut Truman, visibly irritated. "Insisting further for more money would have led you nowhere." Eisenhower tightened his jaws while staring for a moment at Truman. He then took a decision and closed the file in front of him.

"I can see that now to my utter regret, Mister President. Since our actual debacle in Korea doesn't seem to be enough to change your attitude about the needs of the Army, and this despite my repeated counsels, then I have no choice left but to present my immediate resignation. I can see no usefulness in serving you if you keep ignoring my advice, Mister President."

"But, you can't resign like this, General." Nearly shouted a shocked Truman. "We are at war!" Eisenhower, who was stuffing back his files in his briefcase, gave him a nearly contemptuous look.

"No, Mister President, we are not at war. According to your own words, the present crisis in Korea is only a simple international police action. If you can't even call things by their true name, then it only reinforces my decision to resign. Good evening, Mister President!"

Both shaken and shocked, Truman watched Eisenhower leave the cabinet room before looking at the politicians and officers still sitting around the table.

"Such arrogance!"

General Hoyt Vandenberg, the head of the Air force, snapped his head towards Truman on hearing those words.

"Mister President, I believe that General Eisenhower's reputation as a military leader gives him the moral right to take the decision he just took. A general whose advice is not listened to is basically an officer with no real authority."

"Then, can I surmise that you agree with his opinions about our military budgets, General Vandenberg?"

"You can, Mister President." Replied Vandenberg in a barely polite tone. In truth, his last year of service as Chief of Staff of the Air Force had been most frustrating, with his own counsels largely ignored, while those of a few dangerous demagogues gained favor in the White House. Those demagogues, including Lieutenant General Curtiss LeMay, were preaching a nuclear strike doctrine that left next to no place to conventional forces. Unfortunately, President Truman had been blinded by the

argument that nuclear forces were less costly than conventional forces in order to prevent Soviet aggression. He then went on, his voice firm.

"We are here to debate the present crisis in Korea and to find a way to send adequate reinforcements there as quickly as we can, Mister President. Yet, I don't see here the Commandant of the Marine Corps, who would be in a good position to quickly land extra troops in Korea."

"You know very well what I think about the Marine Corps, General Vandenberg." It was the turn for Admiral Nimitz, head of the Navy, to snap his head towards Truman.

"Mister President, that you are ready to systematically put down a military entity with such a distinguished and heroic history of service is in my mind both a disgrace and an injustice. Without the Marine Corps, we would have probably lost the war in the Pacific, but you are still clinging to an ill-informed opinion you gained during the First World War. Well, we are in 1948 and we need the Marine Corps more than ever, Mister President. We will in fact need all of our available conventional forces in order to win the actual conflict."

General Vandenberg nodded his head at that and jumped in, trying to put back the conversation on its original track.

"Mister President, I presently have eleven squadrons of aircraft and helicopters fighting hard in Korea and taking losses in order to slow down the enemy advance. I need your authority in order to obtain a drastic, immediate increase in our budgets dedicated to our conventional forces, so that I can reinforce and support those squadrons. Putting together mere strings will not be enough to win this war."

Truman, who was getting upset at what he viewed as military insubordination, shot back in an impatient tone.

"General, we will study the question of our military budgets another day. You should rather think about transferring more of our fighter squadrons to Europe, to prevent any Soviet attack that could be made under the cover of the North Korean invasion."

"More squadrons for Europe, Mister President?" Said Vandenberg, incredulous. "But, we have no indications at all of such an attack being prepared by the Soviets."

"Not at this time, but I don't want to risk losing Europe, which is inside our sphere of interest, while Korea is not."

Vandenberg's face hardened when he understood that Truman had no intentions at all to agree to any of his demands. Gathering his files and notes on the table and putting them in his briefcase, he then got up from his chair and saluted Truman.

"In this case, since my opinion seems worthless to you, then I have no choice left but to present to you my resignation. Good evening, Mister President!"

For the second time of the evening, Truman had to watch one of his generals walk out of the conference room. Admiral Nimitz then shocked him by also getting up and gathering his papers.

"Admiral, don't tell me that you are also resigning?"

The old sailor nodded his head at that while looking coldly at Truman.

"I probably should have done this months ago, Mister President, instead of listening to the nonsense from your so-called experts, who claimed that our nuclear weapons rendered useless our aircraft carriers. Now that Generals Eisenhower and Vandenberg just showed moral courage in defending their positions, and in view of your refusal to readjust our defense policies, then I can't in all conscience stay in my present position. After 47 years in the Navy, I am not willing anymore to just watch as my ships are sent one by one to the scrap yards or are sold away. Good evening, Mister President!"

After the door closed behind Admiral Nimitz, Robert Patterson looked at Truman with the expression of a beaten puppy.

"What are we going to do now, Mister President? Who will take care now of finding more troops for Korea?"

"I DON'T KNOW!" Exploded Truman, completely overwhelmed by the turn of events. "MAKE DO WITH WHAT YOU GOT AVAILABLE, DAMMIT!"

07:41 (Washington Time)

Monday, July 12, 1948 'C'

Congress' cafeteria, Washington, D.C.

John Kennedy, having arrived early in order to go through his mail, was having breakfast at the cafeteria of the Congress Building when his secretary nearly ran to his table in order to show him the front page of the morning edition of the Washington Post, an alarmed look on her face.

"Sir! Sir! Did you see this?"

"Uh, I haven't read today's papers yet, Miss Crandall. Please, sit down."

John then took the newspaper and immediately felt blood rush to his head as he read the titles in bold letters.

"The Pentagon generals are revolting against President Truman?"

Putting down his fork at once, he took the newspaper with both hands and read carefully the article. Finally, both discouraged and disturbed, he looked at his secretary and managed to give her a smile.

"Thank you for bringing this newspaper to me, Miss Crandall. You did well."

"Thank you, sir." She replied in her small voice before getting up and walking away. John followed her with his eyes for a moment, admiring her legs as she left. Contrary to what some forked tongues said, John appreciated Julie for more than just her body: she actually knew how to type and how to answer the telephone. His mind then went back to the newspaper article, thinking about the possible repercussions of this affair, including the impact on the American troops fighting in Korea. The simultaneous loss of the three top American military officers, along with the wave of discontent that was bound to go through the ranks of the armed forces, was going to seriously perturb the military chain of command. On the other hand, that only confirmed John's opinion that Truman was becoming a burden on the Democratic Party for the coming presidential elections. The fact that Truman had been named to the post of vice-president in 1944, and not elected to it, and that he had become President only because of the death of President Roosevelt, was going to make it only easier to criticize him.

Quickly finishing his breakfast and keeping the newspaper with him, John then went to his office and turned on his radio, trying to find if he could hear more about the resignations of the Chiefs of Staff. He actually managed to find a radio program playing a taped declaration just made by General Eisenhower, in which the famous general declared that he was unable to continue to serve under President Truman because of important differences between them concerning Army budgets. As for Truman, the radio announcer confirmed that he had not made yet any official declaration about that subject. John then took the first of dozens of telephone calls coming from voters in his district, who were calling to give him their opinions on the crisis at hand. It soon became evident to John that the large majority of his callers were on the side of the generals, and

not of President Truman. Around nine O'clock, John took another call, to find himself listening to Sam Rayburn, the leader of the House Democratic minority.

"John, this is Sam! The Republicans are cooking something up for this morning's session. Go take your seat in the House as quickly as you can and stay there until I give the permission to leave."

"Uh, understood. I'm on my way."

Grabbing his crutches, John then made his way to the House Chamber, finding there that the Republicans were already sitting in force, with a wave of excitement running among their ranks. John was sitting down as the Republican Whip, Leslie Arends of Illinois, asked the right to speak to the Speaker of the House. Taking place behind the lectern reserved to the persons addressing the House, Arends then started reading with a solemn air a written declaration taken out of a vest pocket.

"My dear colleagues of the House of Representatives, we are here this morning facing a grave crisis for our country, a crisis caused directly by the criminal negligence of the present administration and, in particular, of President Truman. Our soldiers are fighting and dying in Korea while lacking everything and are forced to fight with obsolete equipment while suffering from a lack of ammunition. This situation is not new, my friends. In fact, this lamentable state of affair, which just caused the resignation of our greatest generals and admirals, has been enduring since 1945, when President Truman started his first massive cuts in the country's military budgets, and this without any regard for their effects on our armed forces. Far from worrying about the state of our armed forces, President Truman even confessed that he eventually wanted to abolish the Marine Corps, one of our most heroic and glorious services. He even said, through his total ignorance of military affairs, that the Navy could also be abolished, with the Air Force and the atomic bomb being enough to ensure the defense of the nation. Well, history is now catching up with him and teaching him that you cannot defend a territory only from the air. Unfortunately, everything indicates that he is still unwilling to learn his lesson and is insisting that our soldiers stop the enemy only with their present, inadequate equipment. Yes, gentlemen, you will be able to note that not a single request for supplementary military appropriation has come yet to this House, even though our soldiers have been fighting for three weeks now. Worse still, President Truman has shown his utter contempt for Congress by refusing to request its authority to declare war against North Korea. Instead, he abused his powers by passing a simple executive order that called the present conflict in Korea a simple international police

action. He thus insulted our soldiers, telling them that they were not fighting a real war. I, Leslie Arends, Republican Representative for Illinois, thus demand formally to this House that the following charges be brought against President Harry Truman and be registered before being passed on to the Judicial Committee of the House, with the goal of conducting a vote of censure by the House and the Senate against President Truman. The charges are: criminal negligence on the part of President Truman concerning the armed forces of the nation, to the point of putting in grave danger the national security; and abuse of power, for having sent our soldiers, airmen and sailors to war in impossible conditions and while refusing to even ask for the approbation of the Congress for the said war. Mister Speaker, I thus transmit officially to you this request for censure, to be passed to the Judicial Committee of the House.”

John Kennedy, like most other Democrats in the House, was shaken by that announcement. While partly predictable, that request for presidential censure came at a very bad moment. Since the death of President Roosevelt and his replacement by his vice-president, Truman, the latter had governed from the White House without ever bothering to name a new vice-president, leaving that post empty. If the request for censure against Truman was eventually voted by the Congress, forcing Truman out of the White House, power then would pass automatically to the Speaker of the House, a Republican. Unfortunately for the Democratic Party, a formal request for censure by a House member had, according to the constitution, to go either to the House Judiciary Committee or to the House Ways and Means Committee, which would then decide if the charges were valid. If they said yes, then the House would vote on the request and, if it was accepted, would then pass the request for censure to the Senate, which would put President Truman on trial in front of the Senate. If found guilty, then Truman would have no other choice but to leave the White House. The problem was that the Republicans were controlling both the House and his committees and the Senate. They thus had now a golden opportunity to grab power from the Democrats. Republican Representative Charles Halleck then got up from his bench to propose a supplementary appropriation bill for the armed forces, officially with the intent of repairing part of the damage caused by Truman’s negligence. By the end of the day, the Democratic Party found itself shaken to the core, forced to defend a President that was suddenly deeply unpopular with both the public and many members of his own party.

09:47 (Korea Time)

Saturday, July 24, 1948 'C'

Command post of the KATF, K-1 Airfield (Pusan West)

South Korea

Ingrid examined with growing unease the air photos just taken over the area of Sunch'on, only 150 kilometers to the west of the port of Pusan: numerous enemy motorized columns were clearly visible on them, now that the rotten weather of the last few days had improved. Unfortunately, the enemy had used to the most the cover provided by the bad weather to speed up its advance along the southwest coast of the peninsula. In comparison, the three last weeks had brought only bad news and a series of disasters to the American Army forces in Korea. Late last night, Ingrid had learned that, on top of losing Taejon, a critical point for the defense of the southwestern part of Korea, the American 24th Infantry Division had lost as well the majority of its heavy equipment, abandoned during its wild withdrawal from Taejon. The division commander, Major General William Dean, was also reported as missing in action. Ingrid and her pilots had done their best during those three weeks to prevent that string of disasters, inflicting heavy losses on the mechanized and motorized enemy units. However, stopping the advance of a light infantry force across mountainous terrain was a job for ground soldiers, not aviators. Ingrid was frankly becoming frustrated to have to constantly risk the lives of her pilots in order to compensate for the tactical incompetence of too many Army commanders and for the flagrant lack of combativeness in the frontlines of many American soldiers. Making the situation worse was the confusion in the upper chain of command in Washington caused by the resignations of all three Chiefs of Staff. This confusion had been magnified by the refusal by President Truman to substantially change his defense priorities, something that had forced General MacArthur to literally scrape the bottom of the drawers in the Pacific in order to find reinforcements. Due to persistent and repeated Soviet vetoes at the United Nations, which had blocked the formation of an international force, no other allied country had joined forces with the United States in Korea. The South Korean forces, already weak at the start of the war, were now all but wiped out by casualties and mass desertions. The American troops in Korea thus were now basically alone to fight the North Koreans, something that had further hurt the sagging morale of the soldiers. She was still

mentally reflecting on the misfortunes of the American forces in Korea when her chief of staff, Lieutenant Colonel Evelyn Hudson, came to her at a near run.

"Ingrid, the radio news just announced that the House of Representatives has just voted in favor of censuring President Truman. The Senate will thus start to pass judgment on President Truman next week."

Ingrid threw her pencil up in the air in frustration on hearing that.

"Great! We are fighting for our lives here and we will now find ourselves with a power vacuum in Washington. We also just sent to the enemy a message of political weakness at the worst possible moment. You can be sure now that the enemy will use that to the maximum."

"And what could they do to us that they are not doing yet, Ingrid?"

"The Chinese could intervene directly in Korea and pour hundreds of thousands of fresh troops into Korea. That is what happened in Nancy Laplante's history."

Evelyn Hudson was left speechless then, unwilling to even try to imagine what so many Chinese soldiers could do to their situation here in Pusan.

16:07 (Korea Time)

Sunday, August 01, 1948 'C'

Command post of the KATF, K-1 Airfield

Ingrid had just entered the new underground command post complex of her task force, completed a mere three days ago, having returned from a close air support mission in her P-38, when Jenny Kawena approached her, her expression somber.

"Ingrid, the 8th Army headquarters just called from its new location near Pusan Harbor, with some bad news and a request for help. The 19th Regiment of the 24th Infantry Division, or rather what was left of it after the loss of Chinju, has been outflanked by the enemy. Its two remaining battalions, respectively near Chungam-ni and Kagan-ni, are now isolated and surrounded. Worse, its roadblock position in Chindong-ni, five miles from Masan, just called the army headquarters to say that they were under attack by at least a battalion. General Walker wants you to call him as quickly as possible."

"Has Evelyn Hudson sent something to help the 19th Regiment?" Asked Ingrid, immediately worried.

"Our attack helicopters and heavy gunships are already striking at the enemy soldiers they can find around the regiment, while six of our helicopters are on their way

to deliver some ammunition and rations on top of the hills occupied by our soldiers. Unfortunately, the present poor weather is helping the enemy, while our attack helicopter squadron doesn't have enough helicopters left to also deal with the situation at the Chindong-ni roadblock."

"Damn! The timing of this sucks! Our P-38s and B-25s already have their hands full with the enemy breakout caused by the bug out of those cowards from the 24th Regiment³ in Sangju. My own plane took a few bullet hits and will need a few hours to be repaired. Very well, I will go call General Walker right away."

Following the main tunnel of the complex, which formed a closed loop and on which opened a multitude of well-separated alcoves and side tunnels, Ingrid went to the alcove that served as her office and sat down at her work desk. She then took out her tactical map of the region and grabbed the handset of her field telephone, asking the telephone standard operator of the command complex to connect her with General Walker. She finally had him on the line after a minute of waiting and multiple connections.

"General Walker!"

"General, this is Brigadier General Dows. I was just informed of the situation with the 19th Regiment. My helicopters are already operating in support of the two battalions of the regiment, but my other aircraft are already fully occupied with the enemy breakthrough in the 24th Regiment's sector."

"That's already a lot of good you are doing, Ingrid." Replied Walker, who then hesitated, while his tone of voice became nearly pleading. "Ingrid, the enemy battalion that was attacking our roadblock in Chindong-ni just blew through it. We now have nothing between that point and Masan. After Masan, there is your airfield, then the port of Pusan and its logistical installations and supply dumps. Our forces in Masan are presently limited to a small railroad movement unit with less than twenty men armed with rifles. If the enemy takes Masan, and I believe that he will be able to do that easily, he will then be able to reach Pusan and condemn us to total defeat. Our defensive perimeter around Pusan is at breaking point everywhere and I just committed my last reserve force, which includes a bunch of cooks and clerks, to reestablish our line in the sector of the 24th Regiment. The only unit from which I didn't ask yet a combat reserve

³ The 24th Regiment of the 25th Infantry Division was disbanded and erased from U.S. Army lists after the Korean War, for repeatedly fleeing en masse in front of the enemy, often without firing a shot. Please refer to South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu, by Roy E. Appleman.

ground force is yours, Ingrid. I know that female units are legally forbidden to fight as frontline ground troops and that both the American public and Washington will probably crucify me for using women as infantry, but I have no other options left to me. Are you willing and able to provide me with a ground force capable of defending Masan and preventing its capture by the enemy?"

Ingrid did not have to think long before answering Walker. In fact, she had formed and trained an airfield defense force with the 99th Wing as early as 1942, a force supplemented by ground support and administrative personnel trained in basic infantry defensive tactics. That force had actually seen ground combat, first in Guadalcanal in 1942, then in Papua New Guinea. Even after her departure for Washington in late 1943, Evelyn Sharp had preserved and maintained that force, which had been reinforced further at the end of the war with the sending by Ingrid from Germany of sizeable quantities of selected captured German small arms and ammunition and with the use of American surplus equipment and weapons left in the Philippines. In terms of armored cars, small arms and support weapons, her air task force's inventory would have been qualified by any other general as 'outrageously lavish'. However, Ingrid had always believed in being ready for anything, being a great believer in the infamous Murphy's Law'.

"General, I can send within two hours to Masan about 400 women armed with automatic carbines and machineguns, plus a dozen M20 armored cars and 24 jeeps mounting machineguns. I will use my helicopters to move, resupply and support that force, but my airfield security perimeter here in K-1 will be correspondingly weakened. I will however need you to designate an artillery unit to be in support of my ground force." Walker was silent for a moment, surprised by the speed of her response.

"Uh, those women, are they trained in ground combat, Ingrid?"

"General, the majority of these women fought on the ground to defend the perimeter of Henderson Field in Guadalcanal in 1942, then saw action in Papua New Guinea. Every woman of my unit received basic training in small arms and infantry defensive tactics and regularly practiced rifle and machinegun shooting in the Philippines. They will do at least as well as your cooks and clerks, General. I will immediately send my armored cars to Masan, to establish there a first line of defense and block any further enemy advance. I will then drop by helicopter my other women on top of the hills surrounding Masan and dominating the road coming from Chindong-ni. Masan should be secured by nightfall, General."

“Uh, I don’t know what to say, Ingrid: I wasn’t hoping for that much.”

“Just give my force the support of at least one artillery battery and I will be happy, General. Since my aircraft is presently down for repairs, I will be personally leading my force in Masan. Do you have anything else for me, General?”

“No! Good luck to you and your women in Masan, Ingrid. I won’t forget this.”

Putting down her receiver, Ingrid consulted quickly an organizational chart pinned to a support beam of her alcove, then got up and went to the communications section of the underground complex. There, she grabbed the microphone connected to the loudspeaker system of the airfield.

“Attention to all the personnel of the KAT Force, this is Brigadier General Dows speaking. The personnel of the following units and sub-units will prepare immediately for a ground defense mission beyond the perimeter of the airfield: the armored car and detention platoons of our Military Police company; the first and second platoons of our airfield defense company and the emergency defense sections of all our administrative, logistical and construction sub-units. All the personnel used in maintaining, repairing and arming our aircraft and helicopters will stay in their present occupations. All the personnel deploying outside the airfield will carry with them three days of hard rations and the maximum of ammunition, plus all the anti-tank weapons and other support weapons available. The ordnance company will immediately prepare for transport by helicopter a total of thirty 250 pound I.E.D.s equipped with long command detonation wire spools, while the quartermaster company will prepare pallets of barbed wires and other defensive stores and tools. All unit commanders are to report immediately to the command complex for more detailed instructions.”

Ingrid’s announcement instantly created frenetic activity across the airfield, with hundreds of women suddenly running to get weapons and ammunition or packing things to prepare for combat. Marguerite Higgins, from the New York Herald Tribune, who was living with seven female clerks and logisticians in one of the dozens of bunkers serving both as defense points and personnel quarters, looked with confusion as her companions were hurriedly packing ammunition and rations in their backpacks and checking their weapons.

“What is going on? What are you doing?”

"You didn't hear General Dows, Marguerite?" Replied a stout redhead who was a quartermaster clerk. "Our whole ground defense force is being mobilized for deployment outside the airfield."

Marguerite's eyes opened wide when she understood and saw the possibilities for writing a splashy article.

"Can I come with you, girls?"

"Uh, you will have to ask General Dows for that, Marguerite. If she says yes, then you better have water and rations for a few days with you before getting in an helicopter."

Marguerite did not have to be told twice and went to her backpack, making sure that she still had some army rations in it and that her water bottle was full. She also put a dozen spare rolls of film for her camera in her pack, then followed the Air Force women outside of the bunker. A bunker that seemed to have been pre-designated for that purpose served as a rallying point for a group of about sixty heavily armed women, all carrying backpacks, steel helmets and web gear. Marguerite took a number of pictures of the armed women as they probably waited for vehicles. The reporter then notice with some shock that the women had with them a number of very non-regulation weapons, including eight German MG42 7.92mm medium machine guns, three Japanese 50mm grenade launchers, eight German PANZERFAUST 100 antitank weapons and dozens of German 'Potato Masher' stick grenades. Even in infantry units, Marguerite had never seen so much firepower for such a small group of combatants. A light truck then briefly stopped in front of their rallying point, time to drop a number of ammunition boxes and crates. Some crates were opened at once, with their contents then distributed around, while others were piled up beside the group. A second truck soon came, dropping an assortment of picks, shovels and stacks of empty sand bags that were also distributed around. Four medium trucks showed up twenty minutes later to pick up the heavily loaded women and Marguerite Higgins. The ride was relatively short, the trucks stopping behind a line of parked helicopters. As she disembarked with the others from the trucks, Marguerite saw eight more groups of armed women, each counting between forty and sixty heavily armed women. She took more pictures of the assembled force, which now counted about 400 Air Force women quietly chatting between themselves or smoking cigarettes. She also took pictures of an impressive column of M20 armored cars and jeeps mounting machineguns as it rolled by, heading out of the airfield on the road leading west to Masan. A female major from the parked helicopter unit then

organized the armed women, assigning them to specific helicopters. During the whole process, the women, while somber, seemed calm and thoughtful to Marguerite. That did not surprise too much the latter, as she knew the impressive fighting history of the 99th Wing, to which those women normally belonged. That contrasted with the often jittery or nervous looks she had seen on the faces of too many American infantrymen in this war.

Ingrid Dows arrived in a jeep thirty minutes later and stepped out, as heavily armed as the others and also carrying a large portable radio on her back. Two more women carrying backpack radios accompanied her. Marguerite took a few pictures of the trio just before Ingrid addressed the crowd of armed women.

"Listen carefully, girls! The enemy has broken through our lines west of here and the 8th Army is out of available reserve units to block the road to Pusan to the enemy. We will thus be dropped by helicopter on a number of selected hills dominating the access road to Masan and will establish defensive positions on those hilltops. As soon as you will be landed and will get detailed instructions about your arcs of fire, I want you to start digging slit trenches or, for the machine guns, small bunkers. Dig deep and quick tonight, as I expect the enemy artillery to plaster us once they will have identified our positions. After dropping us, our helicopters will come back here to load for us extra ammunition, water, rations and defensive stores to help fortify our positions. Our military policewomen, under Major Dickinson, will on their part hold the town of Masan itself with their armored cars and armed jeeps. Major Kawena will soon come here to distribute tactical maps to the platoon and section commanders. I will personally command the company that will hold the most forward hills to the northwest of Masan, while Major Nolan will command the company holding the hills to the southwest of Masan. We may end up staying in position around Masan for many days, but I am certain that you will do a great job, as usual. Be assured that I have a number of nasty surprises in store for the enemy, so don't worry too much about any enemy numerical superiority. I will now leave by helicopter to do a visual reconnaissance of Masan and select the hilltops we will defend. This said, good luck to all of you."

As Ingrid was walking towards a UH-1 DOVE light helicopter, Marguerite Higgins ran to her to ask her a question.

"General Dows, could I accompany your women to Masan?"

Ingrid eyed her soberly for a moment before smiling to her.

"If you are gutsy enough to ask, then you are welcomed to ride with me, Marguerite. Expect however to have to dig yourself your own trench. I will also expect you to obey instantly my orders and those of my NCOs, and this for your own safety."

"I will be as quiet as a doll, General."

"In that case, get in!"

With the excitement making her forget about the dangers she was going to face, Marguerite eagerly took place in one of the rear seats of the light helicopter.

17:59 (Korea Time)

Town of Masan, South Korea

Major Angie Dickinson had just entered the town of Masan at the head of her convoy of armored cars and jeeps and had left four M20s and six armed jeeps at the intersection of the main road with the road leading northwest to Chungam-ni. Three American military trucks and one jeep suddenly emerged from a side street and nearly collided with her. She only had time to briefly see the panicked face of the lead truck driver before the four vehicle sped towards Pusan in a cloud of dust.

"Those guys seemed to have their asses on fire, Major." Remarked in a sarcastic tone Angie's driver, Corporal Amie Baker.

"I hope that this doesn't mean that the enemy is already in town." Said Angie. "I should have stopped them to ask."

"Stop them at the speed that they were going? Good luck, Major!"

Turning on the same street from which the fleeing trucks had come, Angie then saw some 200 meters to her front the railway station of Masan and its shunting yard. The yard was nearly full of rail cars apparently full of military supplies and equipment, but she saw no movement at first. Then, she saw six American trucks led by a jeep which had just emerged from between two warehouses of the station. Angie hurriedly patted the shoulder of her driver.

"Amie, block their path, quickly! I want to talk to them."

The driver obeyed her at once, accelerating for a moment before veering and stopping across the road. The U.S. Army captain sitting in the jeep got up on his seat to shout at the occupants of the M20.

"ARE YOU CRAZY? YOU NEARLY CRUSHED MY JEEP!"

Jumping on the ground, Angie walked quickly to the jeep, her face impassive.

"Sorry about that, Captain, but I urgently need some information."

"Then, you better make it quick, Major: the enemy will soon be here."

"Who told you that?"

"The men in the four vehicles that you must have just passed, Major. They came from Chindong-ni and told us that enemy tanks were running after her."

"Tanks?!" Exclaimed Angie, making the captain of the Corps of Logistics nod his head with impatience.

"Yes, tanks! Could you now move your vehicle, so that my trucks could pass?"

Now worried, Angie signaled her driver to free the road, then ran back to her M20 and climbed in it as the jeep and trucks of the captain sped away in a mighty hurry.

"ENEMY TANKS ARE APPROACHING THE TOWN. ONCE AT THE WESTERN END OF THE TOWN, DEPLOY IN LINE BEHIND HOUSES AND PREPARE ANTITANK AMBUSHES. Step on it, Amie! Direction: the southwest end of Masan and the road to Chindong-ni."

Crossing quickly the town didn't prove easy, as the local population seemed to have heard about the approach of the North Koreans and was now fleeing east, filling the streets with people and carts. In one instance, having no other choice, Angie had her gunner fire a short heavy machine gun burst over the heads of the Korean civilians, making them disperse in panic. She then shouted to her drive.

"DRIVE! DRIVE!"

Pushing aside and partly crushing a cart blocking the road, Amie Baker accelerated her M20 to the maximum, closely followed by the other vehicles of their convoy. They finally arrived fifteen minutes later at the southwest end of Masan, where the road to Chindong-ni went down in a gentle slope, squeezed between two hills to the left and right of it. A narrow, undulating trail connected with the main road, climbing the slopes of the hills to the left. Angie was about to signal her truck-mounted detention platoon to take the trail to the left when something right ahead on the road made her blood freeze.

"ENEMY TANKS DEAD AHEAD! DEPLOY! DEPLOY! AMIE, BACK UP! BACK UP!"

Thankfully, both Amie Baker and Grace Channing reacted quickly and with coolness. While Angie guided her driver as she went in reverse, her gunner opened fire with her heavy machine gun, sweeping away the North Korean infantrymen clinging to the turret and engine deck of the leading T-34/85 tank. The other American armored cars also

opened fire while dispersing and searching for cover behind the houses and alleys of Masan. The dense heavy machine gun fire quickly downed the North Korean soldiers standing or sitting on the three T-34 tanks, ripping apart over twenty soldiers. The jeeps and trucks of Angie's convoy also dispersed along lateral streets before letting out over forty armed women, who started at once to advance from house to house, carrying their MG42 machine guns and PANZERFAUST 100 antitank weapons. Taken by surprise by the appearance of the M20 armored cars, the first T-34 tank, which was climbing at slow speed the sloped road towards the town, fired its first gun shell more than twenty seconds after the start of the encounter. The 85mm shell barely missed Angie's M20, exploding against a house and destroying it. Angie could now see from the corner of one eye the women of her detention platoon run at a crouch towards the first hill slopes to the left, PANZERFAUST 100 launchers in their hands. For the armored cars, the battle was however too unequal and Angie shouted in her radio microphone.

"TO THE M20s WITH ME, TAKE COVER BEHIND THE HOUSES AND CONTINUE THE FIGHT ON FOOT!"

Giving the example, Angie grabbed one of the PANZERFAUSTs stored inside her M20 and jumped out to the ground, then crouching behind a low stone wall. The first enemy tank, now without infantry to support it, still advanced into the town while firing its gun and coaxial machinegun. Angie could only look with rage as a 85mm shell struck a M20, shredding it and making it roll on its side. Now being in good position on the left flank of the lead T-34 tank, Angie raised the sight of her PANZERFAUST and firmly held her weapon under her right armpit, the way she had learned it from the instructions sent by Ingrid from Germany. With the enemy tank immobile fifty meters away while it turned its turret to aim at another M20, Angie was able to aim her weapon with care before pressing the trigger. The rocket, with its big shaped charge warhead, flew forward with a loud detonation and a cloud of smoke and dust, performing a downward curved trajectory before hitting the side of the tank's turret and exploding. The turret hatches opened like Champagne cork plugs under the internal pressure from the explosion and jet of hot plasma. A fraction of a second later, the shells stored in the turret exploded, projecting the turret high in the air before it fell on the ground twenty meters away. The two remaining enemy tanks, their arcs of fire blocked by the destroyed tank, then advanced and went around it, one tank on each side, with their turrets pivoting while searching for targets. The tank to the right was suddenly targeted by three PANZERFAUSTs fired from different angles and distances. One rocket missed, another

blew up a track and the last one hit the engine compartment, putting it on fire. Seeing the turret hatches of that tank open in a hurry, Angie grabbed her M2A2 carbine.

“You will pay for Katie and her crew!”

The tank commander was the first to be cut down by Angie’s fire as he tried to leave his doomed tank. A heavy machine gun burst from one M20 then killed the loader and the driver. There was however still one tank left intact and still dangerous. Ingrid Dows had however taught her aviatrix and ground specialists that a lone tank, without infantry escort and with its hatches closed, was not much more than a big, myopic beast in close combat. The women of the detention platoon proved that point when they approached the tank from its rear and then fired two PANZERFAUSTs from short range, both projectiles hitting the T-34. The North Korean tank turned at once into a funeral pyre for its crew, which died while screaming horribly. Angie then looked down the road coming from Chindong-ni. To her great relief, she did not see more enemy vehicles or soldiers.

Angie’s female MPs were starting to come cautiously out from behind their covers as she ran to the M20 destroyed by the first tank. Unfortunately, she could only see quickly that there was nothing she could do for the three women of that armored car. Straightening up, she looked at one of her NCOs.

“Sergeant, have the bodies of our women carried in that nearby house: we will have them evacuated to K-1 when we will have the chance.

Angie then turned to face the commander of her detention platoon, a big matron with rough manners.

“Lieutenant Collins, take your platoon and dig for yourselves a defensive position on this hilltop to the left of the road, 300 yards from here. Make sure that you have plenty of PANZERFAUSTs with you.”

“We’ll be right at it, Major.”

Angie then repositioned her surviving M20s in the best positions and covers possible, in order to cover completely the road to Chindong-ni and the western flank of the town. She was still giving orders when a UH-1 light helicopter overflew her position before turning around and come down to a landing near the destroyed tanks. Ingrid Dows and a civilian woman that Angie recognized as being the reporter Marguerite Higgins then stepped out of the helicopter. As Higgins took multiple pictures of the three destroyed T-34s and of the armed MP women around them, Ingrid went directly to Angie and shook her hand.

“Good job, Angie! What are your losses?”

“Three women killed and one M20 destroyed. My detention platoon will take position on this promontory dominating the road to the left, while my armored cars will stay in the outskirts of the town to block the road. I was thinking of using one machine gun section from our defense company to stay with my armored car, to help prevent infantry infiltration at night, and to send two machine gun platoons with PANZERFAUSTs and grenade launchers on this hill to the right of the road, where they will be in good position to overlook the valley that the road crosses. I will also put some antitank mines across the road, 200 yards down the road, and anti-personnel mines at the foot of the hills we will occupy.”

“A good plan, Angie.” Said Ingrid before pointing at an imposing ridgeline about two kilometers to the northwest of Masan that dominated both the valley and the road from a height of 300 meters.

“The road from Chindong-ni goes around the foot of that big hill, which makes it in my mind an ideal blocking position. I will position three platoons on top of it, plus another platoon on the hill immediately west of it, to prevent the enemy from outflanking it.”

Ingrid then pointed another ridgeline, this one to the southwest of the town and rising to more than 200 meters above the valley floor.

“Major Nolan, with four platoons, will hold that ridgeline and will provide us with crossfire arcs, plus will prevent the enemy from outflanking the town from the South. After dropping off our troops, our helicopters will go back to K-1 to get extra ammunition and defensive stores, as well as water jerrycans and rations. Our light helicopters will also drop at the foot of our positions a number of 250-pound aircraft bombs rigged for command wire detonation, which we will then emplace and camouflage along the road and around our positions.”

Angie smiled at that: the 99th Wing had used such command detonated aircraft bombs to defend its perimeter around Henderson Field in Guadalcanal, and that with great success. Anyone within sixty meters from such a bomb when it exploded was basically dead or seriously wounded, just from the blast overpressure. Ingrid then went on.

“Our helicopters should arrive in about six minutes. I will now go fly to that hilltop to the Northwest, so that I can plan in detail my defensive setup. Good luck, Angie!”

“And good luck to you too, Ingrid.”

As per an old habit of the 99th Wing, Angie avoided saluting Ingrid, being in an active combat zone. With Marguerite Higgins getting back in the helicopter with her, Ingrid soon flew out in the UH-1, to then head towards the ridgeline to the Northwest. Angie then concentrated back on preparing her own positions, hoping that the enemy was going to let her enough time to prepare before showing up in force.

19:40 (Korea Time)

Hill 260, 2600 meters to the northwest of Masan

Marguerite Higgins, drenched with sweat, stopped digging her foxhole for a moment and grabbed her camera to take pictures of the women around her as the Sun was about to set. The Moon, nearly full on this date, had just gone up. Nearly 160 women were working and digging furiously around the reporter, building trenches and firing bunkers for three mutually supporting platoon positions along the ridgeline of their hilltop. A UH-3 heavy lift helicopter had just flown back to Pusan after dropping on top of the hill over six tons of ammunition, water, rations and defensive stores to help build bunkers, including thick wood beams and corrugated iron sheets. To date, the professionalism of the women of the air task force in a job that normally was that of infantrymen was surprising to Marguerite. During past recent visits to a number of American infantry units in Korea, the standard of defensive works she had seen often was limited to the digging of simple individual foxholes, often made without enthusiasm and poorly positioned, with a lack of supporting arcs of fire. Marguerite, who had visited many battlefields in the Pacific and in Europe during the last war, had to say with some bitterness that the standard of the average American infantryman had fallen precipitously in the last three years.

Pointing her camera downwards, Marguerite used her zoom lens to observe the strange ballet of six light helicopters, each of which were dropping in well separated points along the road and the foot of the hill two large elongated objects, along with four women. Intrigued, Marguerite went to see Ingrid Dows, who was presently speaking in one of her three radios sitting on the ground around her. The reporter then waited for Ingrid to have finished her conversation before asking her a question.

“General, could I ask you what your helicopters are doing presently at the base of our hill?”

Ingrid smiled in the growing darkness, answering Marguerite in a friendly tone.

“You can call me Ingrid in private, Marguerite. Actually, our helicopters are dropping off at selected points a number of 250 pound aircraft bombs, without their tail assemblies fitted, along with spools of command wires. This is a trick we used against the Japanese in Guadalcanal in 1942. The women dropped off with the bombs will now fit their nose fuse wells with detonators connected to the command wires, then will half-bury them in a vertical position and camouflage them as best they can. The command wires will be buried along the first hundred yards up the hill, to protect them from being cut by blasts or bullets, and the ends of the wires will be connected to manual triggers. The hills to our South will also be surrounded by such command-detonated bombs, along with the approaches to our positions in Masan. You also saw that other helicopters dropped a few barrels of gasoline on top of our hill, along with boxes of rations, ammunition, spools of barbed wire and other defensive stores?”

“Uh, yes! That actually mystified me a bit: why would you need gasoline here on top of a hill, where you have no vehicles?”

“These drums of gasoline will actually be turned into ‘fougasses’, the French name for a deadly incendiary device. Each drum will be buried into selected points on the slopes of our hill, and this at carefully calculated angles. An explosive charge at the deepest end of the barrel will be remotely detonated by wire on my command. When that charge will explode, it will burst open the bottom end of the barrel and propel it in the air while it spews burning gasoline. Think of those fougasses as giant, one-shot flamethrowers. My women are also going to bury some antitank mines in the road coming from Chindong-ni.”

“My God!” Exclaimed Marguerite, both impressed and shocked. “Where do you get all those devilish ideas, Ingrid?”

“Let’s say that I have a fertile imagination.” Replied Ingrid with a wicked smile. “With these fougasses, the buried bombs, the antitank mines and our extra complement of machine guns, we should be able to inflict very heavy losses to any enemy forces that may attack our position.”

“Well, I sure wouldn’t want to be one of those North Korean soldiers attacking this hill. I think that I better go finish digging my trench.” Said the reporter before letting Ingrid get back to her command duties.

Digging and fortification work went on until late at night around the hilltops defended by what was now calling itself 'Task Force Dows', with strict orders not to use any lights and not to smoke a cigarette unless sitting at the bottom of a trench or bunker. Apart from digging her own slit trench, Marguerite Higgins helped further by carrying crates and boxes around the position. Between her deliveries, she would use her resting periods to interview the women of the unit, gathering material for her next article to be published in the New York Herald Tribune. Finally, exhausted and with her muscles aching all over, she went to sleep at the bottom of her trench at about two O'clock in the morning, this after receiving a last directive that told her not to stand in the open once daylight would come. She closed her eyes as she could hear in the distance artillery and machine gun fire to the Northwest, which signaled the last moments of resistance by the men of the 19th Infantry Regiment surrounded near Chungam-ni and Kagan-ni.

07:50 (Korea Time)

Monday, August 02, 1948 'C'

Hill 260, area of Masan

Marguerite woke up to find a gray, cloud-covered sky that announced more rain soon. Not hearing any battle noise nearby, she got up in her trench, moaning as her back protested the hours spent sleeping in a crouch on the rocky bottom of her shelter. Sticking her head out of the half of her trench not covered with a protective layer of planks and dirt, she saw that nearly all the women on the hill were in their combat positions, with only four women still working with picks and shovels to deepen the communication trench connecting the various bunkers and trenches. A female cook occupying the trench nearest to Marguerite saw her and spoke to her while being careful not to raise her voice.

"Don't speak loudly and don't stand up in the open, Miss Higgins: the enemy started to pass by the foot of our hill around four in the morning."

Marguerite opened wide eyes at those words, fully waking up all in a sudden.

"And you haven't fired at them yet?"

"We will do that at the moment chosen by General Dows, miss. She wants to sucker in as many North Koreans as possible inside the valley below us before calling in an airstrike. The enemy scouts that walked by earlier on have stopped under the cover

of a hut about half a mile from the limits of Masan, probably to observe the town and send observation reports by radio. The main enemy force came in less than one hour ago and is now camping below us, on the northwest side. If you want to know more, you will have to speak with the general.”

“I will certainly do that, miss. Thanks for the info!”

Marguerite, being famished after her hard work last night, first took the time to eat cold a can of beef from her rations before leaving her trench and going to the command bunker, a sturdy affair with a meter-thick overhead cover of wooden beams, sand bags and dirt. Ingrid, who was looking at a map with two of her radio operators, smiled to the reporter when she entered the bunker.

“Good morning, Miss Higgins! Have you slept well?”

“As well as one could while crouched at the bottom of a trench, General. I was told that the enemy is below us in the valley. Do you know how many North Koreans there are around us?”

“I can actually show them to you, miss.” Answered Ingrid, who then got up from the overturned empty crate she used as a chair and walked to the bunker’s firing slit facing northwest. She then pointed the narrow defile between hills that the road from Chindong-ni followed, while passing her binoculars to Marguerite.

“Look carefully at the bushes and trees along the road, Miss Higgins. There are at least 400 enemy soldiers hidden among them, sleeping after making a night approach march. You should also see eight trucks and four SU-76 self-propelled howitzers camouflaged among the trees.”

Marguerite observed with the binoculars for a long moment, worried, but saw that the enemy did not seem to be about to move.

“Why is the enemy not advancing now, General?”

“Because they have learned to fear our airstrikes and now move and fight mostly at night. They also probably fought last night around Kagan-ni and need to rest and eat before continuing their advance. By the way, for your information as a reporter, know that my helicopters managed to extract the survivors from the 19th Regiment that were surrounded in Chungam-ni and Kagan-ni. The operation did not go smoothly, however, and the 19th Regiment lost all its heavy equipment and vehicles in that evacuation.”

Detecting a bitter tone in her voice, Marguerite fixed Ingrid in the eyes.

“Something wrong happened with the 19th Regiment, General, right?”

Ingrid hesitated for a moment before answering. What had happened near Chungam-ni had embittered the women of her helicopter group used in the evacuation operation.

"I will tell you, but only if you promise not to publish it. I suspect anyway that Army censorship would not let you write such a story."

"I promise to keep it to myself, General." Said Marguerite, expecting some inglorious story. She was not disappointed.

"Very well! When our first helicopters landed at night on top of the hills held by the 19th Regiment, the order was to load first the wounded men before those who could still fight. Unfortunately, the soldiers from one company panicked and swarmed one of our helicopters as soon as it touched the ground. Despite the repeated orders of the pilot, those men refused to come off the helicopter, or even to limit their number in order to avoid overloading the machine. That delay made our helicopter an easier target for the enemy, who then managed to disable it with mortars and machine guns. The crew of my helicopter had to abandon and destroy their machine before jumping in the next helicopter. The commander of the infantry battalion involved finally managed to restore some semblance of discipline in his men, which allowed the evacuation to continue. General Walker has learned about that incident and he is not happy at all, I can tell you." Ingrid, her fury returning as she told the tale, then slammed a fist against the sill of the firing slit.

"Dammit, what happened to the American Army I knew? General Patton would have shot on the spot for cowardice the responsible ones."

"It doesn't exist anymore, General." Said gravely Marguerite. "Our politicians reduced it to a mere skeleton through their negligence and lack of foresight. With some luck, a better army will emerge from this war."

"I don't know about that, miss. Too many people, both military officers and politicians, think that the atom bomb is the solution to all our defense problems. What they tend to forget is that atomic bombs can't do much against bands of guerrillas hiding among the local population, unless you are ready to completely destroy a country in the process."

After a moment of silence, the two women look again at the enemy troops camped at the foot of their hill. The arrival a few minutes later of a long column of vehicles coming from the direction of Chindong-ni then changed the mood in the bunker.

Forgetting her bitterness, Ingrid used her binoculars to examine the convoy as it stopped on the side of the road, level with the soldiers sleeping among the trees.

"Shit! The majority of the trucks in this convoy were ours before. It seems that the 19th Regiment left gifts behind them for our North Korean friends. At least 500 fresh troops are now jumping out of the trucks and are also unloading C Rations boxes. Yep, they are bringing the breakfast for those gentlemen. I also see what seems to be a group of officers assembling around a map put on top of a jeep's hood. Damn, this makes for a tempting target indeed!"

"Are you going to detonate your aircraft bombs now, General?" Asked Marguerite, who was taking pictures of the North Koreans through her zoom lens-equipped still camera. Ingrid looked sharply at the enemy strung along the side of the road: if she detonated now the four bombs in proximity to the enemy soldiers, she would probably cause a horrible carnage among them, but she would also risk prematurely unmasking her position on top of Hill 260. On the other hand and with some luck, the enemy would think that the bombs were actually naval gun shells that they didn't hear coming. Ingrid then thought about the old French saying that loosely translated into 'giving one now was better than promising two later'. Taking a decision, Ingrid turned to face her two radio operators.

"Call all our call signs of our task force in and around Masan and tell them that I will remotely detonate some of my roadside bombs but that no one is to shoot then without my express order. Get confirmation of receipt and advise me once everybody will have answered you."

While her radio operators went at it, Ingrid briefly went out of her bunker to go see the nearest machine gun crew, patting the shoulder of the section commander.

I will detonate some of our bombs down by the road, but nobody is to shoot then. Pass the word around the position but be careful not to show yourself to the enemy."

"Understood, General!"

Ingrid then returned inside the bunker and started connecting one by one to a plunger box the command wires of the four bombs she had selected. About three minutes later, satisfied that all her units had received her directives, she smiled to Marguerite Higgins.

"You may now take a last picture of the décor down the hill before I change it, miss."

"I will instead take a picture of you as you detonate those bombs, General. Then I will take pictures of the results."

"As you wish! Cover your ears, ladies!"

Marguerite took a snapshot as Ingrid pushed down the plunger. The ear-splitting simultaneous detonations of the four 250 pound bombs terrified the reporter, even though she had been warned in advance. The shock wave from the explosions, while much weakened by the time it swept by the top of the hill, was enough to fill the bunker with dust and dirt, making its occupants cough. Marguerite could not see outside at first, the dust clouds hiding everything. After a couple of minutes, the dust and smoke was finally pushed away by the wind, allowing her to see the scene down in the ravine.

"My God! This is a true massacre!" Exclaimed the reporter before starting taking pictures of the overturned and burning enemy trucks and of the hundreds of now immobile corpses lying around the road. Ingrid had a more critical look of the results.

"We have managed to hit about half of the enemy force. The rest was too far down the road to be truly touched by our bombs. Let's see now what the survivors will do."

As she was observing the reactions of the North Koreans, who were mostly trying to help their wounded comrades after seeing that nobody was shooting at them, a weak engine noise in the sky made Ingrid and Marguerite come out of their bunker. They then saw a small artillery observation plane approaching slowly from the Northeast at an altitude of 2,000 meters.

"He probably was attracted by the explosion of our bombs while patrolling over our frontlines to the North." Said Ingrid while observing the single engine artillery spotting plane. "With some luck, the North Koreans will think that it directed Navy gunfire on them."

The women around the hilltop watched anxiously as the spotter plane made a wide turn to overfly from a safe altitude the remains of the convoy. On her part, Ingrid ran back inside her command bunker to contact the pilot by radio. She finally got back a reply after four calls.

"This is Howl Five! Go ahead, Lady Hawk!"

"Howl Five, you are presently overflying my position on top of Hill 260. We just command detonated bombs along the road to catch an enemy convoy, but the North Koreans still don't know that we are near them. Do as if you just directed heavy naval gunfire on the convoy but do not unmask our positions. If you could direct actual artillery fire on the surviving North Koreans, it would be perfect, over."

There was amusement in the pilot's voice as he answered her.

"Understood, Lady Hawk. I will pass a fire mission to my fire support coordination center. You should get some eight inch howitzer shells down your hill in less than five minutes, over."

"Thank you, Howl Five. That would be perfect. Please advise as well your FSCC of our presence, just in case. Out!"

Ingrid then smiled to Marguerite Higgins.

"I wouldn't want to get American shells on my head."

"Uh, me neither, General."

About four minutes later, a shell whizzed over their heads and hit the ground 200 meters behind the surviving enemy trucks, followed a minute later by another shell that exploded between two trucks. The surviving enemy soldiers then hurriedly loaded up in their remaining trucks, probably to get out of the danger zone. However, the enemy surprised Ingrid by rushing forward on the road leading to Masan, instead of withdrawing.

"Hell, that enemy commander is thinking quite well: while he wants to vacate the zone beaten by our artillery, he chose to at the same time rush to Masan with the hope of taking the town and take shelter there."

Marguerite Higgins nodded her head at Ingrid's remark as she took more pictures.

"I must say that some of our own unit commanders have proved to be more stupid than the North Koreans, General. In fact, I sometimes wonder how some of our officers managed to get to their present ranks."

"Don't get me going on that, Marguerite." Replied Ingrid while rolling her eyes. She suddenly realized that the enemy trucks were going to roll past her remaining bombs buried alongside the road. Hurrying to her plunger detonator box, she removed the wires of the spent bombs and then connected as quickly as possible the wires for her remaining four bombs. Looking out and down through the south side slit of her bunker, she made a ferocious smile as she pressed the plunger.

"More naval gunfire for those gentlemen, coming up!"

The bunker was shaken for a second time by the shock waves of the explosions and filled again with dust and smoke. A call from the spotter plane came barely a few seconds later.

"Lady Hawk, this is Howl Five. Did you just detonate a few big pills?"

"I sure did, Howl Five! I still had four 250 pound bombs left buried alongside the road. Feel free to continue treating the remaining enemy soldiers with more shells, over."

"Howl Five, understood!"

Seven trucks crowded with North Korean soldiers, all that was left of the enemy force, rushed on the road at top speed towards Masan. Before the American artillery fire could be shifted by the spotter plane pilot, the leading truck hit one of the antitank mines buried in the road. The powerful explosion literally made the truck jump into the air and overturn before crashing back on the ground, killing all its occupants. A second truck soon blew up on a mine, with a similar result. Then, more howitzer shells started falling around the surviving trucks, with one vehicle disintegrating under the direct impact of a 100 kilo shell. Now desperate, the enemy survivors veered off the road and sped cross country towards Masan, trying to escape the artillery fire. That suited Ingrid just fine, as that preserved some of the antitank mines dug a bit further along the road. She then sent another radio call to her units.

"To all the Fifinella call signs, do not open fire yet. Matron Six, this is Lady Hawk, over!"

Angie Dickinson answered her nearly at once.

"Matron Six, listening!"

"Matron Six, I will leave you the honor of wiping out what remains of the enemy force once it gets within range of your machine guns, over."

"We will give them a warm reception, Lady Hawk. Matron Six, out!"

Ingrid then called for a stop to the American artillery fire before it came too close to her military police unit in Masan. Angie Dickinson waited for the first truck to be less than 300 meters from the entrance of the town and to be 150 meters short of the minefield she had dug in and alongside the road before opening fire. Eleven Browning M2 heavy machine guns and twelve MG42 medium machine guns firing from three different directions turned the remaining four trucks full of troops into sieves within seconds and making minced meat of their occupants. The few North Koreans not killed outright then burned alive when the fuel tanks of the trucks, shot full of holes, caught fire, sending balls of fire up in the air. Silence then fell back on the valley. Ingrid surveyed the scenes of carnage around her hilltop, her expression grim. Yes, this was war and those men were her enemies, but she didn't take pleasure at killing. After all, most of these

dead soldiers were previously simple peasants and farmers often conscripted against their will. She would have felt much better at killing the politicians responsible for starting this war.

"Alright, girls! Let's use this break to continue improving our positions and deepen our trenches. We will also take the time to finally install our claymore mines."

"Claymore mines, General?" Asked Marguerite Higgins, curious.

"Yes! They were not supposed to exist for another fifteen years or so but Nancy told me about them and I had a sizeable number of them built, using improvised means. In this case, our claymore mines are made out of empty ammunition steel boxes with plastic explosives in the bottom covered with a thick collection of nails, bolts and steel nuts that are then sealed in place under waxed paper. The boxes are then partly buried at a proper angle in front of our trenches and bunkers, with their open tops directed towards the enemy. On being detonated via command wire, the mines project a shotgun-like pattern of steel projectiles in the enemy's face. These claymore mines make great backup weapons when the enemy is able to rush in through our fire."

Marguerite couldn't help look at Ingrid with wide eyes.

"My God, General, the Devil itself would be proud of you."

Ingrid made an apologetic smile at those words.

"Well, hopefully I will not end up on his guest list, Marguerite, although some of my sexual sins could land me on that list, if you listen to some of my detractors."

The first signs of a return in force of the enemy was when movement was detected at a distance along the road from Chindong-ni at around five in the afternoon. By that time, Ingrid had learned by radio that the remains of the 19th Regiment had been reorganized in a new blocking position on the northern road to Masan, in the company of four M20 armored cars from Angie Dickinson's unit. That only partly reassured her about her northern flank and rear being secured, as she had no confidence left in the 19th Regiment after the incident involving her helicopter lost in Kagan-ni. Ingrid in turn sent by radio an order to her task force headquarters in K-1, telling Vance Hemmingsworth to send his heavy construction and airfield maintenance company and a large team of women to prepare in advance a second line of fortified positions, to defend K-1 in case her positions in Masan had to be evacuated. A bit more at ease now, Ingrid then concentrated her attention back on the approaching enemy column coming down the road. She was able to see a few T-34/85 tanks, along with self-propelled guns and

trucks, advancing cautiously on the road while enemy infantry on foot covered their flanks. Unfortunately for her, the weather had turned quite rotten and low dark clouds were now pouring rain, turning the ground into mud and making nearly impossible any close air support mission by cutting down drastically the visibility. The enemy used the poor visibility to the maximum, accelerating its advance. Ingrid was able to see just as the Sun was about to disappear on the horizon long lines of enemy infantrymen slipping around her hill from the North and West, in effect surrounding her position. Ingrid could only tighten her jaws then and passed discreetly the word to her women to be on their guard against night infiltrations. The enemy then forced her hand when about a hundred soldiers carrying a few light mortars started climbing laboriously the north slope of her hill, slipping in the mud created by the heavy rain. Running out of her command bunker, Ingrid went from bunker to bunker, personally giving directives to her women on when to fire. She then returned to her bunker and gave more directives by radio.

She gave the order for one of her platoons dug in on an adjacent hilltop to her northeast, Hill 310, to open fire with its machine guns when the enemy infantrymen were still a good hundred meters short of her hilltop. Firing first two parachute flares up into the dark sky to illuminate the enemy soldiers, that platoon then opened fire with its eight MG42 medium machine guns and two 50mm Japanese grenade launchers, while the women on Ingrid's hilltop held their fire and stayed out of sight. Mowed down by the merciless fire of the MG42s, each able to fire up to 1200 rounds per minute, the surprised enemy infantrymen quickly ran back down the slope, pursued by explosions from 50mm fragmentation grenades and by hails of 7.92mm bullets. The rest of the enemy force, taken utterly by surprise by the unexpected presence of that American advanced position, took some time to recover its wits and react properly. However, the enemy commander made the mistake of thinking that Hill 260 itself was unoccupied and sent a major part of his force in a direct assault on the nearby Hill 310, while ordering two companies of infantrymen to climb the western slopes of Hill 260, out of the line of sight of the American machine guns on Hill 310. The assault force sent against Hill 310 however had first to advance along a side ravine that had been designated by Ingrid as a target zone for her supporting artillery battery. Illuminated by more parachute flares from Hill 310, the enemy infantry was soon caught under a fierce barrage of 105mm shells directed via radio by Ingrid. Leaving dozens of dead and wounded comrades behind in the ravine, the surviving enemy infantrymen bravely pushed on their assault up

the western slope of Hill 310, despite the withering machine gun fire decimating their ranks. Marguerite Higgins, using high sensitivity films and long exposures, took numerous photos of that battle from one of the machine gun bunkers positioned along the north side of her hilltop. The women defending Hill 310 then command detonated two of the 'fougasses' incendiary devices buried to cover their western slope. Like the fiery breath from giant dragons, the pierced barrels full of gasoline roared over the heads of the assaulting soldiers, spewing on their way a rain of burning fuel before crashing down in the midst of the enemy ranks. That infernal scene, apart from impressing the hell out of Marguerite Higgins and the other American women, created utter panic among the surviving enemy infantrymen, who then withdrew in disorder, pursued by machine gun fire. The enemy commander did his best to cover their retreat by using his mortars and self-propelled howitzers, but did not have his T-34 tanks open fire. Ingrid understood quickly why: the gun elevation of the tanks was insufficient for them to be able to aim at nearby hilltops.

Storing that precious information in a corner of her mind, Ingrid then concentrated on the enemy soldiers climbing her own hill. The closest enemy infantrymen were still a good 150 meters down the slope, but she could hear some of them, probably officers, shouting orders. Her blood suddenly froze on hearing the words spoken down the slope, making her swear loudly.

"SHIT! They are Chinese, not North Koreans!"

Her radio operators and machine gunners inside her command bunker stared at her with shock and surprise. Staff Sergeant Mary Takahashi, a veteran of Guadalcanal and Papua New Guinea, swallowed hard.

"Chinese, General? But, that could mean a whole new war."

"It sure does, Sergeant! Get me Army headquarters on the radio, pronto! I want to speak directly to General Walker."

"Uh, yes, General!"

As Takahashi got busy with her radio, Ingrid pointed at her second radio operator.

"Corporal Mansfield, call our task force headquarters in K-1 and pass the word that we are facing Chinese troops in large numbers. I am not confident at all that our Army headquarters will believe me or will pass on the information."

"Yes, General!"

Ingrid then had to wait a good minute before Mary Takahashi passed her the handset of her backpack radio.

“General Walker on the line, General.”

“Thank you, Sergeant!” Said Ingrid before grabbing the handset and speaking into it.

“Six, this is Lady Hawk, over!”

“Go ahead, Lady Hawk!” Replied the voice of Lieutenant General Walton Walker, worry evident in his voice.

“Six, I am presently under attack by a large force of enemy infantry supported by tanks and self-propelled howitzers. That force is however Chinese, not North Korean: I can hear their officers scream orders in Mandarin Chinese, over.”

“WHAT? Are you sure, Lady Hawk?”

“Six, I am positive: I am under attack by a large Chinese mechanized force. If anybody above you doubts my word, then tell him that I can speak fluently Mandarin Chinese, along with Japanese and a few more Oriental languages. This could be a game changer, Six.”

“No shit, Lady Hawk! Do you think that you could capture some prisoners and documents to prove this, over?”

Ingrid lowered the radio handset for a short moment, struck by the irony of that demand. All the American politicians and generals had fiercely opposed in the past sending women to combat zones, then had strictly limited the types of specialties and postings they could take. Now, she was asked to go get prisoners while commanding a female unit under direct ground attack, and this after being tasked to plug a hole in the frontlines caused by the debacle of a male infantry unit. Her tone was cautious when she answered Walker.

“Six, I will do my best on that, but I can’t promise results. I must now leave the air, as the enemy infantry is now closing in on my bunker. Lady Hawk out!”

Shaking her head, Ingrid went to the western side firing slit and looked down at the approaching enemy soldiers, now only a hundred meters down from her. In the dim light from distant parachute flares, she could see over 300 soldiers climbing the muddy slope, often swearing to themselves about the arduous climb. She could hear only Chinese being spoken by them. She then spotted one of the soldiers, who carried what looked like a unit flag on a pole. He was following close behind a group of four men, one of which carried a bugle and another a radio backpack. That probably made these men a

command group. Taking a decision, she went to the nearest machine gunner and patted her shoulder.

“Excuse me, Corporal, but I will borrow your weapon for a second.”

The corporal, while surprised, let her at once step behind the MG42. Checking first that the safety was off, Ingrid looked at the waiting gunner.

“Go pass the words to all our women facing our western slope: be ready to open fire on the climbing enemy infantry as soon as I start firing.”

The woman simply nodded before leaving the bunker at a run. Ingrid waited for her to be back in the bunker a couple of minutes later, then looked at the two other machine gun crews in the command post.

“Aim close to the ground and sweep the slope thoroughly, girls.”

Shouldering the butt of the MG42, Ingrid carefully aimed her machine gun at the command group and slowly squeezed the trigger. Her first burst was strictly aimed at that group of five men and the twenty or so bullets she fired on that first burst downed all five of them. Then, as machine guns and carbines started spitting fire all along the western edge of the hilltop, she fired three more bursts aimed at the soldiers closest to the now downed command group, not wanting any Chinese to try recuperate their unit flag. Once she was done, she gave back the MG42 to her gunner and went to the radio tuned to the frequency of their artillery support battery, grabbing the handset and speaking in an urgent tone.

“Golf One Four, this is Fifinella Six, urgent fire mission, over!”

“Go ahead, Fifinella Six!”

“Golf One Four, I need you to fire a mixed high explosive fragmentation and smoke mission in a line pattern between the two following coordinates...”

She then read out two coordinates on her map that corresponded roughly to the portion of road on the western side of her hill. After getting confirmation of the grids from the artillery officer, Ingrid pointed at Mary Takahashi.

“Sergeant, you’re with me!”

Mary followed her without discussion out of the bunker, accustomed to the often surprising moves of her commander. Running at a crouch, they soon flopped down on their belly besides one of the firing trenches facing west. Ingrid looked at one of the two women in that trench.

“I am going down the slope as soon as the enemy starts retreating. Be careful about who you shoot at then. Sergeant Takahashi, you order a hold fire when I will

climb down: I am going to try to get a prisoner or at least some interesting papers from those dead Chinese.”

The two female clerks occupying the trench nodded in understanding, then resumed firing at the enemy with their carbines. While there was plenty of enemy return fire, mostly from submachine guns, it was on the whole very inaccurate and wild. The American machine gunners easily won the firefight, helped by the precarious position of the Chinese soldiers on the muddy slope, and mowed down nearly half the assault force before the survivors had enough and ran or tumbled back down the slope. Ingrid then patted Mary Takahashi's shoulder as the first American artillery shells started bursting down along the road.

“Order the hold fire now, Sergeant!”

Ingrid slipped over the edge of the hilltop on her belly, then started climbing down towards where the bodies of the Chinese command group lay, her carbine at the ready. Her acute night vision helped her find those bodies within minutes. Grabbing first the flag lying in the mud, she saw Chinese markings and symbols on it. Grinning with satisfaction, she took it and approached each of the five bodies in turn, searching them for papers or identity booklets. She did find military identity booklets written in Chinese on each of the men, along with a marked map and some kind of document on the officer of the group, a colonel. Staying crouched, she pocketed those and grabbed again the flag pole before starting to make her way back up. She covered less than ten meters before a moan of pain from nearby made her stop, her carbine pointed and with her heart beating hard. When the moaning continued, she cautiously approached a Chinese soldier lying face up on the ground. The man had a nasty gash on the top of the head, probably caused by a grazing bullet, and his face was covered with blood. Thinking quickly, Ingrid took off her steel helmet before bending over him and speaking softly to him in Chinese while taking a field dressing bandage out of a belt pouch.

“Do not worry, Comrade: I am going to bandage your wound.”

“Thank...you.” Said weakly in Mandarin the young Chinese, who could not see because of the blood in his eyes. Ingrid gently applied her bandage on the head wound, but also covered on purpose the eyes of the Chinese in the process of wrapping the gauze around his head to fix the bandage in place. All the while, she spoke to him softly in Mandarin to reassure and calm the soldier.

“I am Ziyi. What is your name, Comrade.”

"Cheng... Did we take the hill?"

"Yes, we did, Comrade Cheng. However, the price was sadly very stiff. Once we will be up to our new positions, I will be able to treat you further. Can you walk?"

"I...I'm not sure, Comrade Ziyi."

"Then, me and other comrades will drag you up. Just protect the back of your head with your hands while we drag you. First, I'm going to take some weight off you." Ingrid quickly undid the web gear of the soldier and threw away his grenades, then solidly grabbed the Chinese by his collar and started climbing, dragging him behind her while holding to the captured flag. A normal woman would have exhausted herself at such a task, but she was a Chosen, with a physical strength unimaginable by common standards. Thankfully, none of her women shot at her, while the artillery barrage and thickening smoke screen down by the road prevented the Chinese from spotting her and her prisoner. After ten minutes of climbing, she arrived at the ledge of the hilltop with her prisoner and flag, barely breathing harder, to be confronted at once by two very nervous women pointing carbines at her.

"WHO GOES THERE?"

"Calm down, girls: it's just me and a prisoner."

The women sighed in relief and lowered their carbines.

"Gee, General, don't you know that you're supposed to be over ranked for such jobs?"

"I never ask of others things that I can't do myself. Come and help me escort this wounded prisoner to our command bunker."

"Right away, General."

The Chinese soldier, suddenly alarmed at hearing her speak in English, tried to break loose from her, but was unable to escape her grip. Still unable to see and with the two American women now helping Ingrid hold his arms, the weakened Chinese soon gave up and went along his captors. He however asked a question to Ingrid in Mandarin as she guided him towards her command bunker.

"You speak both Mandarin and English. Who are you?"

Ingrid, bent on playing the card of gentleness and care in order to extract as much info out the man as she could, answered in a friendly tone.

"I am a woman who admires the Chinese people and its culture. I studied its history and languages in depth. Do not worry, Cheng: you will be well treated and fed. Are you hungry, or thirsty?"

"I am mostly hungry and weak. How should I call you? I suppose that your name is not really Ziyi?"

"No, it is not, Cheng. Just call me or any other American women around you 'miss'. My unit is exclusively composed of women, but don't think that it will make it easy for you to escape: my women fought against the Japanese in the last war."

"A unit made of women? But, even in the People's Liberation Army we don't have all-female units. How could the decadent American Army be progressive enough to have female units?"

"Maybe because we are decadent, Cheng." Replied Ingrid, starting to enjoy the exchange.

She finally got to the entrance of her command bunker, but left her prisoner sitting alone at the bottom of a nearby trench, guarded by two women and having been handed an opened can of food and a spoon. Mary Takahashi sighed with relief on seeing Ingrid walk in the bunker.

"Thank God you're safe, General! Did you get a prisoner?"

"I did! What is the enemy doing now?"

"Regrouping behind the zone beaten by our artillery, General. They lost at least half of their men in those two attacks."

"Then, have our supporting artillery stop their barrage for the moment but tell them to be able to resume firing on the same coordinates at a moment's notice."

"Got it, General!"

As Takahashi got busy on her radio, Ingrid sat down on an empty ammunition crate and took out the identity booklets and the document and map she had found on the dead Chinese to study them. The document proved at once of being of certain interest: it was a general order signed by a Chinese field marshal and detailing the procedures to be followed with captured American soldiers. Reading it quickly angered Ingrid: it called for prisoners of war that were of no intelligence interest to be 'disposed of' the moment they became an encumbrance. She definitely had something now to pass on to General Walker and his staff. As for the map, it also proved of great interest, with a number of arrows marked with grease pencils and accompanied by unit designations in Chinese.

"Hmm, so, the 42nd Chinese Field Army is now at our doorstep with three divisions, with one reinforced division gunning for Masan. General Walker will be thrilled to learn this."

She paused for a moment, not thrilled at all herself. She could inflict some significant losses on the new enemy, as she had just done, but there was no way that her motley collection of clerks, cooks and aircraft specialists, however well-led, could stop cold such a large enemy force. A bit disheartened, she started writing a short but concise message to be encoded and sent by radio to General Walker's headquarters. Later, she would have to get a helicopter to land at night on her hilltop in order to pick up her prisoner and the precious Chinese map and documents.

09:44 (Korea Time)

Tuesday, August 03, 1948 'C'

Masan train station, South Korea

Captain James Harvey was not happy at all as his men sweated in the humid heat of Masan's Summer to unload his eleven SHERMAN medium tanks from the flatcars that had brought them from Pusan. He had arrived in Masan in one of the four M8 armored reconnaissance cars assigned to his 'B' Company, 8072nd Tank Battalion, a bit before the train carrying his tanks. He had then found that the men of the rail movement unit that were supposed to take care of the Masan train station were nowhere to be found, finding the station empty of personnel save for a handful of Korean policemen guarding abandoned rail cars full of American military supplies. Of course, none of the men of his unit newly arrived from Okinawa spoke Korean, while the Korean policemen spoke no English. Checking his map for a moment, he then called to his side his two junior officers, Lieutenants Barnard and Norrell.

"Well, gentlemen, here we are! As soon as all our tanks will be off the flatcars, we will divide the company as discussed before, with one platoon going to reinforce the southwest end of the town and the rest, under my command, going to reinforce the positions of the 19th Regiment astride the road coming from the North. Our support echelon will establish itself here, near the rail station, when it will arrive from Pusan later today. We will have to be vigilant from now on: the 24th Infantry Division, which holds this area, believes that Masan is full of Communist sympathizers. The women of Task Force Dows also supposedly repulsed a number of enemy attacks yesterday...if we can believe them."

Lieutenant Herman Norrell, who was tasked with going to the southwest end of the town with his four tanks, smiled at those words.

"At least it should be nice to be surrounded by the women of that Task Force Dows, Captain. Uh, do I really have to take orders from these women, Captain?" Harvey nodded his head, serious.

"The orders from 8th Army headquarters are very clear, Lieutenant: your tank platoon is to be under tactical control of Task Force Dows, which means that Brigadier General Dows will decide how she will use your tanks. Logistical and administrative control will however be the purview of our battalion, via me."

"Understood, Captain!"

"Then, return to your men and let's speed up the unloading."

About twenty minutes later, Lieutenant Norrell left the train station with his four tanks, splitting up from the eight tanks and four armored cars led by Captain Harvey. During his crossing of Masan, Norrell was struck by the tense calm around the town and its port. He could see that the town was still inhabited, but hardly any Korean dared venture outside. Instead of feeling like a liberator or savior, he had the distinct impression of rolling inside enemy territory. His total lack of combat experience only reinforced his unease. His loader, Corporal Ned Chadwick stuck his head and torso out by his roof hatch and wiped sweat from his forehead.

"Damn, this country is worst than a steam bath! We are dying inside the turret, Lieutenant."

"I know! By those gray clouds, it seems that we will have some rain soon."

"Super!" Said Chadwick in a disgusted tone. Fifteen minutes later, after looking constantly at his map and wondering he if was getting lost, Norrell finally saw with relief the southwest limits of the town, with the start of the road leading to Chindong-ni. What he saw at the start of the road also made him feel both shock and fear.

"T-34 TANKS DEAD AHEAD!"

The gunner of the SHERMAN tank hurried to aim his 76.2mm gun at the enemy tank, only to sigh with relief after a good look through his telescopic sight.

"Lieutenant, those tanks were destroyed a while ago."

Looking more carefully, Norrell, embarrassed, had to agree with his gunner.

"Uh, right! At ease, guys."

Only then did Norrell see the tall woman in American combat uniform approaching calmly his tank after coming out of her hiding place behind the corner of a nearby house.

She had a carbine slung from one shoulder and held in her right hand a sort of steel tube ending in a large cone.

"You are from the 8072nd Tank Battalion?" Asked the tall woman, shouting over the noise of the tank engines.

"Correct! Who is asking?"

"Major Angie Dickinson, Commander of the 9927th Military Police Company of Task Force Dows. You now belong to me until further orders. You should be more careful next time that you go through the town: Communist guerrillas could have easily ambushed you."

Looking around him, Norrell saw a bit late five M20 armored cars hidden and camouflaged behind walls or houses, with women manning their heavy machine guns. There were also four female MPs crouching behind stone wall and holding tubes similar to the one held by Dickinson. Coming out of his turret and jumping down on the ground, Norrell went to the tall female major and was about to salute her when she spat out a warning.

"Don't salute in the frontlines, Lieutenant, unless you want to designate targets to enemy snipers."

"Uh, understood, Major. First Lieutenant Herman Norrell, 'A' Company of the 8072nd Tank Battalion. Are there really Communist guerrillas in town?"

Angie Dickinson then pointed at a low stone wall about fifty meters away. The bodies of fifteen Korean civilian men lay in front of the wall.

"There are some that used the last enemy attack to try to attack us in the back. They however were not ready for my hidden security sentries. Since martial law was declared at the start of this war, those guerrillas were executed as irregular combatants." A shiver went through Norrell's back at the calm tone used by the MP officer as she mentioned the executions. His eyes then went wide on seeing that no less than nine destroyed T-34/85 tanks lay dispersed at the entrance of the town or along the road coming from Chindong-ni.

"Did your women destroy those nine tanks, Major?"

"Of course! Who else, the Marx Brothers?"

As Norrell digested those words, a medium helicopter approached from the southwest while losing altitude. It finally landed in a nearby empty field as a number of women assembled on one side of the field with large thermos containers and with two elongated shapes rolled inside bed sheets. A crewmember came out of the rear cargo ramp of the

helicopter and made a sign to the waiting women, who then approached with the containers and two wrapped shapes. Crates, jerrycans and containers were unloaded from the helicopter, then the thermos containers and wrapped shapes were loaded aboard, joining more containers and one wrapped shape inside. The women staying on the ground saluted the helicopter as it took off, imitated by Angie Dickinson and confusing Norrell.

“Uh, what’s going on, Major? Why are you saluting that helicopter?”

The tall MP looked gravely at him while answering.

“We are saluting our dead leaving the battlefield, Lieutenant. One of our helicopters makes daily runs to bring ammunition, water and hot food. In exchange, it takes back our empty thermos containers as well as our dead. I lost three women two days ago, plus two more killed and four wounded yesterday. We also lost one woman killed and three wounded yesterday on Hill 260, which the enemy attacked three times already, without success.”

Herman Norrell suddenly felt humble as he watched the helicopter fly away to the east.

13:20 (Korea Time)

Positions of the 19th Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division

Hill 295, five kilometers to the northwest of Masan

The UH-2 PELICAN medium helicopter landed on a small plateau on the eastern flank of Hill 295, some forty meters below the summit. Two senior officers and an infantry squad were present to greet the eight passengers that came out of the helicopter, which then shut down its engines. Brigadier General Pearson, the deputy commander of the 24th Infantry Division, returned the salutes of Colonel Moore, the commander of the 19th Infantry Regiment, which belonged to his division, and of Lieutenant Colonel Rhea, the commander of the 1st Battalion, 19th Regiment.

“At ease, gentlemen! I am sorry that you could not be warned beforehand, but the visit of the senatorial inquiry commission that I am escorting around was kept secret, so that the enemy could not learn about it. May I present you first Senator Eugene Millikin, chairman of this commission and also chairman of the Conference of Republican Senators. The other members of the commission that are with me are Senator Henry Cabot Lodge Junior, Senator Arthur Vandenberg, Senator Harry Byrd Senior, Senator James McGrath, Senator Robert Taft and Senator Edward Martin.”

Colonel Moore felt ill at ease as he shook hands with the seven senators: the group represented a considerable amount of political power. Only a major reason would justify exposing such a group to the dangers of the frontlines in Korea.

“Can I ask to what I owe your visit, Senator Millikin?”

“You can, Colonel.” Replied on a sober tone the politician, a man in his fifties with a nearly bald head. “As you may know, the House of Representatives has voted to censure President Truman and the Senate now has to judge the President on accusations of criminal negligence towards the American armed forces, as well as for abuse of power, for having dragged the country in this war without the approval of the Congress. The Senate has however decided that, in order to properly judge President Truman, a commission of inquiry had to go to Korea, to ascertain there the true state of our armed forces. The Senate is not satisfied with the answers it is getting up to date from the Pentagon and suspect that our top generals are giving a wildly optimistic picture of the real situation here. I must tell you right away that my commission of inquiry has received full powers from the Senate to investigate as it sees fit all aspects of our armed forces and of the situation in Korea. Any attempt to hide or distort the information given to my commission will attract charges of outrage to and obstruction of the Congress. We wish to be able to interview any military personnel of our choice in complete intimacy, in order to prevent any attempt at intimidation by senior officers who may want to hide instances of incompetence or negligence. If we learn later that a witness was disciplined for having spoken with us, then those commanders responsible will have to answer to the Congress. The United States Senate wants the truth in this affair, and nothing less. In order to help my commission analyze the military information it will receive, I have joined to my commission Senator Henry Cabot Lodge Junior and Senator Edward Martin, both of whom served with distinction as senior officers during the last war.”

Moore nodded his head at those words, as he already knew Martin, who had commanded the 28th Infantry Division in Europe as a major general.

“Very well, Senator! I can guarantee my full cooperation and that of my officers and men. However, you must realize that my regiment has fought a number of hard battles during the last few weeks and that our losses have been heavy. My regiment is presently at half strength and all our heavy equipment was lost during the last withdrawal.”

“This question of successive withdrawals is actually one of the aspects of this war that is strongly interesting my commission, Colonel.” Replied Millikin on a tone that

signaled that he would not let anyone serve him lies and excuses on that subject.

“Could we first inspect your positions?”

“Certainly, Senator! Follow me!”

Moore spent a good hour guiding the senators around the positions of his 1st Battalion, letting them question those they wanted to speak with and thus having to often walk away in order not to overhear the conversations. The senators also questioned him in detail on many aspects of the war and of the recent battles, and that away from Brigadier General Pearson. Moore used that chance to describe in a candid manner the glaring deficiencies in equipment, personnel and training that his regiment had suffered from prior to joining combat in Korea, deficiencies that were due in his mind to the severe budget cuts imposed on the Army by the government. His testimony seemed to please a number of the senators but Moore did not miss the unhappy expressions that Lodge and Martin made on a number of occasions while inspecting the positions and the troops of his regiment. The group of senators finally left the regiment's positions after a last exchange of handshakes. However, at the surprise and annoyance of Brigadier General Pearson, Millikin assembled his senators for a discreet discussion away from the helicopter...and Pearson.

“So, Ed, what do you think of this unit?” Asked Millikin to Martin, who made a face.

“To be truthful, this regiment did not impress me one second. Even while taking account of their recent defeats and withdrawals, the standard of dress is deplorable and many of those soldiers have lost, or should I say threw away, nearly all their personal field kit, including their entrenching tool and their steel helmet. Morale is low and more than a few soldiers seem to be ready to flee at the first shot. The infantry training standards also seem to be very low in this unit.”

“And you, Henry?” Said Millikin, looking at Henry Cabot Lodge, who had been decorated for bravery during the last war, where he had served as commander of a tank battalion.

“I must agree with Ed on this. The tactical positioning and the choice of the arcs of fire of the trenches of this regiment denote either a lack of tactical judgment on the part of the officers of this unit, or general neglect about defensive works. The trenches were too shallow and none had overhead protection of any kind. On top of that, no mines were laid to protect the approaches to the position. Most of the weapons were

dirty and poorly maintained and the personal discipline of the soldiers was poor. I must say as well that, from what I have heard to date, many of the so-called withdrawals of this regiment could be more realistically called mass bug outs. To be honest with this regiment, this seems to be a common problem among our other units in Korea, particularly in the 24th Infantry Regiment. This demonstrates in my view a catastrophic drop in our military training standards, in unit discipline and in morale among our combat units during the last few years.”

Millikin shook his head, both discouraged and furious. He had served in France during the Great War in 1917 and, if a general of that time would see what he had seen to date, would probably have dragged the responsible ones in front of a court martial.

“Very well! It is now a bit past four in the afternoon. We thus have a good three hours of sunlight left. Where should we go after this?”

Henry Cabot Lodge Junior unfolded his map indicating the positions of the American units holding the Pusan Pocket, given to him by General Walker, and studied it for a moment, with Edward Martin looking over his shoulder.

“We should go visit that Task Force Dows to the South: it is defending the port of Masan and the main coastal road, thus is on ground vital to the 8th Army.”

“Sounds good to me, Henry.” Said Millikin. “Let’s go fly to Masan.”

The group of seven senators walked back to the helicopter’s rear ramp, where they met with Brigadier General Pearson and with the pilot, a young and pretty captain named Patricia Morgan. To the surprise of the politicians, Pearson stiffened and became nervous after hearing where Millikin wanted to go.

“But, Senator, couldn’t we visit instead the 23rd Regiment to the North?”

Millikin gave him a dubious look, his suspicions up at once.

“And why wouldn’t you want us to visit the Task Force Dows, General?”

As Pearson hesitated to answer, the female pilot standing a bit behind him and to one side spoke up in her clear voice.

“Sir, Task Force Dows is actually an ad hoc unit formed exclusively of female Air Force specialists and ground personnel, commanded by Brigadier General Ingrid Dows. It has been defending ground positions in front of Masan for two days and has repelled up to now three major enemy assaults.”

“WHAT?” Shouted Edward Martin, incensed. “WE HAVE WOMEN DEFENDING GROUND FRONTLINE POSITIONS? WHY?”

Patricia Morgan swallowed hard, knowing that this was liable to create a political storm but she was also unwilling to play Pearson's hiding game. She thus answered as all the senators stared at her with disturbed expressions.

"Because General Walker was completely out of reserves following the latest bug out by the 24th Regiment of the 25th Infantry Division, which forced him to shift the 27th Regiment north to plug that hole. Brigadier General Dows then accepted to form a ground defense unit with parts of her administrative and logistical personnel. General Dows is presently on top of a hill near Masan that is under enemy siege."

"And her unit is composed strictly of women, Captain?" Asked Millikin, forcing himself to stay calm.

"Yes, sir! But don't worry too much: General Dows has control of the situation around Masan."

Millikin exchanged a dejected look with his six colleagues.

"My God! Is the situation this bad, to be forced to use female aviators as infantrymen?"

"This is in fact a flagrant violation of the congressional interdiction about using women as ground combat troops, Eugene." Pointed out Arthur Vandenberg, making Millikin nod.

"It indeed is, Arthur. However, this only reinforces my wish to visit that unit. Captain Morgan, you will fly us to Masan. I want to meet Brigadier General Dows in order to have a serious chat with her."

"Right away, sir!" Replied the pilot before turning around and running inside to her cockpit. Millikin then gave a dark look at Pearson, who was now quite nervous.

"I hope for your sake that you were not trying to hide something by steering us clear of that Task Force Dows, General. Let's get in and fly out!"

The UH-2 medium helicopter soon took off from the hill and started flying at low altitude towards the South. Patricia Morgan spoke to Senator Edward Martin, who was standing behind her seat, as she piloted her machine.

"Once I will have dropped your group on top of Hill 260, sir, I will have to take off at once and go wait in Masan. If I stay on the hill while waiting for you there, I will certainly attract enemy fire. Our resupply helicopter flights have had to frequently dodge machine gun or even mortar fire as they landed supply at our most forward positions."

"Sounds like a reasonable line of action, Captain. Do as you feel best."

Going back to his seat, Martin informed his colleagues about what the pilot had told him, making more than one suddenly nervous. Henry Cabot Lodge smiled at their reactions, as he could himself start to feel the adrenaline rush that he had experienced many times during the last war.

Their helicopter, once over Masan, first made a low altitude pass over the southwest limits of the town, overflying the positions of Major Dickinson and giving to the Senators a good view of the nine destroyed enemy tanks at the entrance of the town. The pilot then shouted to be heard over the din of the rotor.

"WE ARE NOW OVERFLYING THE POSITIONS OF ONE OF THE THREE DEFENSE COMPANIES OF TASK FORCE DOWS. THOSE TANKS WERE DESTROYED BY OUR WOMEN IN TWO SEPARATE BATTLES. THE FOUR SHERMAN TANKS THAT YOU CAN SEE ACTUALLY ARRIVED IN MASAN THIS MORNING ONLY AND DID NOT PARTICIPATE IN THOSE BATTLES."

"WHAT KIND OF ANTITANK WEAPONS DID YOU USE? BAZOOKAS?" Asked Lodge, to which the pilot shook her head.

"PANZERFAUST 100, SIR. THEY WERE TAKEN FROM THE GERMANS DURING THE LAST WAR. WE HAVE A SIZEABLE STOCK OF THEM."

Martin and Lodge exchanged knowing looks then, with the former speaking out.

"Those women truly have a lot of guts. Taking on tanks accompanied by infantry, and with weapons with such short a range as the PANZERFAUST? And destroying nine of them on top of it? Somebody trained those women very well."

"Is this PANZERFAUST a standard weapon in the U.S. Army, Ed?" Asked Eugene Millikin.

"Not at all!"

"Then, how could those women have them?"

"That will be another question to ask to Brigadier General Dows, I guess."

As the helicopter now flew towards a ridgeline to the West, their pilot shouted again.

"WE WILL FLY AROUND THE FOOT OF HILL 260, SO THAT YOU CAN SEE THE RESULTS OF THE ENEMY ASSAULTS. I WILL THEN DROP YOU ON TOP OF THE HILL BEFORE FLYING BACK TO MASAN AND WAIT THERE. OUR MACHINE GUNS ON THE HILL WILL COVER OUR APPROACH."

Many of the senators swallowed hard at those words and made themselves small in their flimsy canvas seats, while the helicopter took speed and the two female door gunners grabbed the grips of their machine guns, ready to fire if need be. The UH-2, flying parallel with the road to Chindong-ni, passed by the wrecks of a number of trucks and tanks surrounded by dozens of dead North Korean soldiers, apparently victims of artillery fire. Exclamations came out of the senators when the helicopter started turning around the foot of Hill 260: dozens of twisted, burned out trucks lay along the road, surrounded by hundreds of bloated bodies. At least 300 more dead North Koreans lay on the southern slope of Hill 260, some less than fifty meters from the hilltop. Jumping a small elevation, the helicopter started rounding the foot of the hill towards the Northeast, allowing its occupants to look at the western and northern slopes of the promontory. More dead North Koreans lay on those slopes and on the floor of the ravine to its north, sometimes forming thick carpets of bodies.

“My God! Look at all those dead North Koreans! There must be at least 2,000 of them.” Said Martin. “Overall, that makes about 3,000 enemy soldiers killed around that hill. The way most of them lay, they must have been caught in machine gun crossfire.”

“Yeah! That reminds me a bit too much of the battlefields of France in 1917.” Added Millikin. “None of these North Koreans seemed to have been able to make it all the way to the top.”

The noise of machine gun fire suddenly echoed just after the senators were able to hear a metallic impact on the helicopter. A dozen machine guns posted on top of Hill 260 immediately fired back. Flying under the shower of tracer bullets now striking the ridgelines to the West, the helicopter suddenly rose sharply at the end of the ravine it was following, then swiveled nearly on the spot before landing none too gently on top of Hill 260.

“GO, GO, GO!” Shouted the cargo master as the rear ramp lowered open. The seven senators and the general ran out with their individual kit bags, to be immediately greeted by a dozen armed women that guided them at once to a long trench that ran the length of the position. The helicopter took off as soon as its passengers were in the trench, then dived down along the southern slope in order to use the mass of the hill as a shield against the enemy machine gun bursts. As the politicians sighed with relief once in the communication trench, one of the women presented herself to them and Pearson.

"Welcome to Hill 260, gentlemen. I am Brigadier General Ingrid Dows, Commander of the Korea Air Task Force and, at the moment, of Task Force Dows. Follow me to my bunker, where we will be able to talk more easily."

"My God," said Arthur Vandenberg, coughing because of the dust, "I am getting too old for this kind of stuff."

"Come on, Arhtur," replied Henry Cabot Lodge, smiling, "some sessions of the Senate can be quite cut-throat affairs."

Ingrid snapped her head around on hearing those words but didn't say something then. She waited for the whole group to be inside her command bunker before facing Pearson.

"General Pearson, my helicopter pilot only told me on the radio that she was bringing in important visitors. Can you tell me what United States senators are doing here, when the situation is so volatile?"

"You are right about the situation being volatile, Dows. However, those senators insisted on coming to visit your positions and to speak with you. They arrived yesterday in Korea to conduct a commission of inquiry for the Senate, which is due to judge President Truman for criminal negligence. They want to see how things really are here in Korea."

"That's correct, General Dows." Cut in Eugene Millikin. "My commission of inquiry is anxious to hear what you would have to say concerning the situation of our forces in Korea."

"Many generals in Washington would chop my head off if I told you what I really think about a few things, Mister Senator."

"What you will tell us will stay strictly confidential, I assure you. General Pearson will not be present for your interview, or that of any of your personnel."

"We would however like to inspect your positions on this hill before it becomes too dark, if you don't mind, General." Added quickly Edward Martin. "Then we would interview you."

"No problem, Senator! I will now give you the grand tour. Follow me and keep your heads low while we move between bunkers."

The group of senators returned to the command bunker about forty minutes later, apparently satisfied with what they had seen. Edward Martin was the first to speak once back in the bunker.

"I must say that your network of bunkers and your overall firepower are impressive, General Dows. This position could serve as a training model at Fort Bragg. Can you tell us what pushed you into storing so much surplus or captured equipment in the Philippines at the end of the last war?"

"Very simple, Senator Martin: the certainty in my mind that we would have sooner or later another war in Asia and that we would then have to fight with only what we would have available immediately then."

"You didn't think that the Truman administration would see to it that enough equipment and weapons would be kept for a future war, General Dows?" Asked Robert Taft. Seeing Ingrid eye wearily Pearson while she hesitated, Millikin smile to the later.

"Could you please excuse us for a moment, General?"

"I got the picture, Senator." Answered Pearson, exasperated. "I will make myself rare for a few minutes."

Once Pearson was out of the bunker and at a comfortable distance from it, Ingrid answered Taft in a low voice.

"To be frank, Senator Taft, I believe that President Truman is an honest man, but that he knows nothing about military matters and surrounds himself with people who know little more. Like many in Washington now, either generals or politicians, he thinks that the atomic bomb has rendered superfluous most of our military units. In that, he is making a very big mistake. We are not the only ones, or even the first ones, to have the atomic bomb and others, meaning the Soviets, will eventually have it. On top of that, the atomic bomb is simply useless in limited conflicts or when you are facing a guerrilla opposition. This is not only my personal opinion, gentlemen: it is also the judgment of History. In the world of my dead adoptive mother, the nuclear weapons stockpiles numbered at a time tens of thousands of warheads each for the United States and the USSR, before shrinking gradually due to nuclear disarmament treaties. Despite those stockpiles, dozens of conventional conflicts were fought around the World, often between proxies of the U.S.A. and of the U.S.S.R., and without a single nuclear weapon being used. Contrary to what some civilian and military thinkers believe in Washington and at the Pentagon, our conventional ground forces, our navy and its carriers and our tactical bombers and fighters will stay indispensable for our national security. President Truman said that he has a personal aversion towards the Marine Corps that is stronger even than the one he has about the Navy. Well, I would tell him that he is dead wrong about them. The Marine Corps represent one of our most important assets in terms of

quick intervention force around the World, along with our navy aircraft carriers. President Truman emasculated the American forces in order to pay for his social programs, while hoping to save money by concentrating our defense on nuclear forces. Well, the present disaster we are now experiencing in Korea should show him that his petty savings only put our national security and our World interests at risk.”

The Republican senators present, thrilled by her opinions, took notes frantically as she spoke. The two Democratic senators in the group, Harry Byrd and James McGrath, showed much less enthusiasm, something that pushed Ingrid into looking at them directly into their eyes.

“Senators Byrd and McGrath, please don’t take my words as a proof of some political partisanship on my part. I would have skewered in a similar way a Republican president that would have shown the same level of incompetence concerning national security. I am sending a message to the presidents to come and their counselors: this world is a dangerous place and will stay so for the foreseeable future, while the atomic bomb is not a solution to our security problems. Yes, let’s have enough atomic weapons to be able to deter an enemy from using atomic bombs against us, but that is about all that atomic weapons are good for: to deter their own use.”

Henry Cabot Lodge Junior carefully noted down that last declaration before asking a question that had been burning his tongue.

“General Dows, what do you think about how this war is proceeding? After all, you have been fighting in it since its start.”

A discouraged expression then showed on Ingrid’s face, making Lodge feel dread.

“I will be brutally frank with you, gentlemen. From what I have seen to date, only a miracle will save us from an American defeat in the next few weeks. In the history known to Nancy Laplante, this war went from 1950 to 1953 and many factors were different. Yet, in that parallel history, the United States barely avoided defeat and ended the war with a precarious armistice that only perpetuated the confrontation for the decades to come. Here, the conflict started two years earlier, when there was still no official South Korean government in place and no South Korean Army worthy of the name. In Nancy’s history, the South Korean Army actually inflicted the majority of the enemy losses and helped hold half of the frontlines, along with allied troops from dozens of countries, including British and Canadian troops. Here, American troops are alone to hold our defensive perimeter, which is falling apart everywhere. We did not get help from our allies because the Soviet veto at the Security Council stopped the United

Nations from voting a resolution calling for a collective defense of South Korea. Now, with Communist Chinese troops having entered the fight, the odds against us only increased.”

“Wait!” Exclaimed Eugene Millikin, shocked and alarmed. “Why are you saying that the Chinese are now fighting in this war, General Dows? We were told that this was only an unsubstantiated rumor.”

Ingrid’s face reflected instant fury at these last words and she stared hard at Millikin.

“Who the hell told you that, Senator Millikin?”

“Major General Willoughby, General MacArthur’s intelligence officer.”

“That incompetent ass licker!” Spat Ingrid. “Senator, I personally captured a Chinese soldier yesterday and seized a Chinese regimental flag, numerous Chinese identity booklets and a marked map showing that we are being attacked by the 58th Division of the Chinese 42nd Field Army, with at least two more Chinese divisions now facing us. I sent all that to General Walker’s headquarters within hours and there is no way that General Willoughby could not know about them. He is thus denying a reality that wouldn’t fit with General MacArthur’s approved vision of the situation. Believe me, gentlemen: China is now in this war with both feet.”

Millikin exchanged befuddled looks with the other senators before looking back at Ingrid with deep concern.

“Then, what do you think will happen in Korea in the next days, General Dows?”

“The enemy will probably use his preferred tactic when hitting a tough obstacle: he will try to infiltrate around our flanks, then will establish blocking positions along our resupply and withdrawal routes, to be ready to decimate us if we decide to retire under the pressure. I personally expect the enemy to attack on my northern flank, where they know that the 19th Regiment is presently quite fragile. I asked by radio this morning that my planes fly reconnaissance missions in order to find and identify the main axis of advance of the enemy around my positions. I should get the results of those missions soon.”

Edward Martin was the first to recover from that gloomy estimate and ask a question to Ingrid.

“General Dows, how long are your women and you supposed to hold these positions in front of Masan? When do you expect to be relieved by a proper combat unit? I understand that your women are mostly specialists and technicians that are probably essential to the functioning of your air task force.”

"I was not notified about any replacement unit for Masan, Senator. To date, my orders are to stay here until further notice."

"But, that's nonsense! We can't let aviation specialists play indefinitely the role of infantrymen in the frontlines. You need to take care and lead your squadrons."

"I agree with you that I can't afford to lose many of these women or to stay here too long. Unfortunately, General Walker is out of tactical reserve units and, if we would pull out now, that would leave a big hole in our perimeter that would let the enemy go all the way to Pusan. If that ever happens, then this whole army will end up being massacred. What we would need here in Korea are a minimum of four fully equipped and manned combat divisions, and quick!"

"I'm going to get General Person. This is totally unacceptable!" Exclaimed Martin, incensed, before leaving the bunker at a run. He returned two minutes later with Pearson, who ended up facing seven irate senators. Millikin's tone when he spoke to Pearson was harsh.

"When is General Walker planning to replace those women in the frontlines, General Pearson? Don't get me wrong: this is not due to a request from General Dows, but this is an anomaly that cannot go on."

"I frankly don't know, Senator. I would have to contact General Walker about this."

"You can use the services of my radio operators here, General." Offered at once Ingrid. Pearson jumped on her offer and sat down besides Sergeant Mary Takahashi to compose a message to be encoded and sent. Ingrid led the group of senators out of the bunker, in order to get some fresh air. She looked at Millikin after a moment of silence.

"What will happen exactly to President Truman, Senator?"

"Well, once my group will be back from Korea, the Senate will use our report to judge the President in front of the assembled senators. The President will in turn be able to defend himself and call witnesses to support him. The Senate will then vote a verdict. If found guilty, something that requires a two-thirds majority, Truman will then have to leave the White House."

"And...after that?"

"Since President Truman never cared to name a vice-president, the Speaker of the House of Representatives will have to temporarily fill the functions of President until presidential elections can be organized and held next November."

"I was afraid of that, actually: we are going to possibly find ourselves without an effective head of state just as the enemy will have us by the balls in Korea. What if President Truman is found innocent?"

"He will keep his post, but I can tell you right now that he will be nothing more than a lame duck president from then on. The House will probably vote systematically against his social programs while voting for supplementary defense budgets. I also heard that the Democratic Party is seriously thinking about dumping Truman, at least for the incoming November elections."

"Well, even if he manages to stay in power, he will be the first American president to lose a war, looking at the way things are going here."

She had barely finished speaking when a soft whistling noise made her shout a warning.

"INCOMING MORTAR FIRE! GET DOWN!"

The senators barely had time to crouch down in the communication trench before a loud detonation made them cover their ears. Another explosion followed a mere second later, followed by a third one. The cycle then repeated itself after fifteen seconds, making Edward Martin grimace.

"Harassing mortar fire: the Chinese probably want to prevent more helicopters landing here today. We may be stuck here for a few hours."

"If not the whole night, Senator Martin." Added Ingrid. "This may even be in preparation for another assault: the enemy now had ample time to mass fresh troops around our hill."

"What are we going to do?" Asked Arthur Vandenberg in a worried tone, to which Martin answered firmly.

"We sit tight and let General Dows defend the position. General Dows, would you have spare weapons for me and Senator Lodge?"

"I have the carbines and revolvers of the women that were either killed or wounded last night. Let's go back to the command bunker, gentlemen."

Once in the command bunker, Ingrid went to a corner where a number of weapons and web gear were piled up. She selected two M2A2 automatic carbines, along with full extra carbine magazines, and gave them to Martin and Lodge, who eagerly took them and checked them out.

"Aah, it feels good to have a weapon at such a time." Said Lodge, smiling. Ingrid also smiled at those words and looked at the five other, unarmed senators.

"Do anyone else among you know how to shoot a weapon?"

Three of the politicians raised a hand, prompting Ingrid in giving each of them either a pistol or a revolver, plus spare .45 caliber ammunition. Millikin, pocketing his spare bullets, looked inquisitively at Ingrid.

"What next, General Dows?"

"I will have your helicopter on standby, ready to come and get you out the moment that this mortar fire stops. However, I expect it to continue until nightfall, then the enemy will probably launch a night assault on this hilltop or on other hilltops we are holding. Since I always hate leaving the initiative to the enemy, I will now arrange for some air support for our position. In the meantime, I would counsel you to do like my women will do soon: take a nap in prevision of a busy night."

"Where do you have beds available, General?" Asked rather naively Harry Byrd, attracting dubious looks from Ingrid, Edward Martin and Henry Cabot Lodge.

"You are free to grab any corner of dirt in this bunker that is not occupied yet, Senator. If you will excuse me now, I have a few radio calls to make."

Millikin chuckled at the discomfiture of Byrd and patted his shoulder in encouragement.

"Just take it in stride, Harry: this will actually remind me of my time in the trenches in 1917."

23:02 (Korea Time)

Command bunker of Task Force Dows

Hill 260, Masan area

Eugene Millikin, who had managed somehow to fall asleep while sitting in a corner of the bunker, was awakened by a clear intensification in the enemy fire falling on the hilltop. Shaking off his fatigue as best he could, he grabbed his revolver and looked around him in the dark bunker, lit by a single flashlight fitted with a red light filter. Every woman in the bunker was awake and in position behind the firing slits, while Ingrid Dows was sending a radio message in an urgent, clipped tone.

"...we have now enemy howitzers pounding our hilltop, Reaper One. Find that artillery unit and blast it with a big one, over... Affirmative! Lady Hawk out!"

Millikin, swearing softly to himself when his back protested his hours spent sitting on a dirt floor, got up slowly and went to Ingrid, speaking to her as she put down the radio handset.

"What is going on, General Dows?"

"What looks like a pre-assault artillery fire plan has started to fall on us. I just asked one of our heavy gunship aircraft to find the enemy guns firing at us and to silence them. You should wake up your colleagues in the meantime, Senator Millikin: I expect an enemy ground assault at any time now."

"Uh, will do!"

Feeling a strange mix of fear and excitement at the same time, the old politician woke up his six colleagues one after the other, telling them briefly what was happening. Once awakened, Edward Martin went to see Ingrid to speak to her in a whispering voice.

"I believe that it is not a good idea to keep all of us here in this bunker, General Dows: one lucky hit on it would wipe the whole group out. Me and Senator Lodge know how to fight: we should thus split up and go help some of your machine gunners or riflemen."

Ingrid thought only for a second before nodding her head.

"Agreed, Senator Martin. Please take first a steel helmet before stepping out. So should Senator Lodge do. I will go with you to assign fighting positions to you."

"Thanks, General."

Ingrid then gave him a smile that nearly made Martin melt.

"I am the one who should thank you...General. Do me a favor: if I'm killed, don't let General Pearson take over my command. He would be liable to throw away our position to the dogs."

Martin nodded in turn: he understood perfectly what she meant. While a fairly competent officer, Pearson was a conservative, unimaginative combat leader of the type the U.S. Army had too many of. Dows' tactical setup, which Martin judged to be a masterpiece, would most probably be badly mishandled by Pearson.

"Don't worry about him, Dows: I'll watch your back."

"Thank you, sir! Let's hurry and find you a proper place before the Chinese decide to launch an assault."

Going out in the night with Martin and Lodge, Ingrid took four minutes to assign them each to a separate fighting bunker while dodging incoming shells, then went back to her command bunker. Just before she was going to walk in it, an intense flash of light from a few kilometers away to the Northwest made her blink and freeze for a moment.

She stayed out of the bunker, looking at a rising fireball in the distance, until a powerful rumble made the whole hill vibrate and brought a smile to her face.

“Good old ‘Puff The Magic Dragon’ did the job again. Exit the Chinese artillery.”
Going back in the bunker, she was approached at once by an excited Millikin.

“General Dows, this is not...”

“...an atomic bomb? No, Senator Millikin! That was a five ton fuel air explosives bomb dropped on a Chinese artillery unit by our heavy gunship. Those ‘BLOCKBUSTER’ bombs are our most powerful weapons next to our atomic weapons. If you listen, you will find out that the enemy artillery fire on our position has stopped.”
Listening for a moment, Millikin finally smiled and looked back at her.

“You’re right, General. Decidedly, your pilots are doing a bang up job here in Korea. And so does your ground personnel. To be frank, I expected at first on coming here to find a bunch of frightened women hunkering down at the bottom of their foxholes, but the truth is that they are actually managing much better than the men of the 19th Infantry Regiment. Be sure that this will be mentioned to the Senate when I will get back to Washington. Maybe then your women will gain the respect they deserve.”

“That would be the best thing you could do to make me happy, Senator Millikin.”
Said softly Ingrid. “If you will now excuse me, I have a few things to check on.”

Less than twenty minutes later, a woman looking out with the help of a night intensification scope gave out an urgent warning.

“General, I can see swarms of enemy infantry now crossing the road and advancing towards our western and northern slopes. There are hundreds, possibly thousands of them.”

Ingrid was at the woman’s side in a flash, raising her own night vision scope to her eyes and observing for a few seconds before calling out to Mary Takahashi.

“Sergeant Takahashi, call our artillery support unit and tell it that we need an H.E.-Frag concentration right now on the Kill Zones Foxtrot One and Two. Corporal Mansfield, call Reaper One and tell them to come back here to fly over watch circuits over us.”

“Yes, General!”

Grabbing her own tactical radio, Ingrid spoke urgently into its microphone.

“All Fifinella ground forces, this is Lady Hawk. A major enemy assault is developing against my position. Friendly artillery fire is incoming. Fifinella 310 and 330,

hold your fire until I give the order and be prepared to launch parachute flares on my command. Lady Hawk out!”

A mere four minutes later, the first American 105mm shell screamed overhead before impacting the ground near the road at the foot of the hill, exploding and projecting in the air quite a few of the running dark silhouettes running towards Hill 260. Seven more shells followed in quick succession, killing or wounding dozens of Chinese soldiers. Before the second salvo could fall, what looked like a fire lance coming down from the sky struck, creating a carpet of small explosions among the Chinese infantrymen running into the ravine to the north of the hill with the intent of climbing the northern slopes of the position. Senator Millikin watched that through the corner of a firing slit, his eyes wide as screams of pain and agony could be heard from down in the ravine.

“My God! It is as if the wrath of God is descending on these Chinese.”

“I prefer to think of it as a dragon’s breath, Senator.” Replied somberly Ingrid. You are looking at a battery of ten 40mm automatic cannons firing down from our heavy gunship. The Japanese were terrified of our gunships during the last war, and justly so.” Millikin didn’t reply, instead watching as hundreds of Chinese were being slaughtered in front of his eyes. Yet, incredibly, the surviving Chinese kept advancing, with more of them appearing from the Northwest in apparently infinite numbers.

“Hell! How many of them are there?”

“At least one whole regiment, or 3,000 men, I would say. I will let our artillery and gunship work them up for the moment and save my own ammunition until the enemy starts actually climbing my slopes.”

“General, another enemy foot column has appeared to our South, avoiding our hill and heading towards Masan through the open ground.”

The warning from the machine gunner made Ingrid switch fire slits in a hurry to look by herself.

“Damn, there is another regiment on the move, but targeting Masan. This is a fucking full scale divisional attack!”

Ingrid again spoke in her own radio then.

“Fifinella Golf Two and Three, this is Lady Hawk. Be advised that a whole enemy infantry regiment is now heading towards Masan through the open valley to my South. Get Reaper Two to scramble and support you: I already have my hands full here.”

"Fifinella Golf Two, acknowledged!" Answered Major Sally Nolan, lying in ambush with her company on the other side of the valley.

"Fifinella Golf Three, acknowledged!" Answered Angie Dickinson in Masan. Next, Ingrid looked at Mary Takahashi.

"Sergeant, send an urgent message in clear to 8th Army headquarters: divisional strength enemy infantry attack along my front, with one regiment heading towards Masan. Will do my best to block the attack. Send as 'Critic' priority."

"Yes, General!"

All that time, the senators could only watch and wait anxiously, observing Ingrid and her women do their things. The purposeful and determined attitude of the women around them impressed the politicians to no little degree, making Arthur Vandenberg whisper a comment to Harry Byrd.

"And some in Washington pretend that those women should go back to their pots and pans..."

The next order from Ingrid came ten minutes later, after hundreds of Chinese soldiers had already been killed by artillery or gunship fire and as hundreds more Chinese infantrymen started climbing frantically the western and northern slopes of the hill, covering the ground like an army of ants climbing a mound of earth.

"Fire parachute flares! Machine gunners, fire at will once you see targets."

Three MG42 medium machine guns opened fire soon from inside the command bunker, forcing the senators to cover their ears to protect them from the infernal noise, while a dozen more medium machine guns and four heavy machine guns also opened fire around the perimeter and on the adjacent hilltop to the east, cutting deadly swaths in the mass of enemy infantry desperately climbing towards the hilltops. Five more minutes later, as the lead Chinese survivors were halfway up the hill, Ingrid gave another order.

"FOUGASSES!"

At that command, what looked like four thick tongues of fire spat out from points in the slopes, enveloping the Chinese under a carpet of liquid fire. Nearly 200 more enemy soldiers died horribly or ran down while screaming, their uniforms on fire. Still, more kept coming up the slopes. Millikin couldn't help admire the courage of those enemy soldiers, or was it simple fanaticism?

There were still over 400 Chinese soldiers climbing towards the top of Hill 260 from two sides when Ingrid gave yet another order as the lead enemy soldiers got to within thirty meters from the summit.

“CLAYMORE! CLAYMORE!”

Millikin saw the assistant machine gunner next to him then grab a sort of hand switch and press its trigger, causing a nearby loud explosion just outside the bunker, in front of the firing slit of that machine gun. A concert of screams of pain and agony greeted that explosion and other similar ones around the perimeter. When Millikin cautiously looked outside through the firing slit, he was astonished to see in the dancing light of the parachute flares that the enemy assault lines climbing towards the bunker had been literally swept away, with mounds of corpses and jerking bodies covering the slope. Only a few enemy soldiers seemed intact but they were now running back down, utterly terrorized.

“My God, General! You won! YOU WON! THEY ARE WITHDRAWING!”

“Don’t celebrate yet, Senator Millikin: there is still the small matter of that Chinese regiment advancing on Masan to our South.” Said Ingrid. As if to contradict her, a formidable explosion to the South lit up the night, followed by the rising of a gigantic fireball.

“Uh, I stand corrected, Senator: scratch that regiment as well.”

Overwhelmed by all this, Millikin went to her and shook her hand, frank admiration on his face.

“General Dows, this battle was a true tactical masterpiece. Uh, did you ever get an answer from General Walker about any unit being sent to relieve your women?”

“Yes, I did get an answer, Senator Millikin.” Answered Ingrid, somber. “Basically, it said that none could be sent, since the 19th Regiment just got thrown out of its positions by a massive Chinese attack and is withdrawing towards K-1 Airfield and Pusan. My own force is now basically about to be surrounded by the enemy.”

Millikin could only stare at her with horror and disbelief then.

02:17 (Korea Time)

Wednesday, August 04, 1948 ‘C’

Northeast limits of Masan

“YOU BUNCH OF COWARDS!”

Some of the soldiers of the 19th Infantry Regiment withdrawing by truck under cover of the night lowered their heads at the angry shout from Angie Dickinson, while others gave her the finger as their trucks rolled past her and her five M20 armored cars and six armed jeeps. Angie had been watching with bitterness for ten minutes now the ragtag column of soldiers, many without steel helmet and some without even a rifle, withdrawing through the northeast suburbs of Masan along the road from Chungam-ni. Her anger flared again when she saw the five M4A3 SHERMAN tanks that were near the end of the long column. Jumping out of her M20 armored car, she ran to meet the lead tank and, stepping in the middle of the road, gestured for it to stop. The tank driver did stop his machine, but shouted at once at the dark silhouette blocking his way.

“GET THE FUCK OFF THE ROAD, ASSHOLE!”

Ignoring the slur, Angie quickly climbed the front of the tank to go speak with the tank commander, who was standing in his hatch. The man, a captain, growled at her.

“Who are you to block my tanks like this? We are on a tight schedule.”

“To go where? Withdraw all the way to Pusan Harbor, along with that bunch of yellow bellies? I’m Major Angie Dickinson, commander of the defense company of Task Force Dows holding Masan. We desperately need your tanks here, to help me keep our exit road to K-1 Airfield open, Captain. Our own women have just stopped and decimated a whole Chinese division, for God’s sake! You can’t simply withdraw after only a few hours of combat.”

Those words made Captain James Harvey reflect mentally on the bitter events of the last twelve hours spent with the 1st Battalion of the 19th Infantry Regiment. Through poor sentry discipline and ill-prepared defensive works, that battalion had allowed Chinese soldiers to infiltrate its positions and to outflank the American roadblock across the road to Chungam-ni. Then had come a surprise mass assault by thousands of screaming Chinese soldiers running out of the night. Many soldiers of the 19th Regiment had then simply broken and ran in panic, abandoning their trenches. That had quickly degenerated into a general bug out by a whole company that had opened a big hole in the American defensive network. Two of Harvey’s tanks, who had been supporting that infantry company, had then been swarmed by Chinese soldiers, with the helpless tankers butchered inside their machines. His remaining five tanks and four scout cars had done their best to support the remaining infantrymen, but to no avail, and had in fact escaped only by a hair from being overwhelmed by the waves of Chinese soldiers

running through the battalion lines. Harvey then took a decision he knew could cost him, but one that he could at least live with.

“Listen, Major, I was ordered to support that battalion of the 19th Regiment. I will thus take a blocking position here, in order to protect its retreat and to keep the road open for any stragglers from the regiment that may still be out there. Where do you want my tanks?”

Angie smiled widely, her white teeth showing in the dark, and presented her right hand to Harvey for a shake.

“Thank you from the bottom of my heart, Captain. We will do just fine together.”

05:31 (Korea Time)

U.S. 8th Army field headquarters

Pusan, South Korea

General Walton Walker, a small but sturdily built man normally full of energy, felt more tired than he had ever been before in his life as he examined the latest markings on his army tactical map. Discouragement and bitterness in fact did a lot right now to sap his energy: discouragement at seeing the Chinese enter the war in such large numbers; bitterness at the poor showing by too many of his units, officers and soldiers. Against a top notch enemy with quality equipment, like the Nazis in 1944, his present army would have been utterly trounced. That was not to denigrate the qualities of the North Korean and Chinese soldiers, though: up to now, despite suffering from a poor logistical support system and not enjoying air superiority, the enemy soldiers had proved to be brave, sturdy and ferocious infantrymen with first class field craft skills. With his frontlines cracking everywhere, no reserves left and with over 100,000 Chinese soldiers now supporting their North Korean comrades and pushing against his defensive perimeter, Walker could come to only one, painful conclusion: he was going to have to evacuate his troops from Korea altogether if he didn't want to lose all of them in a final orgy of blood. Even with massive air and naval support, there was no way that his hugely outnumbered units could hold on for more than one or two more weeks before the enemy managed to make a major breakout through his perimeter. Once in force inside his perimeter, the enemy would then be free to wreak havoc and even capture the port of Pusan, making any final withdrawal impossible. Suddenly feeling like he just had aged by twenty years, Walker called a transmissions officer to his side.

"Captain, note down the following message to General MacArthur, to be encoded and sent as a 'CRITIC' priority message..."

06:45 (Korea Time)

Headquarters, United States Armed Forces, Far East (USAFFE)

Naha, Okinawa

Ryukyu Islands, Japan

Major General Edward Almond, General MacArthur's chief of staff, nearly snickered when he read Walker's plea to evacuate Korea. Almond was a very aggressive officer, some would say too aggressive for his own good, and Walker's request smelled of defeatism, if not worse, in his mind. The major from the transmissions section that had brought him the message gave him a cautious look.

"Should I have General MacArthur awakened, sir?"

Almond gave him a contemptuous look at those words.

"To present him this rag? It will wait until he arrives from his residence, Major."

"But, it is a 'CRITIC' message personally addressed to him by General Walker, sir."

"Are you trying to second-guess my judgment, Major?" Said Almond, raising his voice. "That message will wait! Now, get back in your hole!"

Chastised, but still believing he had been right, the transmissions officer could only turn around and leave the operations center. Three hours later, a captain came to the major in the transmissions center, a draft message in his hands and deep embarrassment and shame on his face.

"Sir, General MacArthur wants this to be encoded and sent to General Walker, in Korea."

Feeling dread, the major took the draft message and read it quickly. It was a short, blunt message, but it made him pale at once.

"...The presence in strength of Chinese forces inside Korea is still unconfirmed. Suggest that you push your troops harder. Your request for evacuating your forces out of Korea is denied... My God! This could be the death of our men in Korea."

The major was tempted for a moment to go protest the content of the message but, remembering Almond's initial reaction, decided that it would be to no avail and had the message transmitted verbatim.

16:58 (Korea Time)

Headquarters USAFFE

Naha, Okinawa

Major General Almond was about to leave the operations center to have supper at his residence when Lieutenant General Stratemeyer, the commander of the Far East Air Force, walked in at a brisk pace, a briefcase in his left hand. Almond noted at once the angry look on the Air Force general's face as the latter went straight towards him, finally stopping one pace in front of him and pointing an accusing finger.

"General Almond, can you tell me what the hell is going on in Korea right now?"

"Uh, what do you mean, General Stratemeyer?"

Stratemeyer answered him by putting his briefcase on a nearby desk and opening it, extracting from it a newspaper and copies of two messages. He presented first the newspaper to Almond, holding it with both hands so that the Army general could see its front page top title and large picture.

"Why do I have to learn through a newspaper article that one of my aviation units, and a female one at that, is stuck in frontline trenches, doing the job infantrymen should do?"

The top title of the copy of the New York Herald Tribune said 'AMERICAN WOMEN FIGHTING IN FRONTLINE TRENCHES IN KOREA', with the article signed by a Marguerite Higgins, while the large picture showed an incredible scene of carnage, with hundreds of dead enemy soldiers scattered on the slopes of a hill and with a few American women in combat gear looking around them for wounded men. Stratemeyer then waved the two message copies in Almond's face.

"I have here copies of a message my headquarters just received from Brigadier General Dows in Korea, plus one I had to extract from the logs of your own headquarters and that was not retransmitted to me. That last message, a situation report from 8th Army, had FEAF HQ as an info addressee but it was blocked for retransmission here, on your orders, General Almond. That situation report said clearly that women from the KATF were fighting on the ground as part of 8th Army's Pusan defensive perimeter, and this because of the lack of Army troops to protect the Masan sector. That those women have fought heroically and with great success up to now doesn't change the fact that you tried to hide from me the true state of affair in Korea, General Almond. General Dows

and her KATF were given to you to support the 8th Army in the air, not on the ground! Now, General Dows herself sent me this afternoon a request to thin out on the ground her non-essential administrative and logistical equipment and spare parts in prevision of a possible evacuation from Korea. Her message also stated that she had been facing troops from the Chinese 42nd Field Army for two days now and that there were no army troops available to relieve her unit in Masan. Furthermore, she said that the situation was dire in Korea, something the report from 8th Army made amply clear. For one, her report contradicts the claims of your headquarters that the presence of Chinese units is unconfirmed.”

“Those claims are still considered unconfirmed, General.” Replied Almond, unapologetic. That infuriated Stratemeyer, who grabbed again the copy of the New York Herald Tribune and opened it to page three, then showed to Almond two pictures on that page. One of the pictures showed a wounded prisoner flanked by two armed women. The other was a close-up of a battle flag bearing Chinese inscriptions.

“Unconfirmed, you say? How about this? You have here a Chinese soldier captured near Masan by the KATF, plus a Chinese battle flag. I had officers who could read Chinese look at it: it belonged to a regiment of the People’s Republic of China’s 58th Infantry Division of the 42nd Field Army. Brigadier General Dows can speak Chinese and interrogated that prisoner herself. Will you still pretend that the Chinese are not involved in strength in Korea?”

“Those Chinese must have been mere so-called ‘volunteers’, like those Russian pilots we captured.”

Stratemeyer stared hard at Almond, nearly tempted to slap him out of his delusions. Instead, he waved the message from the KATF.

“General Dows’ report, along with the 8th Army report, makes clear that our units in Korea are on their last mile. Yet, a request by General Walker to evacuate his troops from Korea before the enemy can overwhelm his defensive perimeter was denied today in what I would call a rather cavalier manner.”

“I believe that both Generals Walker and Dows are too pessimistic and are overstating the threat, General Stratemeyer. Brigadier General Dows in particular is not qualified to judge properly a ground combat situation. She is a fighter pilot, after all.” That enraged Stratemeyer, who stepped forward to get nose to nose with Almond, nearly shouting at him from up close.

"You god damn incompetent idiot! Dows is a Medal of Honor recipient with more actual experience of frontline ground combat than you! She fought with her women in Guadalcanal and Papua New Guinea and now has been repulsing repeated assaults by a whole Chinese division for three days now, and you have the gall to tell me that her opinion is unworthy of attention? Her unit may have been provided as a tactical air support unit to 8th Army, but the KATF still falls under me for administrative and logistical matters. I have already sent a message authorizing Brigadier General Dows to start the thinning of her unit on the ground in Korea and am now going to see General MacArthur to put an end to this farce."

"But, you can't do that! Her unit is needed to help hold the Pusan perimeter."

"Oh, really? You were saying that the threat was not so great, but now you say that her unit is vital in the frontlines in order for our perimeter not to collapse? Irrespective of what General MacArthur will say about this, I am going to fire up a message to the Chief of Staff of the Air Force at the Pentagon, to appraise him of this sorry mess here. Whether you are able to appreciate this or not, while General Walker's decision to put female aviators in the frontlines was made out of dire necessity and could still be justified, it still contravened congressional rules about the use of women in direct ground combat. If you can't find proper ground troops to replace these women in the frontlines, then that means in my mind that there is no way that we can hold on to Korea. To refuse permission to the 8th Army to evacuate Korea in these conditions is tantamount to sacrificing all these men and women for nothing, you damn jackass!"

Stratemeyer then grabbed back his newspaper and briefcase and stormed out in the direction of General MacArthur's office, leaving behind an Almond now unsure of the ultimate consequences of that verbal confrontation.

03:51 (Korea Time)

Friday, August 6, 1948 'C'

Underground command post of the Korea Air Task Force

K-1 Airfield, Pusan

South Korea

Evelyn Sharp, Ingrid's deputy commander, shamelessly hugged Ingrid when she walked in the small operations room of the KATF's underground command post in K-1 Airfield.

"Ingrid, I am so happy to see you back in one piece."

She then caught a sniff of Ingrid's body odor and made a grimace that made Ingrid giggle.

"Phew! I think that you need a good shower, Ingrid. You reek of sweat and gunpowder."

"Well, five days spent fighting from inside a bunker or trench kind of made bathing a bit difficult. It didn't help that my time of the month came as well while I was in Masan."

"Then that would explain your ferocity there: those Chinese didn't stand a chance."

Both of them, along with the other women in the operations room, laughed at that. Ingrid then became serious.

"I was able to pull out safely all our women from Masan once General Walker was able to shrink and shorten his defensive perimeter, but I had to concede Masan to the Chinese as a price. Let's hope that the men of the 19th Regiment will be able to hold on to their present positions this time. There is nothing left between them and this airfield and we are barely out of enemy artillery range now. I know that our attack helicopters and heavy gunships have made big dents in the enemy facing the 19th Regiment, but I have by now lost much of my confidence in these guys."

"The same here." Said Evelyn in a disillusioned tone. "I can however give you a few precious good news."

"Aah, that would be a nice change from the last few days, Evelyn. Shoot!"

"First, our thinning out program is going well and has managed to bring back to the Philippines much of the vehicles and equipment of our administrative and logistical support echelons, including our tents and mess facilities. We kept here only what is required to maintain, service, repair and arm our planes and helicopters. As a consequence, we are on hard rations until further notice and we will have to bathe out of wash basins. Vance Hemmingsworth is performing his usual miracles in keeping our machines in flying state and we lost only two helicopters and one B-25 to enemy fire in the last five days, but their crews were thankfully able to bail out or crash-land inside friendly territory, with five of our girls being lightly wounded as a result. Your message to General Stratemeyer seemed to have kicked a lot of dirt in the Pentagon and in Washington, by the way. While General MacArthur still has not authorized an evacuation of our troops from Korea, pressure from Washington is building on him and

his assertion that the presence of Chinese troops in Korea is not confirmed is now widely ridiculed in the United States.”

“And President Truman, how is he faring in the public opinion? Has the Senate started to judge him?”

“According to the latest news, the Senate will start to judge him next week. While its observations and recommendations are still confidential, the senatorial investigation team that visited you in Masan is now back in Washington and leaks about their report say that it will be devastating for both President Truman and for the Pentagon high brass.”

“Well, I can’t say that I will be sorry for most of those paper-pushing idiots at the Pentagon. Just between you and me, I am quite disappointed by General MacArthur’s stance about General Walker’s request to evacuate. There was a time when I respected him, but his ego has grown to overcome common sense and I can’t stand anymore his staff of sycophants.”

“Same here. However, his days as Commander of USAFFE may be numbered: there are rumors that President Truman will soon sack him, possibly to use him as a scapegoat to shield himself from blame about this war.”

“Politics!” Said Ingrid in a disgusted tone. “Remind me to never become a politician, Evelyn.”

“You, a politician? You are way too honest to become one, Ingrid.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Evelyn. Let’s review what we will do in the next few days. I want our remaining equipment and rolling stock to be prioritized into numbered planeloads, so that we could evacuate quickly and without confusion once the authorization to do so will come.”

Evelyn gave a cautious look at Ingrid.

“You think that it will come to that, Ingrid?”

Ingrid nodded grimly at Evelyn’s question.

“Yes! The real question is more how long it will take before General MacArthur accepts reality and lets us evacuate Korea. If he takes too long, then we may all be as good as dead.”

The authorization of General MacArthur to withdraw never came. Instead, General MacArthur himself was relieved of command next Sunday, August 8, by order of President Truman, who replaced him with General Lawton Collins, a hard-fighting

veteran of the last war. On the following Monday, after sacking and sending back to the United States the bulk of the sycophantic staff of MacArthur and bringing in fresh blood, General Collins flew to Korea, landing in Pusan to confer with Lieutenant General Walker and to see the frontlines by himself, something that MacArthur or Almond had never done. Ingrid ended up personally piloting the light helicopter that Collins and Walker used to inspect the frontlines, something that allowed her as well to give her frank opinion once Collins asked for it. What he saw then quickly convinced Collins, who secretly authorized the next day an organized evacuation of all American personnel from Korea. However, the problems of organizing such an evacuation without it sinking into chaos and general panic became too quickly evident.

09:07 (Korea Time)

Thursday, August 12, 1948 'C'

Pusan port area, South Korea

Angie Dickinson, who was leading in her M20 armored car a convoy of trucks loaded with aviation spare parts towards the docks of Pusan Harbor, waved skyward as the 34 surviving helicopters of the Korea Air Task Force overflew the port, on their way to the two amphibious assault and helicopter carrier ships, or LPDHs, waiting off the shore.

“HAVE A GOOD TRIP, GIRLS!”

She then returned her attention to navigating through the crowded port area, full of units and vehicles waiting to be loaded on the cargo ships and amphibious ships docked to the piers and quays of Pusan Harbor. The emergency evacuation of American forces and their equipment and supplies from Korea was now in its third day, by both air and sea, and things had been difficult from the start. Some units had not respected the movement timetables laid by 8th Army headquarters, while individual deserters and stragglers had been legion, making a complicated operation even more difficult to control and regulate. MP units, including Angie's unit, had been working hard to keep some order in that controlled chaos, but it was getting more difficult by the day, as frontline units broke off one by one from the shrinking perimeter defensive line in order to go to the harbor and board the ships that would take them to the safety of Okinawa or the Philippines.

As her convoy was coming into view of the LST, or Landing Ship Tank, that was due to carry the trucks she was escorting, Angie suddenly heard a burst of automatic rifle fire coming from another part of the docks, about 300 meters away. That burst was then quickly followed by more bursts and by individual rifle shots, growing soon into a full-fledged firefight. Swearing to herself and not knowing if this was a fight between an American unit and some Korean communist sympathizers, Angie activated the microphone of her headset.

"All Fifinella Watchdog Four call signs, this is Watchdog! A firefight has started between unknown combatants 300 yards to the east of our assigned amphibious landing ship. Continue escorting our convoy to the LST while I take covering position on the docks, out!"

The three other M20s escorting the convoy obeyed her at once and led the trucks and their precious aviation spare parts towards the waiting LST. On her part, Angie directed her driver to stop in the middle of the road following the harbor front, a hundred meters past the LST. She then ordered her gunner to be ready to use her heavy machine gun and raised her binoculars to her eyes. At first, she couldn't make out what was happening, as the area was crammed with troops and vehicles in the process of boarding various transport and amphibious ships. That process was however falling into chaos as soldiers on foot and vehicle drivers tried to get away from the firefight. Angie's jaws suddenly tightened with anger when she saw that the fight was apparently between two groups of American soldiers, one aboard a vehicle convoy lined up to board a LST, the other a group of soldiers on foot trying to mingle with the convoy. She could see a number of Americans already lying, dead or wounded, on the docks.

"The fucking idiots! Is there any discipline left in this army?"

Realizing that much precious time would be lost if that fight was allowed to continue, and with no one else apparently willing to do something about it, Angie took a quick decision and gave an order to her driver.

"Amie, roll to just behind that group of soldiers firing from behind that pile of crates. Grace, you fire back in controlled bursts only if I give you the order to return fire. Let's try to minimize the damage here."

"Understood, Major."

Driving the M20 through the crowded docks proved hard indeed and proved slow. As they got closer to the soldiers behind the crates, Angie grabbed the powered

megaphone stored in her vehicle and activated it, pointing it towards the two groups of antagonists, who were still firing at each other.

“THIS IS THE MILITARY POLICE. EVERYBODY WILL CEASE FIRING RIGHT NOW!”

While the firing from the vehicles lined up to go down the ramp leading to a LST then stopped progressively, some of the twenty or so soldiers hiding behind the crates, apparently leaderless, took that chance to run towards the LST, prompting another order from Angie.

“STOP! STOP OR I WILL SHOOT!”

Seeing that the runners would not stop, she swore quietly to herself and gave the order she had hoped she would not need to give to her gunner.

“Corporal Channing, shoot down those deserters!”

As the gunner started opening fire with short, aimed bursts, Angie pointed her carbine at the remaining soldiers hiding behind the crates.

“YOU BEHIND THE CRATES, DROP YOUR WEAPONS! YOU ARE UNDER ARREST FOR DESERTION.”

Seeing about fifty soldiers commanded by an officer, their weapons pointed, approaching them from the opposite direction of Angie’s M20, the remaining stragglers finally gave up and threw down their rifles. Looking towards the LST, Angie saw that her gunner had to kill all four of the runners, as they had refused to stop at all.

“What a sorry mess this is!” She said to herself before jumping out of her M20 and walking to the stragglers, who had their hands up. All of them were dirty, unshaven and did not have most of their combat equipment or even their steel helmet. Angie also noted that all of the stragglers were African-Americans, something that made her sigh with exasperation. She was no racist, but the men of the 24th Infantry Regiment, a segregated unit, had acquired a bad reputation as poor, unreliable soldiers during this war.

“Who is in command of your group? What is your unit?”

The soldiers hesitated and did not answer her at first. Finally, a black man wearing the twin chevrons of a corporal spoke up.

“I believe that I am the highest ranking of the group, maam. Corporal Bain, Charlie Company of the 24th Infantry Regiment.”

“Where is your unit, Corporal?”

“We don’t know, maam: we got separated from our unit yesterday.”

"You mean that you ran away from your unit and deserted, Corporal, right?" Said harshly the captain leading the platoon of troops who had backed up Angie. That attracted an angry rebuttal from the black soldier.

"No, sir! Our officer and senior NCO, both white, left us and disappeared early morning yesterday."

"You're lying, you damn nigger!" Nearly shouted the captain, prompting a rebuke from Angie.

"CAPTAIN, THAT'S ENOUGH FROM YOU!"

Angie then looked back at the corporal, measuring how delicate and complicated this affair could turn out to be. The corporal could well be saying the truth, but his word would count for little against that of a Caucasian officer and he was still technically guilty of desertion, on top of having fired on fellow American troops. However, with the chaos and haste of this mass evacuation, she had no time to start a proper inquiry about this incident. She would thus have to cut some corners.

"Captain, were any men of your unit wounded or killed in this firefight?"

"I had one man killed and two others wounded seriously by those damn cowards, Major." Answered the captain while throwing a murderous look at the black soldiers.

"Then, Captain, I will need from you in writing your name and unit, plus the names and identification numbers of your casualties in this incident. Those men here are now under arrest and will have to face a court martial for desertion and attempted murder of American soldiers."

Satisfied by Angie's declaration, the Corps of Engineer captain left to collect that information while leaving behind him ten men to watch the deserters. Angie then wrote down in her pocket notebook the names, I.D. numbers and units of the deserters, along with the details of the incident. She also had one of the engineers go collect for her a half identification tag from each of the stragglers killed in the fight, including the four shot by her gunner. A navy officer from the harbormaster's office showed up in a jeep as the engineer captain was giving her a note with the information she had asked for. The lieutenant commander looked around at the dead soldiers on the ground before going to Angie and the Corps of Engineers captain.

"What the hell happened here, Major?"

"A group of deserters tried to board this LST, prompting a firefight. The situation is now under control, Commander. Could you tell me when the 24th Regiment of the 25th Infantry Division is due to ship out?"

"Uh, one moment, please!" Said the navy officer before returning to his jeep. Fishing out a clipboard from inside the vehicle, he went back to Angie and leafed quickly through the pages before answering her, some surprise showing in his voice.

"Uh, the 24th Regiment left Pusan Harbor last night on the troopship GENERAL JOHN POPE. Are these deserters from the 24th Regiment, Major?"

"So they say, Commander." Answered Angie, who had the uneasy feeling that Corporal Bain may yet have said the truth about him being abandoned by his officer. She thus turned to face Bain, who was guarded by two hard-faced soldiers.

"Corporal, what is the name of your direct officer?"

"Lieutenant James Goswell, maam. He left our positions with First Sergeant Maxwell Rierson yesterday morning and never came back."

Angie wrote those names down as the commander and the captain frowned about the implications of that last sentence. She then looked at the navy officer.

"Do you by chance have a military police unit here at the harbor that could take custody of those men for me, Commander. I was escorting a convoy of aviation spare parts for embarkation and have little personnel with me and no detention facilities."

"I will call in part of the MP company assigned to harbor security, Major. They should be here quickly."

"Thank you, Commander. That is very much appreciated."

Less than twenty minutes later, Angie was able to transfer custody of her prisoners to a platoon of MPs, giving at the same time to their lieutenant a copy of the notes she had taken and briefing him on what had happened. By the time that she was done with that sorry episode, all the trucks of her precious convoy had been loaded aboard their assigned LST, with the amphibious ship now pulling away from the docks to get under way. Feeling better now that her job here was done, she led her four M20s back to K-1 Airfield. She however couldn't help being bitter about what that incident said about the present state of the army she had known in World War Two.

14:55 (Korea Time)

Monday, August 16, 1948 'C'

K-1 Airfield, Pusan

Ingrid, standing on the passenger seat of her command jeep, spoke for the benefit of Staff Sergeant Mary Takahashi, her radio operator, while still looking through her binoculars.

"I can see our jeeps coming in at full speed: they must have the enemy right on their asses. Radio the C-142s to be ready to load them up."

"Yes, General!"

As the Japanese-American woman spoke on the jeep's radio set, Ingrid jumped out of her jeep and ran ten steps to get to her P-38NC fighter-bomber, parked nearby and ready to go. As she was climbing into her cockpit, one of her AC-142G heavy gunships tasked with the final defensive mission of the airfield and port overflew her at medium altitude, heading west to go strafe and slow down the enemy trying to rush inside the now empty defensive perimeter. It took her less than three minutes to strap herself in and start her two piston engines, by which time the 29 surviving armed jeeps of her airfield defense company were rolling on the tarmac, heading towards the rear cargo ramps of four waiting C-142 heavy transport planes. As previously planned, her command jeep started rolling itself towards the big cargo aircraft as soon as both engines of the P-38 ran smoothly. The command jeep actually rolled up last inside one of the transports, to Ingrid's satisfaction. She could see as well that Marguerite Higgins, having volunteered to leave on the last transport plane, was taking numerous pictures of this final withdrawal from Korea. Ingrid pushed her engine throttles forward when the cargo ramps went up and the four transport planes started rolling along the taxiway leading to the main runway. She saw from the corner of one eye a distant explosion on the ground, near where the now empty repair hangar stood. Two more explosions followed in quick succession, bracketing the hangar. Probably enemy mortar fire, Ingrid thought as she followed the last transport along the taxiway. She was not worried about being caught on the ground by enemy planes, especially Mig jet fighters: a few night strikes by her AC-142s on the main enemy airfields in the last week had destroyed on the ground the great majority of enemy planes, both North Korean and Soviet ones, all but eliminating that threat. The only thing that could stop her now was a mechanical breakdown.

Her fighter-bomber, like the four transport planes, however proved to be well maintained and took off without a problem from K-1. As her four cargo aircraft formed up for their flight towards the Philippines, Ingrid did a last wide circle over the airfield's

west end, looking down at the ground. She saw nearly immediately the first enemy vehicles, captured American trucks actually, that were rushing in to take the airfield and hoping to at least take some prisoners there. On that, they were however out of luck, as not a single American was now left in K-1. For that Ingrid was grateful, but she still felt bitterness at being forced to flee like this. While she and her KATF had done the impossible to support the American ground troops in Korea, this was still ending in an American defeat, and an humiliating one indeed.

CHAPTER 5 – V.I.P. CRUISE

15:51 (California Time)

Thursday, March 1, 2018 ‘A’

Private yacht M/Y ECLIPSE

South Harbor, port of Long Beach

California, U.S.A.

Roman Abramovich, standing on the stern deck of his super yacht ECLIPSE with his current wife, Dasha Zhukova, smiled on seeing two big limousines halt on the dock of the World Cruise Center, situated in the South Harbor of the port of Long Beach.

“Aah, here comes our first guests, Dasha.”

His wife, a beautiful blonde in her mid-thirties, grinned and waved happily at the passengers of the limousines as they stepped out of their vehicles and started walking towards the boarding ramp, suitcases and travel bags in hand. She had been quite excited at the idea of being able to host on a short cruise some of the biggest names in Hollywood, and this just four days after the 2018 Academy Awards ceremony.

“Helen Mirren and her husband brought Emma Watson with them!”

Roman nodded his head at that, noticing as well that, as expected, Steven Spielberg and his wife Kate Capshaw, coming out of the second limousine, had not brought any of their children, them being all grown adults by now. The famous Russian supermodel Natalia Vodianova, who had traveled from Europe on Roman’s yacht, then joined the Russian couple on the stern deck, her husband Antoine Arnault and her three children in tow. Roman took a second to discreetly admire the supermodel, who still radiated youthful beauty at 36. Her two sons and one daughter, respectively aged seventeen, ten and eleven, were equally beautiful blond children that she had with her previous husband, a rich British gentleman. Natalia still made the Forbes top-earning models list and also managed her own line of lingerie, Etam, that was all the rage in Paris and around the World. Like all the guests invited by Roman for this short sea cruise, she was easily a multi-millionaire. Roman then had to correct himself on that: he had one Hollywood celebrity on his guest list that, while presently very popular and famous, was a relative newcomer to the film industry and barely broke the million dollars a year mark in term of revenues. That actress, however, had inflamed his interest right from the start

with her crazy stunts and mind blowing action scenes. It didn't hurt either that she had the body of a goddess, and of an athletic one at that. A third limousine arrived on the dock as Helen Mirren, accompanied by her husband Taylor Hackford and by 27 year-old actress Emma Watson, got to the Russian couple and exchanged handshakes and hugs with them. Roman and Dasha were still exchanging pleasantries with the three British and Natalia Vodianova when Natalie Portman, her husband Benjamin Millepied and their seven year-old son Aleph arrived on the stern deck of their huge yacht. From then on, it was a nearly non-stop procession as limousines or taxis dropped off their loads of actors, actresses and films directors and producers, most accompanied by their children. Roman had specifically offered to his guests to bring their younger children, so that they could take full advantage of the current school Spring break. There was also the fact that Roman genuinely liked children, something not surprising in view of his own seven children, of whom the two youngest were aboard. As a good Jew, Roman believed in family values and this cruise was meant as much for the children of his guests as for their parents. In total, he was expecting this afternoon 35 adult guests, plus 32 children ranging from kindergarten age to late teenagers. While his yacht M/Y ECLIPSE was a huge one, being 163 meter-long, his seventeen guest cabins would be fully booked, along with nine spare crew cabins. He was not however worried about the security aspect of this cruise, as twelve of his best bodyguards were aboard, ready to repel or keep away any paparazzi trying to spy on his guests.

Roman grinned with amusement when, half an hour later, his least rich guest arrived with two of the possibly richest actors in Hollywood and their little tribe of six children. Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt were said to be very good friends with that newcomer actress, Nancy Laplante, partly because the three of them were known to roam some of the poorest and most dangerous parts of the World, but for different reasons. Many forked tongues insinuated that this friendship had something to do with the fact that both women were openly bisexual, but hordes of paparazzi were still trying to produce a picture that would 'prove' such a romantic link. Even Dasha had speculated about that in private with Roman, to which he had only smiled, thinking with some envy about the kind of situation that would put Brad Pitt into, sandwiched between two such sexy women. He however came out of his reveries in time to greet his latest group of guests.

"Welcome on the ECLIPSE, Mister Pitt, Misses Jolie, along with your six lovely children. Welcome as well, Miss Laplante."

"And I must thank you for inviting us all, Mister Abramovich." Replied Brad Pitt, wearing like most of the previous guests a set of casual, unpretentious clothes. "Our children were quite excited at the idea of being able to sail on your splendid yacht."

"And I have plenty of activities appropriate for all of them prepared aboard, Mister Pitt. In view of the large number of guests aboard and the insufficient number of luxury guests cabins available, I thought of putting my younger guests in groups of four in spare crew cabins situated in a section of the ship separated from the other crew cabins. I hope that this will be to your approval when concerning your children."

"Oh, I'm sure that they will love being out of our sight with other kids to play or interact with." Replied Angelina Jolie, a malicious smile on her face. "As long as they don't start playing doctor between themselves or start teenage romances."

"And what is wrong with teenage romances, Angelina?" Said Nancy Laplante, who had stayed a bit behind the family with her two pieces of luggage. "I had my first date with a boy at the age of fourteen."

"Shhh!" Said Brad Pitt. "Don't give bad ideas to our elder kids, Nancy." Roman laughed at that exchange, then made an apologetic shrug to Nancy Laplante.

"You will excuse me if I put you in one of those spare crew cabins, Miss Laplante. I unfortunately ran out of guest cabins for you."

Nancy immediately stared at him with a falsely offended expression.

"WHAT? I can't even get a water-logged foxhole on this ship? I'm out of here!" She then changed her expression on a dime, smiling to Roman and speaking to him in perfect Russian as Angelina, Brad and Dasha laughed at her joke.

"I don't mind one bit, Mister Abramovich. By the way, is it a problem if I happen to be armed? If your head bodyguard wishes so, I can always surrender my pistols to him for the duration of the cruise."

Roman only hesitated for a moment before answering her, also in Russian.

"Keep them, Miss Laplante. I know that you made a lot of enemies in the course of your adventures, especially in Israel and in the Muslim world."

That made Nancy's smile fade away, to be replaced with a look of regret.

"And that saddens me, truly. Contrary to what some say about me, I am no anti-Semite and I love Israel. I just wish that the Israeli government could regain some

common sense and stop treating me like a terrorist. I may not agree with the Israeli government policies concerning the Palestinians, but so do many Israeli Jews.”

“I understand perfectly, Miss Laplante. If you will follow the steward waiting behind me, he will guide you and the Jolie-Pitt children to your cabins on the Lower Deck.”

“Thank you, Mister Abramovich.”

Her two bags in hand, Nancy followed behind the steward and the Jolie-Pitt children, who ranged in age between nine and sixteen. Going inside the yacht via a steel hatch, the group followed a long passageway and passed through two more hatches before turning left in a side corridor. The steward then briefly stopped and pointed at the hatch in the main passageway that led forward.

“The crew is accommodated in cabins past this hatch, but have been told not to venture in this section, which was reserved for the young guests of Mister Abramovich. Above you is the main guest lounge and disco club, with the guest cabins occupied by your parents yet one more deck above the lounge. You can go up to the lounge via the ladder at the end of this side passageway, which contains your cabins. I will now lead you to your respective cabins.”

The excited children, along with Nancy, quickly found out that other children were already in some of the cabins, unpacking their suitcases in their twin double-bunk cabins assigned to them. Consulting a list attached to a clipboard, the steward stopped in front of a cabin where a young girl was unpacking her things and turned around to face his followers.

“Misses Vivienne, Zahara and Shiloh Jolie-Pitt, you will share this cabin with Miss Harper Beckham. If you may go in and start unpacking, I will be back soon to show you where the washrooms and shower rooms are.”

Then passing a cabin that was apparently already fully occupied, the steward stopped in front of the next cabin.

“Mister Knox Jolie-Pitt, you will share this cabin with Moses Paltrow, Henry Weisz-Oronofzky and Joe Alphie Winslet-Mendes. Mister Pax Jolie-Pitt, you will be in the cabin facing this one and will share it with Cruz and Romeo Beckham and with Viktor Vodianova-Portman.”

Going to the next cabin in the passageway, the steward looked at the elder son of Angelina Jolie, an adopted Cambodian refugee boy who was by now sixteen years old.

"Mister Maddox Jolie-Pitt, you are to share this cabin with Cashel Day-Lewis, Oscar Jackman and Lucas Vodianova-Portman."

Now alone with the steward, Nancy followed him to the two last cabins in the passageway. The man pointed the two opposing doors past the cabin he stood in front of.

"These are respectively the combined washrooms and bathrooms, one for boys and the other for girls. This cabin is yours, Miss Laplante. The guests are invited to assemble in the main lounge once they have unpacked their things. Mister Abramovich will then speak to you all and give you the program for our cruise."

"Thank you very much, mister. I won't be long."

Then entering her assigned cabin, Nancy put down her luggage and looked quickly around her. The cabin had two double-bunk beds opposite each other, with drawers under the lower beds and four large metallic lockers at one end that could be secured with padlocks. One sofa and one easy chair sat in an open space near the door, while a work desk and chair sat against the steel wall at the end of the cabin. Curtains could be drawn across the side of each bed to provide some privacy and there was a bedside lamp and small storage shelf at the head of each bed. By any standards, this was quite nice for cabins reserved for simple crewmembers. Choosing one of the bottom beds, Nancy then found out that the bed could be electrically adjusted to raise the head end of the mattress to a semi-reclined position, making reading in bed more comfortable. Favorably impressed, Nancy thought about what that said about the comfort of the guest cabins on this yacht if this was what the crew got. Unpacking quickly her two bags and putting their content in either one of the lockers or in the drawers under her bed, she then took out her two handguns, a compact GLOCK 26 9mm pistol and a FN FIVE-SEVEN 5.7mm pistol, and her folding combat knife, putting the three weapons and her spare ammunition on the top shelf of her locker before securing it with a key padlock. With this done, she left her cabin and climbed the ladder leading to the main guest lounge.

Despite being a very large room, the luxurious main lounge was fairly crowded when Nancy entered it, with numerous young and excited children sitting on the carpet, in front of the sofas and chairs used by their parents. One of the actresses present that saw Nancy enter then turned her head away, clearly uneasy and averting her eyes. That actually hurt Nancy. She always had tried to be friendly with Natalie Portman, but

the dual nationality Israeli-American apparently believed to some extent the false accusations of Nancy being a supporter of Palestinian terrorists still made by the Israeli government. By contrast, she got a much warmer reception from Scarlet Johansson and Chris Evans, two of her costars in the movie 'THE AVENGERS 2', who waved for her to come sit with them and film director Kathryn Bigelow at their table near the back of the lounge. Nancy happily went to them and sat besides Chris Evans after exchanging kisses on the cheeks with the trio.

"So, Mister Abramovich invited 'The Terminatrix' on this cruise." Said playfully Johansson, making Nancy grimace with false distaste.

"Please, Scarlet! You know that I hate that nickname."

"But it suits you so well. Like 'The Terminator', you can be an unstoppable killing machine, and I am not talking only in movies."

"You do have to recognize that you have quite a reputation as a real world fighter and soldier, Nancy." Added Kathryn Bigelow. "But you also proved with your role as a Parisian madame in 'LA DAME DE PARIS'⁴ that you are equally talented in emotional roles. The César⁵ you won for that role, along with the Oscar for best foreign language film it got, is proof of it. I should make a movie with you one day."

"And what would you have in store for me, Kathryn?" Asked Nancy, resting her chin on her crossed fingers and smiling to the famous film director.

"Oh, many say that you would be perfect to play a CIA agent in some Third World hellhole. Quite a few people are still insinuating that you are actually a CIA agent, especially after your little skit in Pakistan, when you found and freed Anderson Cooper."

"Why not a Russian agent instead, like Angelina Jolie in 'SALT'? I do speak perfect Russian, after all."

Bigelow pointed her index at her, now serious.

"You know, Nancy, that is one of the reasons why you could become one of the best actresses of all times. You can speak so many languages and are comfortable and knowledgeable about so many different cultures and historical times that you could play in about any kind of movie, anywhere in the World."

⁴ La Dame de Paris : the lady from Paris, in French.

⁵ César : the French equivalent of an Oscar prize.

"But, acting is still only a part-time occupation for me, Kathryn. I still love my job as a war correspondent and international affairs reporter. Money or fame does not really attract me, so I'm not exactly chasing after big movie contracts."

"Which is a sad waste for the moviegoers of the World, Nancy." Said Chris Evans, a big, strong and handsome actor. "I believe actually that you would be the perfect match for certain roles that would deserve a movie."

"Like which ones?" Asked Nancy, truly curious.

"Like Wonder Woman! You are truly built like an Amazon, can fight like a master with a sword and do by yourself the craziest stunts possible."

"Hum, you do have a point, Chris. It would be an interesting role to take, but not if she would be like the wimp in cheesy hot pants depicted in those sexist and childish cartoons that made her into an obedient sex object for geeky readers. Wonder Woman should be in reality a strong, intelligent Amazon demigod bent on teaching to men respect for women. And please, no star-studded blue hot pants!"

"Maybe Kathryn could produce such a movie, with you in the title role." Suggested a smiling Scarlet Johansson, making Bigelow turn thoughtful.

"Well, a good movie about Wonder Woman is way overdue in my opinion, but swords and sandals movies are not exactly my forte."

"I could always write the outlines of a scenario for it." Proposed Nancy, malice in her eyes. "After all, the true main story about Wonder Woman is about how an Amazon demigod is thrown into the modern era. However, the original premise in the cartoons, about her coming to fight the Nazis while wearing the colors of the U.S.A., should be completely dropped. Those cartoons were started during World War Two and were nothing more than crude war propaganda, feel-good material meant for American readers."

"True!" Agreed Bigelow. "You really would be ready to write a scenario for a Wonder Woman movie, Nancy?"

"Why not? It could actually prove to be quite fun for me. As things goes, it looks like my role of the She-Hulk in AVENGERS 2 was only a passing, secondary one, with little future for it on the big screen. In contrast, the role of the Shadow Dancer has proved to be a lot more fulfilling."

"And your latest role as a Bond girl?" Said Chris Evans, making Nancy think for a second before answering.

“Well, I have to say that playing alongside Daniel Craig was a nice experience, but I am not really fond of playing simple sex objects. I would actually have liked more to play a strong female villain instead. But don’t get me wrong: playing in ‘HIGH TIME TO KILL’ was worth it.”

Their conversation was then cut short by the appearance of Roman Abramovich and of his wife Dasha in the lounge. While Dasha took place on a sofa, Roman walked to the middle of the lounge to speak to his guests, a wide smile on his face.

“Welcome aboard the ECLIPSE, ladies and gentlemen, and thank you for accepting my little invitation. I am pleased to see that you brought your children with you, as this cruise is meant as much for their enjoyment as for yours. We will soon be underway for the high seas and will sail south on a three-day cruise before returning to Long Beach. Consider the facilities on this ship as yours and do not hesitate to ask if you need anything. This said, my head steward and my head hostess will guide you on a quick tour of the ship, to show you the facilities available, then we will have a hot buffet supper on the aft pool deck. Later in the evening, we could have a few dances and drinks at the disco club, while your younger children could go play in the electronic arcade room or go watch a movie. If you don’t have any questions at this time, I will now turn you over to my head steward and hostess. If you may please split into two groups and follow them.”

The guests eagerly got up from their seats then and mingled for a while before forming two roughly equal groups and starting the tour.

That tour left many of the guests in awe on seeing things like the disco hall, the two pools, the two helicopter pads, the many hot tubs and the mini-submarine in one of the boat bays. The hot buffet that was served following the tour proved no less impressive, with choices for every taste and diet. As per her habit, Nancy ate only moderately then and had only one cup of wine as alcoholic drink, preferring instead to concentrate on socializing with the other guests and their host. She also moderated herself at the disco hall, dancing a lot but only drinking mineral water in order to stay sober. In contrast, many of the other guests indulged quite a lot, with a few being rather unsteady by the time Nancy and a few others decided to go change into bathing suits in order to go take a dip in one of the hot tubs. Nancy finally excused herself with the other

guests and her host at around midnight and went to her cabin, taking a quick shower before going to sleep.

03:58 (California Time)

Friday, March 2, 2018 'A'

Bridge of the M/Y ECLIPSE

The bodyguard that was doing the night shift on the bridge of the yacht was a relatively junior one in the pecking order of Roman Abramovich's small army of bodyguard, thus had been given with two other junior bodyguards the shift when the threat would be the least. The fact that the three junior bodyguards had volunteered for this night shift had helped, of course. Yevgeni Vlassov, the one on bridge watch, looked again at his watch, hiding his growing nervousness. Soon afterwards, he got on his pocket radio transceiver the call he was expecting from Sergei, the bodyguard watching the open air aft decks.

"Yevgeni, this is Sergei. I am going to take a long number two bathroom break." In response, Yevgeni spoke in the microphone hooked to his jacket lapel.

"Understood! You may go ahead, Sergei. Ivan, replace Sergei for a moment on the aft pool deck."

"On my way!" Answered Yvan, the bodyguard on guard in front of the steel door of the armored suite in which Roman Abramovich and his family slept. This apparently innocuous exchange in fact hid prearranged coded phrases with much more sinister meanings. As junior bodyguards for Abramovich, Yevgeni and the two other men presently on watch would be considered very well paid by most standards. The problem for Abramovich was that someone who hated him had offered the junior bodyguards much more, with as an added incentive a threat to hurt their families if they refused the offer or double-crossed the Russian mafia oligarch doing the offering. With a promise of enough money to retire in luxury and having served Abramovich for only a few years, the three men had accepted the 'offer'. With their families now 'temporary guests' of the said oligarch until the job was completed successfully, the three bodyguards started their moves with grim determination.

While Yevgeni stayed on the bridge and watched the three crewmembers on duty there, Sergei joined up with Ivan on the V.I.P. deck, then went down to the deck

and section where the nine other bodyguards of the yacht's protection force slept. Screwing silencers to their pistols first, the two men quietly entered first the cabin occupied by Abramovich's head bodyguard, a dangerous man indeed with Russian special forces training to his pedigree. A bullet to the head of the sleeping man was however enough to end his life abruptly. Tense as steel bars, Sergei and Ivan then moved to the next cabin, killing the two men sleeping there with single bullets to the head. They repeated the process three more times in less than six minutes, eliminating the only armed opposition they expected on the yacht. Playing it safe, they also gathered the weapons of the dead men, so that no one else could use them, putting the weapons and ammunition in a large canvas kit bag that they carried with them up to the aft pool deck. There, Sergei used his radio to call their accomplice on the bridge.

"Yevgeni, this is Sergei: I am back at my post and Ivan is on his way back to his post. Nothing unusual to report. Everybody is sleeping soundly."

"Understood! Yevgeni out!" Replied the bodyguard on the bridge. His time to act had finally come. Turning around to present his back to the officer of the watch and the helmsman, Yevgeni discreetly took out his pistol and screwed a silencer to its muzzle, then silently walked to the officer, raising his pistol and shooting the man in the back of the neck. The muffled 'PUFF' made the helmsman turn his head towards Yevgeni, in time for the sailor to get a bullet between the eyes. As the helmsman crumpled to the deck, Yevgeni walked out of the covered, armored bridge and onto the open air bridge port wing, where the other sailor on watch stood, scanning the night with his binoculars. That sailor, concentrated on his observation task, was dead before he realized that something was wrong. Returning inside the covered bridge, Yevgeni went to the helm and made sure that the ship was still on its planned heading, then engaged the autopilot. He now had only two things left to do. First, he walked to the communications room, adjacent to the bridge, and entered it. The bored radio operator inside only had time to look up at Yevgeni before the latter shot him dead in his seat. At about the same time, the muffled noise of the big diesel engines of the yacht went down noticeably, a signal that Sergei had taken control of the engine room. Stepping forward to the banks of radio transceivers, Yevgeni changed the frequency on one of the HF radios and spoke in Russian in its microphone.

"Vulture, this is Shark, come in!"

He had to repeat his message once before getting a response, also in Russian.

"This is Vulture. Send, Shark!"

"From Shark: the fish is hooked up. You may pull the line out now, over."

"Understood, Shark. Give us fifteen minutes, Vulture out!"

His main job now done, Yevgeni returned to the bridge and contacted by intercom the engine room, checking with Sergei there that all was under control. Sergei answered in the affirmative, which meant that he had already killed the engineer and the mechanics on night watch. Reassured about that part of their operation, Yevgeni went to the engine controls besides the helmsman's station and gradually reduced power, making the yacht slow down to five knots, just enough to avoid that the sea made the ship roll enough to wake up one of the guests or Roman Abramovich himself. Going to the surface navigation radar screen, Yevgeni watched it intently, until a fast moving blip appeared on it twelve minutes later. He then called with his pocket radio Ivan, who should now be standing on the open stern deck.

"Ivan, this is Yevgeni. Our friends are approaching from four O'clock. Be ready to greet them."

"Ivan, understood!"

Yevgeni, feeling a bit better now, sat down in the captain's chair and tried to ignore the bodies of the men he had killed: the only thing left for him to do was to wait for the reinforcements to arrive.

Sixteen minutes later, a large, powerful speedboat approached the ECLIPSE from its starboard stern, slowing down once near the yacht and then falling astern close enough for a waiting Ivan to throw a mooring cable to the man standing on the forward deck of the speedboat. A lightweight boarding plank was then put in place and 22 heavily armed men wearing dark commando outfits and sky masks ran aboard the ECLIPSE. The leader of the boarders immediately went to talk with Ivan in Russian.

"Everything went well?"

"Like clockwork, sir. Abramovich's bodyguards are dead, along with the night watch crewmembers of the bridge, engine room and radio room. Abramovich, his family, his guests and the rest of the crew are all sleeping right now."

"Excellent! You will guide me and four men to Abramovich's suite, while two more men will go to the bridge. The rest will eliminate quietly the remaining crewmembers."

"Uh, is that really necessary, sir? There are numerous maids, waitresses and cooks in the lot, none of which would present any threat to us."

The head of the boarders gave a loathing look at Ivan: the man was proving to be a bit soft for the job to his taste.

"The less witnesses left, the better. They know you and the two others: they could reveal afterwards to the police your roles in this, if that is what you want."

"Er, no sir! I understand." Answered Ivan, understanding that he could well end up with a bullet in the brain if he insisted.

"Then, let's go! We have quite a lot to do before dawn arrives."

04:48 (California Time)

Nancy's cabin, M/Y ECLIPSE

Nancy woke up abruptly in her dark cabin, nearly bumping her head on the top bunk above her when she sat up: a mental jolt of sheer terror from close by had just hit her brain. That jolt had however ended as abruptly as it had come, which could signify only one thing: that person had just died. Concentrating on her telepathic powers, she soon intercepted other thoughts: some were dreams from people sleeping, but others went around with cold determination. Nancy was even able to visualize the thoughts of a Russian man as he pointed a silenced weapon at a sleeping maid and killed her with a bullet to the head as she lay in her bunk bed. The same man then killed the young woman sleeping on the upper bunk bed before leaving that cabin. Now realizing with a sinking feeling that something horrible was happening aboard the yacht, Nancy quietly but quickly got out of bed and, using only the small headlamp of her bed as illumination, started quickly dressing up, putting on a pair of jeans, a T-shirt and her running shoes. She was about to grab her pistols in her locker when a short scream of fear came from the hallway outside her cabin. The noise of running feet coming her way then followed. Going to the door of her cabin and opening it, Nancy was just in time to see young Zahara Jolie-Pitt, wearing only her panties, being hit in her back by something and crumbling to the floor right in front of her door, convulsing and shouting with pain. Nancy had seen often enough the effects of taser darts to recognize what had happened to the young teenager. The noise of booted feet approaching was followed by a man's voice speaking in accented English to the thirteen year-old girl still convulsing on the deck.

"You try to run and I will give you another jolt, young bitch! Now, shut up!"

Rage filled Nancy instantly and she stepped quickly in the hallway to stand between Zahara and her attacker. Slapping away the electrode wires of the taser pistol held by

the man in dark combat suit approaching in the hallway, Nancy then projected a mental energy bolt at the attacker. Hit in the chest by the invisible, silent bolt, the man literally flew off his feet and was projected backward, to slam violently his back and head against the steel corner of the nearby passageway junction. He then slid slowly to the floor like a broken puppet, knocked out. Leaving him be for the moment, Nancy bent down and helped up Zahara, who was crying with pain and fear.

“Don’t fear anymore, Zahara: I am here to protect you. What happened?”

“I...I was returning to my cabin after going to the bathroom when that man in black appeared from behind that corner, pointing a gun at me. I tried to flee but something very painful hit me in the back.”

“He used a taser gun on you, Zahara. Thankfully, the effects are strictly temporary. Go inside my cabin and wait for me there: I have to go check and disarm that man. I won’t be long, I promise.”

Nancy actually gently pushed Zahara into her cabin before running silently to the unconscious man. Scanning first both ends of the passageway, she then dragged the limp man inside the girls’ bathroom, near her cabin, before starting to disarm and search him. The man, on top of having a taser pistol, was armed with a compact UZI PRO 9mm submachine gun equipped with a sound suppressor and with a GLOCK 17 9mm pistol, also equipped with a silencer. The UZI PRO, a very compact weapon measuring only about thirty centimeters with its stock folded, was also equipped with a holographic quick aiming sight, making it an ideal weapon for close quarter fighting. Nancy grabbed it, along with three spare magazines that she slipped in her belt. Seeing a pocket radio linked to a headset worn by the man, she grabbed it as well. After a quick thought, she decided then to simply take the tactical vest of the man and wear it, something that would make carrying the radio and ammunition much easier and more practical. That done, she violently twisted the man’s head, breaking his neck and killing him: she could not afford to risk him waking up and becoming again a threat to the children sleeping in this part of the ship. That thought then made her think about her next move. Obviously, her most urgent task was to protect the children from the murdering bastards that were still killing the whole crew in their sleep. The problem was that any noise of gunfire would certainly attract quickly more pirates, as she now considered the boarders to be, while someone was bound to eventually look for the missing man. In both eventualities bullets were bound to fly left and right, with the thin partitions of the cabins being poor obstacles to them and making accidental casualties among the children very likely. She

had to find a more secure place for them to hide, and quick! Unfortunately, she could sense the thoughts of numerous pirates all around her, even on the lower decks, where she could have used some storage compartment to hide the children. Even then, any surprise encounter with one or more pirates would catch her and the children on the move and in the open, where the kids would be hideously vulnerable to lost or ricocheting bullets. Nancy concluded finally that there was only one way to truly safeguard the children while she tried to save their parents. Unfortunately, that option carried a bitter cost to her, as it meant that she would blow away her secret of being a time traveler. That dilemma was however a short one: as was customary for her, her heart won over her logic, and damn the personal consequences to her! More than thirty children were now in mortal danger and could only count on her. Her decision taken, she grabbed the pirate's pistol in one hand and the UZI PRO in the other and returned to her cabin, where she found Zahara hiding behind one of the bunk beds.

"That was the right idea to hide, Zahara. Stay here: I will go get your sisters."

"What about my brothers and the other kids, Miss Laplante?" Asked the ex-Ethiopian child refugee, fear and worry in her voice. Nancy gave her a gentle, reassuring smile.

"I will go get them as well, but I can't do it in one move only. What is your cabin number?"

"Cabin 233, miss."

"Good! Stay where you are and, please, don't leave this cabin for any reason. I will be back in a couple minutes."

Leaving her cabin and going down three doors, she opened the door of cabin 233, which had been left half opened, and entered the dark compartment, closing the door behind her. She first woke up eleven year-old Shiloh Jolie-Pitt, putting one hand over her mouth so that she would not scream. The contact made the blonde open her eyes at once and look with fear at the dark shape hovering over her. Nancy hurried to reassure her.

"Don't be scared! I'm Nancy Laplante. You need to wake up and dress quietly and quickly: bad men are roaming the ship and I must hide you from them. Please don't ask questions and be quick to dress. Zahara is already hiding in my cabin."

"But, my parents..." Started to say young Shiloh. Nancy cut her at once.

"I will go help them once you and the other kids are all safely hidden from the bad men. Now, please dress quickly and don't ask more questions."

Still fearful but obeying her, the young teenager got up and dressed while Nancy woke up in turn her nine year-old sister Vivienne and seven year-old Harper Beckham, the daughter of the famous soccer player David Beckham. Seeing that waiting for all of them to be dressed would cost crucial minutes, she told Vivienne and Harper to forget about that and to follow her and Shiloh to her cabin. Thankfully, no pirates showed up during the short trip down the passageway and the four of them made it without incident to Nancy's cabin, where Zahara greeted her sisters with emotional hugs. While the African girl told in a low voice to the three other girls what had happened to her, Nancy quickly took out of one of her bags a small box of what appeared at first to be simple pens. Taking eight of the 'pens' out of their box, she then quickly distributed them around the free space in the back of her cabin, one in each corner of an imaginary cube. The pens, in reality space-time beacon units of very advanced design, stuck to the walls thanks to integrated micro tractor beam devices. Activating the eight beacons one after the other, Nancy ended up with a large cubic volume of space that she was going to be able to use to return to her cabin with uncanny precision by jumping space-time. Fully realizing that there would be no turning back once she did her next move, Nancy took Vivienne and Harper in her arms, then told Shiloh and Zahara to glue themselves to her, each stepping on one of her feet and their arms embracing her waist tightly.

"Don't be scared by what will follow, little ones: you are going to a very safe place only I know about. Hold on tight to me."

"I want my mommy!" Said seven year-old Harper Beckham, starting to cry with fear. Nancy gently kissed her on the head and spoke to her softly.

"You will see her as soon as I can take care of those bad men, my little angel." She then concentrated for a second, sending a mental command to the computer controlling the time distorter unit surgically implanted to the inside face of her lower spine. She and the four young girls disappeared a second later from the cabin in a brief flash of white light.

06:58 (Jerusalem Time)

Saturday, May 8, 1948 'B'

Overseer's apartments, Government Administrative Tower

Jerusalem, Holy Land of Palestine

Herakles Sirtis was putting the final touch on his breakfast, a humongous sandwich made with two fried eggs, bacon, cheese slices and two sausage patties. He then decided to practice a bit his telekinesis talents and used his mind to raise in the air, then flip over the slice of bread smothered with mayonnaise, dropping it in place on top of the sandwich. Satisfied with his work, the thirteen year-old boy, huge and muscular for his age, grabbed the sandwich with both hands and took a hungry bite out of it. His appetite was as big as his testosterone drive and muscle mass, byproducts of the genetically boosted hormone production in his body. Conceived in-vitro in the 34th Century of Timeline 'B' in the civilization of the World Council and by scientists with deeply misguided goals concerning time travel, Herakles had been genetically engineered to go to Ancient Greece and play there the role of the legendary hero Hercules, whose proper Greek name was Herakles. Thus, apart from benefitting from the intrinsic mental powers that all World Council citizens possessed thanks to natural evolution, Herakles was of a size and muscular power totally out of the norm. At thirteen, Herakles already stood a full 182 centimeters, with wide shoulders and thick legs, and weighed a solid 110 kilos, without a gram of extra fat. He also possessed a premature and strong sexual drive, due to the boosted levels of testosterone produced by his body, and had bedded his first girlfriend, Tera of Sparta, when he was still only eight years old. The appearance and intervention of Nancy had however put a stop to the irresponsible projects of the World Council, but not before Herakles had found himself marooned in time in 5th Century B.C.E. Rome, where Nancy had delivered him, Tera and a few other girls from a life of slavery. Since then, Herakles had been living with Nancy, who had adopted him along with Tera. Right now, he was expecting Nancy to reappear in about fifteen minutes, according to her time sharing schedule, after jumping to the 21st Century of Timeline 'A' fifteen minutes ago to go live for six months her life there as a war correspondent and actress.

Herakles was taking a second bite out of his sandwich when Nancy reappeared unexpectedly in the adjacent family lounge, well before her scheduled return. She also happened to be with four young girls who were carried by her or grabbed on tightly to her. Understanding at once that something very wrong was happening, as Nancy never brought other people from the 21st Century back with her to Timeline 'B' Jerusalem, Herakles put down his sandwich and wiped quickly his mouth with his napkin before

running out of the kitchen and into the lounge. The four girls, one of them apparently of African origin, were being put down by Nancy as Herakles abruptly came to a halt near her.

“Mom? What is happening? You are returning early.”

Nancy gave him a gentle but pained smile as she answered him.

“Something horrible is happening in 2018 ‘A’, something that left me no other choice but to bring these children here for their own safety. There are however still many more children in imminent danger and I must go back at once to grab them and bring them here.”

“Can I go with you to help?” Eagerly asked Herakles, making Nancy smile with pride and caress his curly black hair.

“You think like a true hero, my lovely Herakles. However, time is of the essence and danger is acute back in 2018. You will be much more useful to me here, to take care and reassure the children I will bring here.”

“Won’t bringing those girls here blow away your secret as a time traveler?” Asked Herakles, letting the words come out under the emotion of the moment. The two oldest girls snapped their heads at those words and looked at him with disbelief, something that did not escape Nancy’s attention. She however had started herself that train of events and could not blame Herakles for this.

“It may very well do that, but I will deal with that in due time. For the moment, I want you to go wake up Miriam and Tera, so that they could help you care for the children I will bring in. By the way, this is Zahara, Vivienne, Shiloh and Harper. Girls, this is my adopted son Herakles. Don’t let his size fool you: he is only thirteen years of age.”

“Only thirteen?” Replied Zahara, the oldest girl of the lot and also thirteen. She then remembered that she was only wearing panties and belatedly covered her budding breasts with her hands. Herakles, who was actually finding Zahara quite cute, smiled to her and showed her the nearby kitchen.

“Let’s go to the kitchen: we have to leave the space in this lounge free for Nancy’s next return. I will then go get one of Tera’s T-shirts for you.”

The four girls watched with disbelief Nancy disappear in a brief flash of white light before following Herakles to the kitchen, where he made them sit on high stools at the service counter.

“I will go wake up some others to help. I won’t be long, I promise.”

Zahara exchanged a befuddled look with her eleven year-old sister Shiloh as Herakles hurried out of the kitchen.

"What did this boy mean about time travel?" Asked Shiloh, a bright and lively beautiful blond girl with a tomboy attitude. "And how did she bring us here? In fact, where are we?"

"Uh, I don't know." Said Zahara. She then saw that there was a balcony with large patio sliding doors connected to the lounge. Some kind of city was visible through the glass panes of the patio doors. She pointed the doors to Shiloh and the two other girls, who were still distressed and unsettled.

"Let's go see from that balcony."

Taking the hands of her sister Vivienne and of little Harper Beckham, Zahara then went with Shiloh to the lounge, opening one of the sliding doors and stepping on the balcony. The balcony, made apparently of metal, was enclosed by a transparent box shell with numerous small holes meant to let air circulate while preventing any accidental fall. The balcony gave as a result a fantastic view of the outside, being at least twenty stories above the ground. Zahara looked around with fascination at the ancient walled city close to the tower they were in.

"Angelina once brought us here: we are in Jerusalem."

"In Israel? But, that's impossible!" Objected Shiloh. "How could she travel like this with us?"

"I don't know, sister. Maybe this boy Herakles will be able to tell us."

"Can he be really only thirteen, Zahara? He is so huge."

"But he really looks nice." Replied the African girl, who had admired Herakles' muscles and built. "He seemed kind, too."

Herakles showed up a few seconds later, a T-shirt in one hand and concern on his face. He first handed the T-shirt to Zahara after stepping on the balcony.

"Here, Zahara, this T-shirt is for you. You should have stayed in the kitchen, liked I asked you."

"We were curious about where we were, Herakles. This is Jerusalem, isn't it?" Herakles hesitated for a moment before nodding his head.

"Yes, it is. Let's go back to the kitchen before Nancy returns, girls."

The four girls reluctantly followed Herakles back into the kitchen, where a woman in her thirties and a teenage girl soon joined them, coming from nearby bedrooms. The

woman was clearly of Semitic blood, while the teenager had a Mediterranean look to her. Herakles spoke briefly to them in a language the girls didn't understand before smiling to Zahara and the three others and speaking in English.

"Girls, this is Miriam of Magdala and Tera of Sparta. Miriam is a good friend of Nancy, while Tera was adopted by Nancy, like me."

A preteen boy with olive skin and curly hair then joined them as well, prompting another presentation by Herakles.

"This is David of Nazareth, the son of Miriam. Guys, this is Zahara, Shiloh, Vivienne and Harper. Nancy said that she was going to bring more children in."

"By God!" Said softly Miriam. "What is happening exactly in 2018, Herakles?"

"Nancy didn't give me much details yet. She said that many children are in imminent danger over there and that bringing them here was the only way to keep them safe."

"She told me that bad men were attacking our ship." Volunteered Zahara. "One of those bad men shot at me but Miss Laplante then knocked him out."

"A ship? What kind of ship?" Asked Tera.

"A private yacht. It is a very big one indeed and belongs to a rich man that invited our family and other families of Hollywood celebrities for a short cruise out of Los Angeles."

"Pirates!" Hissed Tera, deducing at once why that yacht had been attacked. "I hate pirates! They killed my own parents and sold me into slavery before Nancy found and saved me."

Zahara didn't have time to ask questions about that, as Nancy reappeared at that moment in the lounge, four young boys holding on to her. One of the boys was sobbing, prompting Miriam of Magdala to walk quickly to Nancy to take the boy from Nancy's arms and hug him in her own arms.

"My poor little angel! Don't worry anymore: you are now safe here."

As Miriam returned to the kitchen while carrying the boy, Nancy pointed at Tera.

"Tera, I need you to call our Paris outpost and to have it alert Mike. I need him here to help manage this situation, and quick!"

"I'm on it!" Said the Spartan teenager, starting to run towards Nancy's work office, where there was a videophone. On her part, Nancy disappeared yet again, her submachine gun in one hand and ready to use it if need be on reemergence.

Miriam and Herakles were still doing their best to reassure and calm the eight children when Nancy reappeared again, this time with two boys and two girls, all close to the age of ten. She was tense and looked clearly worried as she put down Seraphina and Violet Affleck and let Knox Jolie-Pitt and Henry Weisz-Oronofsky unglue themselves from her.

“Herakles, things are getting dicey on the yacht: I had to shoot and kill one pirate who was looking for the one I killed and hid. The remaining pirates will soon notice the absence of these two men, but there are still at least fifteen kids left for me to bring here and I may run out of time for that. I need some backup: go get one of the combat robots on duty outside my official office.”

Herakles nodded and immediately ran out of the lounge as Nancy led the four newcomers to the increasingly crowded kitchen and dining room area. All twelve children from the ECLIPSE opened wide eyes when Herakles quickly returned with a fantastic, intimidating machine behind him. The machine, the size of a beefy man, rolled on a pair of rubberized tracks, had a number of appendages jutting out of its cylindrical body and had what looked like a weapons turret in place of a head. Nancy read quickly the number painted on the robot’s torso before speaking to it with authority.

“Unit 3419, you are to jump behind me to a ship off the coast of California on Friday, March 2 of the year 2018 ‘A’, at 05:04, California time. Once aboard the ship, I will position you so that you can deny access to a portion of passageway where children are hiding. You will stand guard under cloak and will use only your stun gun. The enemy is dressed in black commando suits, tactical vests and black ski masks. Shoot them on sight before they could trigger an alert or shoot their weapons. You are however to stand your ground and not chase after them. Do you have questions, Unit 3419?”

“What are the precise jump coordinates, Overseer?” Asked the machine in a normal human male voice, making the children watching this gasp.

“I am going now to transmit by radio the coordinates, Unit 3419. I have placed eight space-time beacons that are marking our reemergence area.”

Nancy then seemingly concentrated for a moment, as she mentally ordered her implanted computer to transmit the needed data via radio to the waiting combat robot. Next, she returned to the middle of the lounge and gave a final order to the robot.

“Jump precisely fifteen seconds after I do, Unit 3419.”

Nancy then disappeared for the third time from the lounge. The robot rolled to the spot she had stood in and disappeared itself fifteen seconds after Nancy, making eleven year-old Henry Weisz exclaim with awe.

“WOW! That was cool!”

Zahara, who was still the oldest child from the ECLIPSE present, looked with puzzlement at Miriam.

“That thing called Miss Laplante ‘Overseer’. What does that mean?”

Miriam of Magdala volunteered an answer readily enough, pushed in that by her honest and straight nature.

“Nancy Laplante is the ruler of Palestine in this time period and has the title of ‘Overseer of the Holy Land of Palestine’. She is as well Queen of Jerusalem. Many also call her ‘The Hand of God’ because of the miracles she performed. What is your name again, girl?”

“Zahara, Zahara Jolie-Pitt. Isn’t Jerusalem supposed to be in Israel, miss?”

Miriam shook her head in response.

“Israel doesn’t exist in this time period, never did in fact. Palestine is a unified state comprising all of ancient Israel, with Arabs, Jews and Christians all living in peace and prosperity, thanks to Nancy. She is truly the best thing that ever happened to the Holy Land. As for your parents and those of these other children, don’t worry: Nancy can deal with about any threat, especially with a combat robot to back her up.”

Tera came back at that moment from Nancy’s office, followed by a big, powerful man wearing a sort of gray uniform and by a giant, bald woman wearing a flowing dress. Zahara opened her eyes wide on detailing the giant woman, who stood well over two meters tall but was of slim built. The Ethiopian girl couldn’t help recoil in fear on seeing that the woman had six fingers per hand, instinctively hiding behind Miriam.

“Is she an alien?”

“No, she is simply a woman from the far future, Zahara. Her name is Farah Tolkonen and she is a gentle and kind woman. She also happens to be Nancy’s superior. The man is Mike Crawford, Nancy’s husband.”

Farah, like Mike, surveyed quickly the twelve children from the ECLIPSE, her expression softening gradually as she could see the fearful and disturbed expressions on their young faces. She then looked at Miriam and spoke to her in a subdued tone.

“Tell me what is happening exactly, Miriam? This is after all a major breach of protocol on the part of Nancy.”

"I know and I am sure that Nancy understands that very well. She was however faced with an impossible situation and had to act quickly to protect those children. Many more children are still left to be brought here to safety, according to her. She just jumped back to the year 2018 'A', with a combat robot as a backup. She ordered the robot to stay under cloak and to use only its stun gun on the pirates that attacked the private yacht she and those kids were on. She should be back here with more children in about two minutes and will then be able to give you more precisions."

Mike Crawford, who was detailing the children, frowned as he thought that he recognized some of them.

"I believe that at least a couple of those kids are the children of Hollywood celebrities, am I right?"

Young Zahara took on herself to answer that, stepping out from behind Miriam.

"We all are, sir. My parents are Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt. Mister Abramovich is a very rich man and invited about twenty of the top actors and actresses in Hollywood on his yacht, along with their spouses, us and Miss Laplante. The bad men attacked at night, while we were sleeping."

Zahara's answer made Farah Tolkonen tighten her jaw.

"Hollywood celebrities? Then, this story will be nearly impossible to contain. The medias will have a field day with this incident. Having those kids not talk about what they saw here, especially with the police investigation that will certainly follow, will take a miracle."

"Could this story hurt Miss Laplante, miss?" Asked Zahara, suddenly worried for her savior. Farah grimly nodded her head.

"That and a lot more, little Zahara. In fact, history could be gravely damaged if word of Nancy being a time traveler comes out in the open in 2018. What she did may be admirable and chivalrous, but it was also damn foolish."

"So, she should have let those pirates hurt us?" Shot back Zahara, disapproval clear in her tone. That made Farah pause as she understood now the full extent of the dilemma Nancy had to face. Scanning again the young faces around her only made her hesitate more about how to answer the young African girl. That was when Nancy reappeared in the lounge for the fourth time, carrying two boys and two girls. Mike went at once to her and took one of the girls, a beautiful blonde of about ten, in his powerful arms before kissing quickly Nancy. In turn, Nancy gave him a tired, stressed look.

"It's really nice to see you here, Mike. This is shaping out to be a major event and tragedy in 2018. As far as I can make out, pirates have already massacred the whole crew of the yacht ECLIPSE, over seventy men and women, while they were asleep. They are now busy rounding up the owner and his adult guests and gathering them on one of the stern decks. I was able to read the mind of one of those pirates: they are planning to use those children as means of pressure against their parents, to convince them to give away their secret bank account numbers and access codes. They are even ready to torture these children in front of their parents to make them talk. Those bastards, who are all Russian by the way, are capable of anything and won't hesitate to hurt or kill these children. I really had no choice but to bring them here to ensure their safety. On the yacht, they would have been exposed to crossfire and lost bullets."

Mike's jaws tightened as Nancy spoke, while Farah's mouth opened under the shock of hearing this.

"The bastards! Fuck the protocols then! We can't let that happen."

"But, your secret as a time traveler will be blown in the open by this, Nancy. The future could be at grave risk." Objected Farah. Zahara then surprised them all by stepping forward and speaking in a resolute voice.

"I don't understand much of what you said but, if it is to help avoid trouble to Miss Laplante, I am ready to lie about what happened to us. We can all do that. Right, guys?"

"You would be ready to lie even to your mother, Zahara?" Asked Nancy, deeply touched by her response.

"To my parents, no, but I am sure that they will understand and keep your secret, miss."

Twelve year-old Violet Affleck and fourteen year-old Joe Alphonso Winslet-Mendes then spoke up in turn.

"My parents will stay mum, Miss Laplante."

"Mine too!"

All the children present nodded their heads then, with seven year-old Aleph Portman being the only one to hesitate.

"Mom told me often that she doesn't trust you, miss. Do you really rule on Israel here?"

Nancy gave the little boy a somber look: one dissenting voice would be enough to blow away her secret in 2018.

"I rule here, yes, but it is called 'The Holy Land of Palestine', not Israel. I am also Queen of Jerusalem. You may tell your mother about what you saw and heard here, but tell her to come speak to me before she does anything else, once I am finished eliminating those pirates."

"I will tell her that, Miss Laplante."

"Thank you for your comprehension, Aleph. I will now have to return to the yacht to get more children. Don't worry about your parents: I will protect them from those pirates."

Nancy next looked at Mike and Farah, an apologetic look on her face.

"I am truly sorry about causing such a breach of protocol, but I just couldn't live with myself if I had allowed those pirates to hurt these children."

"For all that it is worth, Nancy, I understand and approve your actions." Replied Farah, sober. "We will somehow manage the consequences of this affair. Now, go! Get those children!"

"Thank you, Farah, you are a real friend." Said Nancy, relieved. She then stepped back to the middle of the lounge and disappeared. Farah looked with pity at the sixteen children from the ECLIPSE, silent and gloomy, and smiled to them to cheer them up.

"Well, since you are here, we might as well make your stay as enjoyable and comfortable as possible, children."

05:09 (California Time)

Friday, March 2, 2018 'A'

Stern pool deck of the M/Y ECLIPSE

"What the hell do you want? Where are our children?" Growled Hugh Jackman, wearing only his pajamas, as a pirate pushed him and his wife Deborra-Lee towards other adult guests already assembled near the open air stern pool of the yacht. The pirate answered him in a heavily accented English.

"You will know very soon what we want. As for your children, they are still asleep in their cabins. Now, shut up and move!"

Seeing five more pirates around the pool deck, all masked and heavily armed, Jackman did not insist and joined the more than thirty adults already crowded in one corner of the open deck. He noticed that the only children present were the two younger children of Roman Abramovich, who was also part of the crowd with his wife Dasha, and the four year-old daughter of Channing Tatum and Jenna Dewan, Everly. Another five adult guests were pushed onto the deck in the next two minutes, before one pirate went to whisper in Russian into the ear of his leader, who was waiting near the hatch giving access to the interior of the ship.

“All the guest cabins are now empty, sir.”

“Good! Time to do the rewarding work.” Replied the leader before approaching the crowd dressed in a mix of pajamas and underwear, stopping a good eight paces from them before speaking up in English over the noise of the waves breaking against the hull of the yacht.

“Listen to me carefully, all of you. If you obey us and don’t play stupid, nobody will be hurt. For those wondering where your children are, they are still sleeping in their cabins, with two of my men watching over them. Nothing will happen to them as well...if you prove to be cooperative. You all have at least one, if not more, secret bank account with electronic access codes, where you stash your extra millions out of reach of the taxman. We want those millions, thus you will provide us in turn with your bank account numbers, user names and access passwords, so that we can then access those accounts and wire their contents to other accounts of our own. You are all still making millions every year, so the loss of those accounts won’t kill you. Resisting us will, however! If you refuse to give us your financial codes, then we will be obliged to inflict pain on either your spouse or your children, or even kill them if you think that we are not serious.”

The pirate leader was satisfied to see fear and worry then replace loathing and hostility on the faces of his prisoners. Roman Abramovich got closer to his wife, who was holding the hands of eight year-old Aaron and four year-old Leah Lou.

“Where is my crew? I don’t see any of them here.”

“They are all dead.” Answered coldly the pirate leader, sending a wave of horror through the adult guests and visibly angering Abramovich. “This should in fact convince you to take us seriously.”

"Since she is not here with us, I suppose that Laplante is in league with you." Shouted Natalie Portman. She belatedly realized, on seeing the confused look on the pirate's face, that her hostility towards Nancy had just made her make a big mistake.

"Who? Gennady, get me the guest list! Miss Portman, step forward!"

"Nice going, Natalie!" Said in a low voice Anne Hathaway as the contrite actress made her way through the front rank of guests. Wearing only her underwear, the small Israeli-American actress stepped hesitantly in front of the group, stopping three paces in front of the pirate leader, who gave her a warning look.

"Tell me again the name of that guest we are missing."

"It is Nancy Laplante. She was lodged in the same section than our children, due to the insufficient number of guest cabins available."

The reaction of the pirate leader was one of instant anger and frustration.

"NANCY LAPLANTE? THE TALIBAN EXTERMINATOR?"

"Her exactly."

Controlling his anger with difficulty, the pirate leader consulted the guest list just given to him and pointed a name and cabin number to his right hand man.

"Gennady, take six men and go get that Laplante in cabin 239. Don't take any chances with her and shoot her if she resists at all. She is to be considered very dangerous."

As Gennady turned around and ran inside the ship, the pirate leader gave a hard look at Natalie Portman.

"You may get back with the others now, Miss Portman. Thank you for the information."

The mortified actress walked back to her previous place, avoiding the eyes of the other guests. Channing Tatum, who stood with his wife and daughter near Daniel Craig and Rachel Weisz, whispered to Craig.

"My bet is on the Shadow Dancer on this."

"I hope like hell that you are proven right, Chan."

Taking with him two of the five men present on the pool deck with their leader, Gennady then made two quick radio calls and waited for four more pirates to join him, giving some terse instructions to them once they showed up.

"One guest, actress Nancy Laplante, is missing and is to be considered very dangerous. We are going to go check her cabin, number 239, in the same section where the children are. If she resist, you are to shoot her without hesitation."

"Laplante? The World karate champion? The one who went to Pakistan to deliver that CNN anchorman from the Taliban?" Asked one of the pirates, making Gennady nod.

"The same one. We can't screw around with her."

"But, Viktor and Dmitri were watching the children's quarters." Said another pirate. "Did they report anything?"

Swearing at himself for not thinking about that first, Gennady then tried to contact by radio the two men posted around the children's quarters, without success. He finally looked somberly at the six masked men assembled around him.

"Viktor and Dmitri are not answering. We must assume that they were taken out by this Laplante. Be sharp and shoot at the least sign of threat from her. Follow me."

With Gennady in the lead, the group of pirates first went down one deck, then followed the long central passageway of the Lower Deck, passing cautiously through a first steel hatch and then approaching a second hatch that gave access to the section housing the children. Pushing open the heavy steel hatch and seeing a few meters ahead of him the hallway junction leading to the children's cabins, Gennady stepped through the opening and cautiously and silently advanced, his submachine gun pointed and ready to fire. His six men followed close behind him, covering the passageway and side corridors with their pointed weapons and ready for anything. What they were not ready for was Nancy having hidden on one side of the hatch, where the opening steel panel would cover her. Staying mostly behind the cover of the hatch, she pointed her silenced UZI PRO submachine gun at the seven men turning their back to her. Firing on semi-automatic mode, she used the holographic sight of her weapon to good effect, shooting bullets in quick succession. The first two men were hit in the back of their heads before the rest, totally taken by surprise, started reacting and pivoting towards her. A third man was hit in the temple as he was half turned around, while a fourth got a bullet in the throat. That man fell backward, impeding the next man from pointing his own submachine gun. That fifth man got a bullet between the eyes before he could fire one shot. Only the sixth man and Gennady were able to fire wild bursts, only to see Nancy vanish into thin air just before they fired. Unable to believe their eyes, the two

Russians simply stood there, staring at the now empty space they had sprayed with bullets. Gennady then caught a bullet in the back of his head, spraying his shocked sixth man with blood and brain parts. The remaining pirate didn't have the time to wipe the blood covering his face before dying from a bullet to the right temple. Nancy, who had used her implanted time distorter to jump space-time to a spot opposite her original hiding place, looked down coldly at the seven bloody corpses now lining the passageway.

"I hope that you have a good time in Hell, you bastards!"

She then looked in the direction of her combat robot, still invisible and guarding the entrance to the children's quarters section.

"Thanks for the advance warning, Unit 3419. Continue your watch in this position while I resume the evacuation of the children."

"Yes, Overseer!" Answered a voice apparently coming from nowhere. Satisfied, Nancy walked past her robot, her back brushing the wall of the passageway, and entered a cabin where three teenage girls were still sleeping, oblivious of the fighting of the last few minutes, which had all been done with silenced weapons. Waking up quietly the girls and convincing them that she was not joking took more time than she cared for. Finally, after five long minutes, the three girls were ready to go and glued themselves to Nancy at her command, disappearing together in a brief flash of white light.

When she reappeared in her own cabin two minutes later, helped in this by her space-time beacons, Nancy listened carefully for a few seconds, then sent mentally a radio message to her combat robot.

"Unit 3419, this is the Overseer. Any movement or presence detected nearby?"

"Negative, Overseer. However, there was an exchange of radio traffic on the enemy frequency in the last minute. More armed men are on their way to here."

"Thank you, Unit 3419. Stay in position while I go get the last children."

Checking the magazine on her UZI PRO and finding that it had only ten bullets left in it, she quickly changed it for a full magazine but pocketed back the half empty magazine instead of simply throwing it away. Nancy then left her cabin and took quick, quiet looks in the last few cabins of the hallway that she had not checked out yet. She found that only one cabin, with four teenage boys sleeping inside, was still occupied. A radio message from her combat robot came in as she was about to wake the boys up.

"Alert! Two groups are approaching from opposite directions along the main passageway. From the angle of reception of the transmissions I am intercepting, they are each less than twenty meters away."

"Damn! No time left for me to transport away all four remaining boys before the shooting will start. Hold your position and do not let any enemy pass you, Unit 3419. I am coming to the fight."

Now truly out of time and wanting to get the four boys in safer positions as quickly as possible, Nancy grabbed with both hands the sleeping sixteen year-old Maddox Jolie-Pitt and pulled him out of his top bunk. The Cambodian teenager woke with a startle as Nancy was carrying him towards the back of his cabin.

"What?...Nancy? What are you doing?"

"Putting you in a safer place, Maddox. Pirates have taken over the ship and are on their way to here to grab you and the other kids."

As she was putting him down on the floor of the cabin, near the wall forming part of the outer hull, Maddox saw the tactical vest and submachine gun carried by Nancy and realized that she was serious.

"Wait! What about my sisters and brothers?"

"I already hid them from the pirates, along with the other children. Bullets are about to fly and I will ask you to stay here on your belly until I come back for you."

"Miss Laplante, what's going on?" Asked fifteen year-old Cashel Day-Lewis, who had awakened on hearing her and Maddox speak. "Why are you armed?"

"Too long to explain, boy." Said urgently Nancy. "A gunfight is about to erupt. Jump out of bed now and come join Maddox on the floor in the back of the cabin. You too, Oscar and Lucas!"

While still groggy and half-asleep, the three teenage boys obeyed her quickly enough, lying down besides Maddox. Nancy gave them a last warning before leaving their cabin.

"Stay down until I return to say it is safe to move around. Those pirates have already massacred the whole crew and will not hesitate to shoot at you."

That last sentence was enough to finish convincing the boys to obey her. This particular worry now out of the way, Nancy slipped out of the cabin and closed its door before switching to phase shift, making her implanted time distorter create a bubble of accelerated time around her. Now moving a thousand times faster than normal and being virtually invisible, she walked past her robot and headed towards the bow while following the main passageway. Effecting a short space-time jump to go past the next

water-tight steel hatch and reappearing while still in phase shift mode, Nancy saw the incoming enemy group as it was passing through the next hatch forward. That group counted four men who were clearly fully alert and ready to shoot. In normal circumstances, taking them out would have proved to necessitate a risky, prolonged firefight, but those were not normal circumstances and she was no ordinary fighter. Still invisible to the four Russians, Nancy simply walked to the hallway junction midway between the two hatches and positioned herself there behind a corner, then emerged from phase shift, her submachine gun pointed and on full automatic. Sweeping the group with a long burst, she downed all four Russians before they could even react to her. Taking three steps towards them, Nancy then coldly finished each of them with single bullets to the head before bending down and grabbing fresh submachine gun magazines from the tactical vests of the dead men. Switching back into phase shift, she walked back the way she had come, passing in front of her robot and going to meet the second group of incoming pirates. That fight proved even easier than the preceding one, as the three pirates of that group were caught as they were coming down a ladder connecting the Lower and Upper Decks. Peppered with bullets while still climbing down the steep steps, the three pirates fell on top of each other, forming a bloody pile on the steel gratings of the Lower Deck. Figuring that this would buy her enough time to go transport away the four boys left on the ship, Nancy returned to their cabin and had Maddox and Cashel get up and glue themselves to her body. Maddox, who had for years dreamed about Nancy's fabulous body, couldn't help himself taking hold of Nancy in a strategic spot, making her look down with a smirk at the teenage boy.

"Getting audacious, are we?"

She then jumped space-time with the two boys, leaving Oscar Jackman and Lucas Vodianova to look with disbelieving eyes at the spot where they had been.

05:22 (California Time)

Stern pool deck of the M/Y ECLIPSE

Seeing the leader of the pirates getting more and more agitated as he tried to contact his men by radio, but not understanding Russian, Hugh Jackman whispered to Liev Schreiber, to his immediate right in the crowd of scared and increasingly cold guests gathered in a corner of the open pool deck.

"What is he saying, Liev?"

"He has been trying to contact the men he sent to find Laplante, but none of them seem to be responding anymore. I don't think that this is just a radio communication problem: he still can contact his men on the bridge and the engine room. It seems that the Shadow Dancer is true to form tonight."

"That Nancy is incredible. I thought that her reputation was overdone, but I'll concede now that I was wrong about that."

At that moment, the pirate leader seemed to give up on his attempts at calling his men and went to an intercom telephone housed in a watertight casing bolted to a steel wall. Opening the casing and grabbing the handset, he punched a button and spoke in the microphone, with his amplified voice reverberating all around the ship.

"MISS LAPLANTE, LISTEN WELL TO THIS, WHEREVER YOU ARE. I GIVE YOU THREE MINUTES TO SURRENDER YOURSELF. AFTER THAT, WE WILL START EXECUTING ONE GUEST EVERY MINUTE, UNTIL YOU SHOW UP ON THE OPEN POOL DECK, UNARMED AND WITH YOUR HANDS UP. THE THREE MINUTES START NOW!"

"Oh my God!" Exclaimed Deborra-Lee Jackman, horrified, as her husband tightened his jaw in anger.

"The bastard! Even if Nancy surrenders now, they will certainly execute her. Then, we will be back to square one."

"But, what else can she do?" Said Liev Schreiber. "She is not the kind to let innocents die just to save her skin."

Hugh Jackman thought for a moment before answering that.

"I wish that I could take a bet with you about that, Liev. But I simply can't say it out loud right now."

The big, 191 centimeter-tall actor gave Hugh a funny glance, then looked at his watch.

"Well, whatever she does, she better do it quickly."

Two minutes passed, with the hostages growing increasingly nervous and fearful as time went by. When only thirty seconds remained, the pirate leader gave a brief order to one of the three pirates standing with him on the pool deck.

"Sergei, pick one of the kids in the crowd and bring it to me."

The few parents who had a child with them, including Channing and Jenna Tatum, stiffened at once and hugged tightly their children as the pirate started walking towards them, his submachine gun at the ready. A popping sound, like popcorn bursting,

suddenly reverberated around the pool deck, coming from the Jacuzzi Deck above and forward of the pool deck. The pirate advancing on the hostages was the first to fall, his head exploding under the impact of a bullet. The pirate standing next to his leader was next, a bullet entering through his neck and going down to pierce his heart. The pirate leader, pivoting and looking up while pointing his pistol towards the Jacuzzi Deck, got hit in the right shoulder, making him drop his pistol. Another bullet then hit him in his left shoulder, with a third following quickly, hitting him in the right leg. Nearly totally disabled, the pirate leader crumbled to the deck while shouting in pain. A dark shape then jumped down from the Jacuzzi Deck, landing smoothly besides the pool while facing towards the bow. The sole pirate remaining intact on the pool deck, who was guarding the access to the inside of the ship, tried to point his submachine gun and shoot, but lost the duel, with Nancy shooting him in the face. The whole scene took only a total of seven seconds, leaving the hostages stunned and disbelieving. However, instead of savoring her triumph and mingling with the other guests, Nancy started running towards the hatch giving access to the inside, while shouting an order towards the crowd.

“CHANNING, HUGH, LIEV, BRAD, GRAB THOSE GUNS AND SECURE THIS DECK! I NEED TO ELIMINATE THE REMAINING PIRATES ON THE SHIP.”

The four male actors, who had done numerous action movies and had received extensive firearms training to prepare them for their roles, were too happy to obey her. As he was grabbing the pistol dropped by the pirate leader, Hugh Jackman viciously kicked him in his wounded leg, making the Russian scream with pain.

“You bloody bastard! I should kill you right now.”

“NO!” Shouted at once Brad Pitt, who had grabbed the submachine gun of the nearby dead pirate. “We will need to hand him alive to the police, so that they could make him tell them who organized this. We should in fact bandage his wounds, so that he doesn’t bleed to death.”

“Right!” Grumbled Jackman, agreeing reluctantly. “But you will have to find someone else to bandage him, or I could end up strangling him instead.”

“I will do it!” Said Angelina Jolie, coming forward at a run. “I saw plenty of war wounds before in the refugee camps I visited.”

She quickly went to a first aid kit hooked to the forward steel partition of the pool deck and grabbed it, then returned to the wounded pirate leader, who was still conscious.

She gave him an unsympathetic look as she opened the first aid kit after putting it down on the deck besides the Russian.

“If I would be you, I would be starting to think about what information you could give later to the police in order to escape the death penalty, you bastard.”

“I would prefer to be dead anyway.” Answered weakly the pirate leader, in great pain. “The one who ordered this will have me killed in jail anyway.”

“Then, give us his name, so that he can be arrested. Then, you will be safe in jail.”

The pirate leader did not reply to that, but Angelina could see that he was thinking about what she had said to him. Forcing herself to restrain her hatred towards the man, she then did her honest best to treat him, watched over by her husband.

Even though they were no more in immediate danger, the guests and the Abramovich family were still tense and anxious during the twenty minutes that followed, being worried about their missing children. Brad Pitt in fact had to stop a number of the guests from going down to the Lower Deck to go check on their children, arguing with them to let Nancy finish her hunting first. While the others were discussing, Roman Abramovich took that time to remove the masks of the dead pirates, swearing in Russian when he recognized one of them as being part of his bodyguard force.

“Sergei, you bastard turncoat! How could you betray me like this?”

“He must have been promised a lot of money, Mister Abramovich.” Said Liev Schreiber, who stood guard nearby with a submachine gun. “If you think about it, without Nancy’s miraculous intervention, these bastards could have cleaned hundreds of millions of dollars out of our bank accounts. As much as I hate to say this, their plan was a good one. Their bad luck was to have Nancy Laplante present on the ship.”

“Damn, I sure owe her a big one for that. In truth, I could never repay her fully for this.”

“The way I know her, Mister Abramovich, Nancy will probably tell you to give whatever you had in mind to some charity work. In fact, she must be the most frugal and modest top actress I know in Hollywood right now. She won’t even take contracts for publicity work because she refuses to link her name to any given brand.”

Roman Abramovich nodded, then looked sadly towards the forward part of the ship.

“Still, over eighty good people died, including my bodyguards. This ship will hang like a curse on me from now on.”

Just as he was saying that, the noise of the ship's engines died down and the big yacht soon came to a halt on the choppy sea, prompting a remark from Schrieber.

"It seems that Nancy has now regained full control of your ship, Mister Abramovich."

"She is decidedly incredible. Hopefully, all the children down below are safe and sound."

"I suspect that Nancy made that her top priority earlier on. We should know soon enough about them."

Six minutes later, Nancy showed up again on the pool deck and raised both hands to stop the dozens of anxious questions about to be thrown at her by the other guests.

"PLEASE BE QUIET AND HEAR ME! ALL THE OTHER PIRATES ON THE SHIP ARE NOW DEAD AND THE SHIP IS SECURE. SO ARE YOUR CHILDREN, WHO HAVE BEEN HIDING IN THEIR CABINS. UNFORTUNATELY, I JUST CHECKED ON THE CREW AND FOUND THEM ALL DEAD, KILLED IN THEIR SLEEP OR AT THEIR POSTS. I WAS ABLE TO CALL THE U.S. COAST GUARD AND SEND AN URGENT REQUEST FOR HELP. A COAST GUARD SHIP SHOULD GET TO US IN THE NEXT FEW HOURS."

"CAN WE GO GET OUR CHILDREN, MISS LAPLANTE?" Shouted an anxious mother, making Nancy nod her head.

"YOU SHOULD IN FACT BRING THEM TO YOUR GUEST CABINS, AS THEIR QUARTERS SECTION WAS THE SCENE OF A RATHER BLOODY BATTLE. DON'T WORRY: NONE OF THE CHILDREN WERE HURT, BUT I WILL NEED A FEW PARENTS WITH GOOD NERVES TO ACCOMPANY ME UNDER. THE SCENE BELOW IS NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART."

Most of the fathers present volunteered at once, along with a couple of the mothers. The group then followed Nancy inside and down, encountering their first group of dead pirates at the foot of the ladder leading to the Lower Deck. Many uttered whispered exclamations when they saw the two large groups of dead pirates lying in pools of blood on either side of the passageway junction leading to the children's cabins. Significantly, not one pirate appeared to have been able to enter that hallway before being killed. Daniel Craig gave Nancy a respectful look as they tiptoed past the bloody corpses.

"Hell, Nancy, compared to you, James Bond is a pussy."

“Why, thank you, Daniel!” Replied Nancy, grinning with pride. She then whistled loudly and shouted.

“KIDS, YOUR PARENTS ARE HERE! YOU CAN COME OUT NOW.”

Her words made dozens of children of all ages come out of their cabins at once, pushing screams of joys on seeing at least one of their parents. The scene of relief and happiness that followed was the best reward possible for Nancy. She however still had one big personal worry left. Hell, she thought, even if she was forced after this to cut short her life in the 21st Century, it would be worth the price for this.

After waiting a minute or so to let the pandemonium around her abate, she then shouted again over the din of dozens of excited conversations.

“IF I MAY HAVE YOUR ATTENTION, PLEASE. WE ARE NOW GOING TO MOVE UP TO THE LEVEL OF THE GUEST CABINS. TRY NOT TO DISTURB ANYTHING ON THE WAY, AS THIS IS A MAJOR CRIME SCENE AND AS EVIDENCE MUST BE PRESERVED.”

The parents understood quickly enough her concerns and either picked up or held hands with their children, guiding them past the dead pirates. That was when the older children fully understood what they had escaped, something that cooled down considerably their excitement. Soon, everyone was up on the V.I.P. Deck and enjoying some family time after nearly one hour of fear and anxiety. Starting to feel the fatigue from her adrenaline-soaked adventure, Nancy gathered Roman Abramovich, Kathryn Bigelow and Emma Watson around her in the V.I.P. hallway and spoke to them in a sober tone.

“Mister Abramovich, I will need you to accompany us downstairs as the owner of this ship. We are going to document and photograph the various sections where killings occurred. Kathryn, you know well how to direct photographers and cameramen, so I will ask you to write down a log of the pictures we will take and of the scenes we will record. Emma, you have no children to care for and I will need you to take pictures as directed by me and Kathryn. On my part, I will use a digital video camera. I am sure that you have the latest in video and photography equipment here on this ship, Mister Abramovich.”

“I certainly do, Miss Laplante.” Replied the Russian multi-billionaire. “Just give me two minutes and I will get what you need.”

Abramovich returned quickly as promised, a digital still camera, a digital video camera and a clipboard with paper pad and a pen in his hands. Nancy nodded on inspecting the two cameras: they were about the best models money could buy.

“Excellent! With luck, we will be able to document what happened on your ship before the arrival of the Coast Guard.”

That task, a most heartbreaking one as they went through the crew quarters, took them a good two hours, by which time a Coast Guard ship had appeared on the horizon, approaching at full speed. That left Nancy only a half hour or so to speak to the adult guests and their children in private in their respective cabins, doing her best to convince them not to blow away her secrets and to agree on a common cover story. By now, every parent was looking at her as if she was something between a goddess and an alien, having heard fantastic, hard to believe tales from their children about their jump to Jerusalem and their short stay there. While things with the Jolie-Pitt family actually went quite well, Nancy couldn't help feel anxiety as she was about to speak in private with Natalie Portman and her family. If anyone could refuse to cooperate, thus blowing her cover as a time traveler, it was the Israeli-American actress. To her surprise and relief, Natalie Portman received her with a contrite look on her face and without any visible hostility towards her. While her son was present, her husband wasn't.

“Nancy, what Aleph told me was positively incredible, but other children said the same things as him, and I now believe what he told me. Is it true that you are Queen of Jerusalem and Ruler of Palestine?”

“It is the truth, Natalie. I have been Overseer for ten years now and Queen of Jerusalem for over five years, in a Palestine that belongs to a parallel world.”

“And your ability to travel through time, is that the reason why the Israeli government is chasing you?”

“Indeed! They learned of my abilities through a pure fluke, then decided to kidnap me in order to get my secrets through torture before quietly making me disappear. Believe me when I say that I never supported any terrorist group, nor am an enemy of Israel, Natalie. Could I count on your silence and that of your family?”

“You can, Nancy. What do you want us to say to the Coast Guard and the police then?”

“Simply that Aleph, like the other children, never left his cabin and laid down on the floor during the gun battles, as I directed him to do.”

Natalie nodded once her head, then looked down at her seven year-old son.

“You will say what Nancy just said to anyone that will ask you about what happened, Aleph. It may be a lie, but it will be to protect someone worthy of our trust and respect.”

“I understand, Mother.”

Natalie then looked back at Nancy, who now felt much better.

“Nancy, I must confess that I doubted you, gravely, during this nightmare. I believed at first that you were in league with those pirates, when I didn’t see you with the other guests, and I blew your absence to the pirates.”

“I know: I heard about that from other guests. I however told those guests not to hold it against you. I forgive you for what was only a logical thought on your part at the time.”

“Thank you, Nancy. You are too good.”

That made Nancy smile ferociously.

“Me, good? Don’t tell that to the pirates.”

22:08 (California Time)

World Cruise Center quay, South Harbor

Port of Long Beach, California

“Damn, another night shot to hell!” Muttered FBI Special Agent Jeff Blumenthal, as he watched with other FBI agents the giant yacht approach slowly the quay, escorted by a Coast Guard cutter that was actually dwarfed by its charge. Blumenthal’s superior and leader of the FBI team that had been assembled to investigate this incident, Senior Special Agent Mack Eastwood, snorted at that.

“You better get used to that, kid: crimes mostly happen at night.”

“I still have a problem believing the report sent by the Coast Guard, sir.” Said Special Agent Rose Watkins, Eastwood’s deputy for this team. “One woman could really take on 25 heavily armed pirates by herself?”

“Actually, I am not that surprised, Rose.” Replied Eastwood. “And please call me Mack instead of sir. You did read the file we have on that Nancy Laplante, did you?”

“Of course I did, si... er, Mack. I would have been derelict not to.”

“Then you should have noticed the long trail of dead bodies following that woman around, Rose. Even though her killings were either legal or justified, that Laplante has

proved many times that she is a true killing machine. In this particular case, if I could believe the Coast Guard report, she had little choice but to kill all those pirates in order to protect a group of children.”

“Mind you,” said Jeff Blumenthal, “with the amount of Hollywood celebrities aboard that yacht, the medias and tabloid paparazzi are bound to go bonkers about this affair.”

“You are talking about that bunch of vultures and jackals over there?” Replied Eastwood, pointing over his shoulder at a mass of cameramen and photographers being contained behind them with difficulty by a small army of policemen. “Right now, I can tell you one thing about them: any member of this team that leaks any detail of this inquiry to them will be able to kiss his or her badge goodbye. Kapiche?”

“Yes sir!” Answered at once Watkins and Blumenthal, knowing that the old-fashioned Eastwood was most capable of following through on his threat.

It took another 25 minutes before the big ship was safely docked to the quay and an access ramp was put in place. Eastwood was the first to climb the ramp, his assistants behind him, to be greeted on the ship by a blond man with a short beard and by a tall, athletic woman with long black hair. Eastwood at once showed them his FBI badge, imitated by his assistants.

“FBI Senior Special Agent Mack Eastwood, in charge of this investigation. My assistants are Special Agents Rose Watkins and Jeff Blumenthal.”

“Roman Abramovich, owner of this yacht. With me is Miss Nancy Laplante, who killed the pirates. She is a guest, along with numerous other Hollywood personalities and their families.”

“We read the initial report sent by the Coast Guards, Mister Abramovich. Has anything been disturbed, evidence-wise?”

This time, it was Nancy who answered Eastwood.

“No, except for a few minor things in order to be able to operate the ship and return it back to port. However, before moving anything, we took both still and video pictures of the various crime scenes, along with a log of the pictures. The two cameras we used, which belong to Mister Abramovich, are on this table behind us, along with the log.”

Eastwood nodded, satisfied, then turned his head to look at Rose Watkins.

"Rose, tag and bag those items and send them at once to our forensic lab for detailed visual analysis."

"Yes sir!"

As Rose went to the table to collect the cameras and the log, Mack stepped aside to let his whole team board the ship. He then went to sit at a table with Abramovich and Nancy, taking out a pocket notebook and a pen.

"Well, let's start with your preliminary statements. Since you were literally in the center of the action, I will ask you to give me your impressions first, Miss Laplante."

"Fair enough!" Replied Nancy, who took a good four minutes to tell her side of the story. The casual way she recounted how she had killed 25 pirates made Eastwood hesitate at one point as he looked at Nancy.

"You make it sound as if it was nearly easy, Miss Laplante."

"It wasn't, Senior Special Agent Eastwood: I am simply accustomed to violent deaths around me. Don't forget that I am an ex-soldier and a war correspondent."

"Er, right! I you don't mind, I would like you and Mister Abramovich to go down with me to your cabin, where I will ask you to walk me through your actions of the night, starting when you woke up and found that pirates were aboard."

"No problem, Senior Agent Eastwood." Said Nancy at once, imitated by Abramovich. Before going inside the ship, however, Eastwood intercepted Rose Watkins and Jeff Blumenthal to give them instructions.

"I am going down with two police photographers to where Miss Laplante fought the pirates. In the meantime, Rose, I want you to start interrogating the guests about their versions of the events."

"Including the kids?"

Eastwood thought about that for a second before answering her.

"Yes, but go easy on them and make it quick and in the presence of their parents. They were traumatized enough tonight: no point in upsetting them more. Jeff, you make sure that this surviving pirate is well protected in hospital: whoever ordered this job will probably do his best to eliminate him and thus prevent him from giving us any information. Assume that professional assassins will go after that wounded pirate and make sure that the policemen guarding him understand that."

"Understood, sir!"

Feeling a bit reassured now, Eastwood then went inside the ship with Nancy and Roman Abramovich, two FBI crime scene specialists at his back.

Despite a long and violence-filled career with the FBI, Eastwood felt nearly sick when the trio came back on the open pool deck fifty minutes later. Many of the crewmembers murdered by the pirates could not have possibly represented a threat to them, yet had been killed in cold blood like the rest, while sleeping. He could think only of Mexican and Colombian drug cartels as organizations that could equal such ruthlessness. As for Roman Abramovich, he was close to tears and looked ready to crack after having to look at the cold bodies of 81 of his employees, many of whom had served him loyally for years. Even Nancy was tight-jawed. The multi-billionaire was the first to speak once on the pool deck, his voice nearly pleading.

"Can we finally take proper care of the bodies of my employees, Senior Agent Eastwood? They have been dead for over six hours now and the Coast Guards refused to move them from their beds."

Eastwood nodded his head once, slowly.

"I will instruct the coroner's office to carry out their bodies at once, Mister Abramovich. Where are you planning to stay for the night?"

"Not on this ship, that's for sure! I will call the Marriot Hotel in Los Angeles and get a suite there, where a backup team of my bodyguards will be able to join up with me once they arrive from London."

"I can offer you in the meantime a protective detail of four agents until your bodyguards show up, Mister Abramovich." Replied Eastwood, who took a calling card out of one vest pocket and gave it to the Russian billionaire. "In the meantime, if you have any questions or requests concerning this investigation, don't hesitate to call me. Let me just call in four agents before you go."

That took only a minute, with Abramovich then going with his family to his suite to pack up and leave the ship with the four agents loaned by Eastwood. The latter then ended up alone to face Nancy, who looked critically into his eyes.

"What about me, Senior Agent Eastwood? I gave you a full deposition and showed you what I did here. Could I go back to my hotel now?"

"Yes, but I will expect you tomorrow at nine in the morning at the L.A. FBI offices, to sign your written deposition and answer some more questions. I will also ask you to stay in L.A. until further notice."

"I can do that for the next few days, Senior Agent Eastwood, but I have to tell you that I have a speaking engagement at the Georgetown University in Washington next Thursday, where I am due to give a presentation on war journalism."

"Well, it should not be a problem, Miss Laplante, but I cannot promise right now that you will be free to go by then. It will all depend on what my investigation will find."

"What you will find is already self-evident, Senior Agent Eastwood: Russian mercenaries, possibly sent by an enemy of Roman Abramovich, hijacked the ECLIPSE and killed its crew in order to then extort hundreds of millions of dollars from the passengers."

"I was thinking more about your own actions during that hijacking, Miss Laplante."

That declaration apparently angered Nancy to no little degree.

"And what about my actions? Are some second-guessing assholes going to play the 20/20 hindsight card to pretend that I didn't need to kill those pirates? I had 32 children to protect from bastards who had already murdered the whole crew of this ship in cold blood. I didn't have time to read these pirates their Miranda Rights, nor could I afford to ask them first to surrender. The only thing I had for me in order to avoid a long firefight that would have endangered the children was the surprise factor. The leader of the pirates said himself to the adult guests that he was ready to torture their children in front of them in order to convince them to surrender their bank deposits codes."

"Calm down, Miss Laplante. I understand and appreciate your arguments, but others above me may question them. Be assured though that I am on your side on this. Where are you staying in Los Angeles?"

"In Room 314 of the Casa Del Mar Hotel, on Santa Monica Beach. Here is my calling card, with my cell phone number, in case that I am out of my hotel."

"Thank you, Miss Laplante. You may now go pack your things and leave the ship. I will be expecting you at nine tomorrow morning."

"I will be there, Senior Agent Eastwood."

As Nancy was turning around to go to her cabin, Eastwood called to her, making her stop and look at him.

"Miss Laplante! Thanks for protecting those children."

"You're welcomed, Senior Agent Eastwood." Replied Nancy, smiling to him. Eastwood then watched her walk away, admiring her long legs and feline walk.

"Damn! There can't be too many women like her around." Thought the FBI man.

10:42 (California Time)

Monday, March 5, 2018 'A'

Room 314, Casa Del Mar Hotel

Santa Monica, California

The knocks on the door of her hotel room surprised Nancy, who was working on her laptop computer on her presentation on war journalism and was not expecting any visitors. Taking out her FN FIVE-SEVEN pistol, which she wore in a belt holster, she approached the door but stayed to one side of it, calling out when she was still two paces away from it.

"WHO IS IT?"

"Sergeant Ronald Olson, Royal Canadian Mounted Police. We would have questions for you, Miss Laplante." Was the muffled answer, which intrigued Nancy. Could there be a Canadian connection to the one who had ordered the hijacking of the ECLIPSE? She doubted that. Having already little confidence in the good judgment or motives of the RCMP following the treatment she had received from it on her return from Pakistan a year ago, she went into phase shift in order to act in a snap. She then went to one of her suitcases, taking out of it a small pocket interview recorder with a sensitive omnidirectional microphone. She next inserted it between the armrest and cushion of the swiveling chair of her work desk and pushed the recording button before going back to the door. Coming out of phase shift and back to normal time, she unlocked her door, opening it and facing two big men in casual suits who brandished police badges. The one who appeared to be the senior officer in the pair quickly noticed the pistol that she had returned at her belt and tensed up.

"Miss Laplante, I am Sergeant Ronald Olson, of the RCMP, and this is Corporal James Pickering. You can put that pistol away."

"And why would I do that?" She replied coldly. "I have a federal American conceal and carry permit for my pistols and I probably earned the enmity of someone very powerful last Friday when I stopped pirates from hijacking the yacht ECLIPSE. If you want to talk to me, you will have to do it with this on me."

"Very well, Miss Laplante. Do as you wish. Can we come in?"

Nancy stepped out of the way to let the two men enter, then closed and locked the door behind them before offering them a seat on the sofa facing the work desk of her room. She sat back on the swivel chair and gave a critical look at her two visitors.

“So, what does the RCMP want from me this time, Sergeant Olson?”

“Some answers about your actions last Friday on Roman Abramovich’s yacht, Miss Laplante. As you may well know, this affair is still making big waves in the medias and has attracted the attention of Justice Minister Reyat, who asked the RCMP commissioner to investigate your role in this incident.”

The words chosen by the RCMP man immediately stung Nancy, who stared hard into his eyes.

“And does your good Justice Minister Reyat realize that there is still a FBI active investigation ongoing about the ECLIPSE affair?”

“He knows but, as a Canadian citizen, you are still subject to our jurisdiction, even while in the United States. You were clearly warned in February of last year, on your return from Pakistan, to keep the peace. Yet, you end up on a private cruise that is then hijacked by pirates and cause a major gun battle aboard.”

“Excuse me? Are you accusing me of being the cause of that gun battle? What about the 32 children I was protecting from those pirates?”

“Well, we do have only your word on that, Miss Laplante. What tells us that you were not in reality in league with those pirates, but changed your mind at the last moment after seeing them murder the whole crew of the yacht?”

Nancy took a deep breath at that moment in order not to explode and looked at the two RCMP men with utter contempt.

“First, I go last year to Pakistan to deliver an American news anchorman held by Taliban terrorists, only to be treated on my return to Canada by your RCMP and your justice minister like a suspected criminal rather than as a victim of illegal torture by the Pakistani secret services. Now, you are accusing me of possibly having been in league with those pirates? Are your superiors warped by political interference or are they simply stupid? I fought terrorism in Afghanistan as a Canadian Forces officer during three tours of duty there and yet you think that I could be an accomplice to bastards who murdered dozens of innocent people in their sleep? Do you realize that I am still an active prime witness in an ongoing FBI investigation and that your visit could be construed as outside foreign interference into that investigation?”

"We don't care about that investigation, miss: it still doesn't change the fact that you are a Canadian citizen, with residence in Canada. I..."

"FINE!" Finally exploded Nancy. "If the Canadian government can think of me only as a potential criminal, then the hell with it and with you! Tell your commissioner that he can expect a lawsuit for judicial harassment from me if he persists in this idiotic line of thinking. Even better, tell him to stop licking the ass of Justice Minister Reyat and to drop the political correctness. Now, get out!"

Olson gave Nancy a cold look as he got up from the sofa with his partner.

"You may regret this, Miss Laplante. Expect trouble when you fly back to Canada. You have too many murky connections and suspicious acts in your past for your own good. You may have denied already in the past that you were a paid CIA assassin, but many in Ottawa still don't believe you."

"All your suppositions have absolutely zero value in terms of evidence of any criminal activity, unless you are ready to accept at face value the ridiculous Israeli accusations against me, something even INTERPOL is not ready to do. Don't let the door hit you on the way out, gentlemen."

The moment that the two RCMP men were out of her room, Nancy closed back and locked her door, then went to her swivel chair to stop her voice recorder. She had to sit down and take a few minutes to calm down and chase the anger and frustration that this visit had brought to her. She however shouldn't really be surprised by this, she thought. While the previous Canadian government had been nearly slavish in espousing and supporting American policies around the World, the present one had quickly distanced itself from the United States in many respects, intent on building back for Canada a reputation as 'an independent World middleman and honest broker'. While Nancy didn't have big problems with that, the new Canadian official attitude had fuelled insinuations and accusations against her of being a possible CIA covert agent, to be treated like a foreign spy. One overzealous Canadian Security and Intelligence Services officer had even called her a potential traitor during her brief detention last year, on her return from Pakistan. While she was still proud to be a Canadian, she was much less proud of the present government of her country and of the obtuse, biased security officers it was throwing in her path. She couldn't go on and accept such treatment without fighting back, but she had also better things to do than waste her time and money in legal procedures against her own government. On the other hand, much of

the logic for her to reside in the Montreal area had become mute years ago, when her old civilian employer, CONFLICTS MAGAZINE, had folded financially in 2012, and when she had left the Canadian Forces in 2014. Now, she spent over half of her time each year reporting for CNN from around the World or producing news analysis in Atlanta, while another good part of her time was spent on her career as an actress, mostly around Hollywood or on film locations around the globe. In fact, her biggest budget expenses these days were air travel from Montreal and the associated costs in hotel stays and restaurant bills.

Finally taking a bitter, irremediable decision, Nancy then consulted her electronic telephone list on her laptop and placed a telephone call to the Los Angeles offices of CNN, telling the head news manager there that she would be holding a press conference in her hotel lobby at three O'clock this afternoon. Next, she called in quick succession the local offices of NBC, CBS, ABC and FOX, plus the editors of the two biggest newspapers and of the three main radio stations in Los Angeles, inviting them all to send reporters to her press conference. Once she was done, she put down her telephone receiver, a grim smile on her lips: if her decision was to cost her dearly in emotional terms, then it was only just that the ones who had pushed her into taking it also paid a price for it.

15:01 (California Time)

Main lobby, Casa Del Mar Hotel

Nancy waited for the last news cameramen to be set up and ready before starting to speak while looking somberly at the lens pointed at her.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the medias, as you know very well by now, I was instrumental in foiling the attempted hijacking of the private yacht of multi-billionaire Roman Abramovich last Friday. In the process, I killed 25 pirates in order to protect the children sleeping on that yacht, something I openly acknowledged to the FBI and to the Coast Guards. Up to this morning, I got only praise for this and even from the FBI itself, which publicly stated that I acted rightly and legally. However, someone has found a way to criticize me for my actions, even accusing me of possibly having been in league with the pirates that killed so many poor innocent people aboard the ECLIPSE."

Taking a short pause while many of the reporters frowned at her last words, Nancy took out her pocket voice recorder and presented it to the cameramen and journalists surrounding her.

“What you will now hear is a voice recording I took during a visit to my room this morning by two officers of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. You are welcomed to record the conversation for your reports.”

She then pressed the ‘play’ button and cranked the volume to the maximum while reporters pointed their microphones at the recorder. While the reporters stayed quiet in order to listen to the recording, the conversation between Nancy and the two RCMP officers made quite a stir around the assembled cameramen and photographers, with many clearly becoming incensed on hearing the insinuations against Nancy about being a CIA agent. The latter stopped the recorder after she was heard telling the RCMP men to leave and looked grimly at the cameras.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is the second time that the Canadian authorities have treated me like a potential criminal, the first one being in February of last year, on my return from Pakistan, where I had been tortured by the Pakistani intelligence services after freeing Anderson Cooper from the Taliban in Quetta. To them, my years of loyal service as a Canadian Force officer, including three operational tours in Afghanistan, seemed to count for nothing. I can now reveal to you that, in February of 2017, while I was temporarily detained by the Canadian authorities, I was accused of being a covert agent of the CIA, which I am not, as if that would have made me a dangerous threat to Canada. I will let you and the American public free to think about what such an attitude by Canadian security officers means. As a result of all this, I have thus decided to move my permanent residence from the area of Montreal to that of Los Angeles and to apply for a Green Card from the United States government. I will now take your questions, ladies and gentlemen.”

Twelve reporters then shouted at the same time to ask the first question, while cameras clicked or rolled all around her.

19:27 (California Time)

Room 314, Casa Del Mar Hotel

Santa Monica

Nancy normally drank alcohol infrequently and moderately, mostly to accompany a good meal or during social gatherings. This evening was one of the rare occasions when she could say that she was heavily indulging, drinking from the stocks of mini bottles and beer cans contained in her room's small refrigerator. She was watching the CNN news channel on her room's television set, listening to the latest events and checking on what reactions her news conference of this afternoon was provoking. Up to now, the joke was clearly on the RCMP, which was now passing off as a bunch of clueless, mean variant of the Keystone Cops. Even the White House press spokesman had made a caustic comment about the RCMP visit to Nancy, questioning its sense of priorities and its common sense.

Nancy was about to mix another mini bottle of rum into an opened can of Coca-Cola when someone knocked on her door. She hesitated at first, putting her right hand on her holstered gun. A second series of knocks, accompanied by a female voice she knew well, then sounded off.

"Nancy, it's me, Angelina. Open up!"

Going to the door in a less than fully steady step, Nancy unlocked it and opened it wide.

"Hello, Angelina! What's up?" She asked in a voice that came out a bit slurred. The actress eyed her with sadness, noting the smell of alcohol in her breath.

"My God, Nancy! This must be the first time ever that I see you drunk."

"Me, drunk? Not yet, anyway. Come in!"

Angelina stepped inside and saw the collection of empty cans and bottles on the work desk, then turned around to face Nancy, who was closing the door.

"Nancy, I watched your press conference on CNN at supper time. Are you sure that you really want to move out of Montreal? You like that city so much."

"I..." Started to say Nancy, who then couldn't finish, a big ball blocking her throat and tears coming out of her eyes. Angelina hurried to her and hugged her as she managed to speak further.

"Yes, I loved Montreal, but those bastards are not leaving me any other option."

Nancy then started crying openly, making Angelina's heart hurt.

"Things will work out eventually, Nancy, you'll see."

"No, they won't! Besides, how could I believe my government about anything after its latest stupidity. I am better off cutting my bridges for good right now."

"Then, make yourself at home here: it is a nice place to live and you have a lot of good friends here, including me and Brad. We will help you establish yourself here."

"You're too good, Angelina."

"Nonsense! You fully deserve every good we can bring you. In fact, I was coming here to offer you to move to our house in Los Feliz. The kids would love to have you with us, and so would I and Brad."

"You would do that for me?" Said softly Nancy while looking into Angelina's eyes, her own eyes still tearful. Angelina gave her a big smile before kissing her on the lips.

"Of course we would! Let me help you pack your things."

05:50 (California Time)

Tuesday, March 6, 2018 'A'

Room 11, Ramada Inn Motel

Los Angeles, California

The loud, insistent knocks on the door of their motel room got the two men sleeping in it to wake up and get up in a hurry, with one of them grumbling to himself as he walked to the door.

"Now, who the fuck could it be at this hour?"

Opening the door, he came face to face with four grim-faced men in dark suits.

"Yes? What do you want?"

One of the four men facing him then produced a police badge and shoved it in his face.

"Special Agent Blumenthal, FBI. Are you Sergeant Ronald Olson, of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police?"

"Yes I am! What is this about?"

"It is about your interference in an active FBI investigation on American territory. Pack up your things: you are leaving this country this morning."

01:16 (Moscow Time)

Saturday, March 10, 2018 'A'

Private mansion, suburbs of Moscow

Russian Federation

The heavily armed team of Russian policemen approaching the walled park containing the mansion that was their target tonight were nervous, with good reasons. That mansion belonged to the very powerful and most ruthless head of a Russian mafia family that had a small army of bodyguards protecting him. Up to now, that mafia head had escaped justice for lack of evidence, mostly because nobody was willing to testify against him or, if they were ready to do so, ended up dead before they could go testify at a trial. This time, however, someone had talked and was, at least for the moment, safely out of reach of that mafia family. Furthermore, firm orders for action to be taken at once had come directly from the office of the President of Russia himself.

The armored personnel carrier that was leading the convoy of police vehicles and was tasked with crashing through the steel gate at the entrance of the property turned off the main road and on the property's snow-covered private road, only to find the main gate wide open. The Ministry of Interior Security major leading the raid then got a radio call from the armored vehicle. The voice on the radio sounded a bit shaken.

"Team Leader, this is Squad Alpha: we found the gate wide open. There are as well three heads planted on the spikes of the gate."

"Did you say three heads, Squad Alpha?" Asked the major on the radio, having expected about anything except that.

"Affirmative, Team Leader! What do we do now?"

"Continue on to the residence, Squad Alpha: we will follow you. Squad Delta, stop at the gate to secure it and investigate those heads."

"Squad Delta, acknowledged!"

The MVD major then gave a befuddled look at his assistant, a young captain.

"Could a rival of Smirnov have already paid a visit to him tonight?"

"But, he was about the biggest fish around, sir. Who could have dared attack him like that?"

"Well, I suppose that we will know soon enough. Let's be ready for anything, though."

The sight of the three cut human heads as their car passed the open gate made the young captain shiver and grip even more firmly his AKSU-74 compact assault rifle. They then arrived at the main residence itself, a luxurious, three-storey mansion made of

stone. The lead armored carrier was already stopped in front of the main entrance, with its eight MVD militiamen dismounted and crouched on each side of the wide opened front door. Two more human heads were visible on the steps leading to the door, making the major wince.

“Somebody really paid a visit to Smirnov tonight, Gennady. I wouldn’t be surprised now to find Smirnov’s head inside as well.”

The major then jumped out of his car as soon as it stopped in front of the entrance, followed by the captain. They entered the mansion with over twenty armed men at their back, only to find it apparently empty at first, attracting no reactions at all. Nervously searching the big residence room by room and encountering only the headless bodies of armed bodyguards on the ground floor, the Russian policemen finally found the first live occupant once they went up to the first floor. That occupant was apparently a simple live-in maid and was unconscious in her bed, her hands and feet tied and with her mouth covered with duct tape. More domestic servants were then found, all unconscious and tied up in other small bedrooms. All of them were later to say that they had seen nothing, having been knocked unconscious while sleeping.

When the MVD major kicked open the double doors of Smirnov’s bedroom, it was to find a naked young woman unconscious and tied up on the big bed, plus the head and body of a naked man. The major gave a long look at the head now lying on the bedside night table supporting a telephone.

“It’s Smirnov alright. I recognize the girl as well: she is one of his mistresses. Damn! Whoever did all this was ruthless as hell.”

The young captain standing behind him also looked at the head and nodded.

“They sure were, or should I say ‘she’?”

“What do you mean, Gennady?”

“Well, sir, this is only purely speculations on my part, but we are here because Smirnov was accused of having arranged the hijacking of Abramovich’s yacht off Los Angeles.”

“So?”

“So, that hijacking was foiled by the actress Nancy Laplante, the same actress who went to Pakistan a year ago to deliver a CNN anchorman, slashing open the throats of over twenty Taliban extremists in the process. She killed a good two dozen pirates on Abramovich’s yacht, so doing this should be more than feasible for her.”

"Hum, you may have something here, Gennady. Once we are back at our offices, I want you to check if Laplante entered Russian territory in the last few days."

"Yes sir!"

05:34 (Moscow Time)

MVD headquarters, Moscow

"So, Gennady, what's the word about Laplante?"

"It seems that I speculated wrong about her, sir: she has not entered Russian territory, at least officially, since at least six years ago. Furthermore, she has a steel-plated alibi: she was conducting a live, online interview on television in Los Angeles at about the time of the murders at Smirnov's mansion."

"That would effectively rule her out." Agreed the major ruefully. "Mind you, whoever did this rendered a true service to Russia. Smirnov was like a cancer to our country. With him gone, it will be much easier now to dismantle his criminal empire. We will thus concentrate next on Smirnov's lieutenants, while they are still off balance."

"With pleasure, sir!" Replied the young captain.

CHAPTER 6 – PALACE COUP

16:h26 (Washington Time)

Saturday, August 21, 1948 ‘C’

Senate Chamber, Capitol Building

Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

Arthur Vandenberg did his best to control his emotions as the Sergeant At Arms of the Senate brought him the official tally of the votes from the assembly of 96 senators: he could already say that the verdict had been adopted by at least two thirds of the votes. Taking the paper offered by the Sergeant At Arms and thanking the man, Vandenberg then adjusted his microphone and cleared his voice.

“The results of the votes are as follows: 68 for, 28 against. President Harry S. Truman is thus found guilty of criminal negligence towards the American armed forces and of abuse of power, for having precipitated the United States in a war without the approval of the Congress.”

Vandenberg then paused to let the storm of exclamations and excited shouts pass: no less than seventeen democratic senators had voted to impeach a democratic president. Vandenberg could however understand their choice. The American units in Korea, pushed to the sea by North Korean and Chinese troops, had to precipitously leave the country by air and sea, with the last American soldiers leaving via Pusan last Monday, on August sixteen. That humiliating defeat for the United States, the first war ever to be officially lost by the country in its history, had triggered a national wave of anger and fury that had been mostly directed at President Truman, seen rightfully as the one most responsible for this debacle. Some military leaders had been criticized, along with the performance of certain units, but the simple American soldier had been seen by the public as an helpless victim of the circumstances. However, out of sight of the public, the report of the investigative commission led in Korea by Senator Millikin had the effects of a bomb in the Senate and in the House of Representatives.

A relative silence having returned to the Senate Chamber, Vandenberg read a declaration he had prepared in advance in case of a positive vote.

"In virtue of Article Two, Section Four of the Constitution of the United States, President Harry S. Truman, having been censured by the House of Representatives and having been found guilty as charged by the Senate, will have to leave his office today, August 21 of the year 1948. He will however still be open to criminal accusations from the Congress of the United States. Since President Truman had not deemed necessary to name a vice-president while he was in office, The Honorable Joseph William Martin Junior, Speaker of the House of Representatives, will carry the functions of President of the United States until a new president can be elected according to the official procedures of the government. I, as President Pro Tempore of the Senate, will thus go forthwith to see The Honorable Joseph William Martin Junior with the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, in order to swear him in his new post. I now call this session of the Senate suspended until tomorrow."

Vandenberg then concluded his address with a resounding bang of his wooden gavel on his table, starting a mad rush out by senators who wanted to return to their offices to use their telephones.

18:07 (Washington Time)

Hotel Hay-Adams, Lafayette Square

Washington, D.C.

"So, what are you planning to do first, Joe?"

Joseph Martin Junior thought about his answer as he chewed a bite of his supper while sitting with Arthur Vandenberg at a table of the Lafayette Dining Room of the Hay-Adams, a quiet and distinguished hotel in direct sight of the White House. A short man of 62 with graying black hair, Joseph Martin was a single man who had given his life to politics and who had no known vices. He didn't smoke, didn't drink alcohol, was not openly religious and was considered by all as a deeply honest and just man, on top of being an old hand of American politics with a vast experience of the government's workings.

"I believe that the first thing I must do is to reassure the country, to show it that the government is still working, even in this time of crisis. You know that I never wanted to be President and that I would have preferred to stay on as House Speaker, Arthur."

"I know, Joe, and I have no doubts that you will think of the good of the nation first. How do you plan to pass your message of reassurance?"

"First, I will keep the present cabinet relatively intact, except for those who had a direct responsibility for our debacle in Korea. I plan to form a coalition cabinet that will govern by consensus with the Congress, instead of working against it."

"I suppose that you will fire Patterson and Forrestal, at a minimum?"

"And with great pleasure!" Replied Martin without hesitation. "Symington will have to go as well. I don't want any of the idiots that presided to the emasculation of our Army and Navy under Truman. In return, I will ask Eisenhower, Kenney and Nimitz to assist me by becoming respectively my secretaries for Defense, the Air Force and the Navy, and I will return Vandenberg into his post as Chief of Staff of the Air Force. Marshall can stay as my Secretary of State."

Looking briefly around him and lowering his voice in order not to be heard by the customers of the hotel that were eating in the dining room but were kept away from Martin's table by Secret Service agents, Vandenberg bent forward to speak to his new president.

"You want some good advice, Joe? There is someone that you absolutely should take as a special counselor to help you with Korea and with the reconstruction of our armed forces. You must know Brigadier General Ingrid Dows, our top fighter ace." Joseph Martin did a double take and looked at Vandenberg with suspicion.

"Are you kidding? That girl is young enough to be my grand-daughter. I know that she has an incredible reputation as a pilot and combat officer, but how could I justify taking such a young person as a special advisor?"

"No need to announce it out loud, Joe. I spoke with that girl in Korea, while she was defending with her women a frontline tactical position. She then predicted nearly point by point what was going to happen in the next two weeks, apart from giving us some very judicious counsels about the future rebuilding of our forces. Don't forget that Dows was educated by Nancy Laplante, the Canadian from the future. She knows already what the future has in store for us."

Martin digested those words for a moment. Vandenberg actually made sense, once you took in account the reputed knowledge of Dows about the future.

"I will talk with Eisenhower and Kenney tomorrow: Dows served under them during the war in Europe and the Pacific and they must know her well. And where would that young Dows be right now?"

"In the Philippines, with her air task force. Her women evacuated last from the Pusan Airfield, in good order and with all their equipment."

"Yeah, I remember the article from the TIME-LIFE magazine about that." Replied Martin, bitterness in his voice. The TIME-LIFE photographer had produced a masterpiece article that had caused consternation around the United States, by taking a series of pictures of the final evacuation of American troops in Pusan. On one page, his pictures showed American infantrymen and artillerymen, many without weapons, that were pushing each other to get a place aboard the last transport planes. On the opposite page, pictures showed the women of the Korea Air Task Force, who had defended the K-1 Airfield by themselves and until the last moment, marching in three ranks and entering their giant transport planes with all their field kit and weapons on them. The title of the photo article, 'THE WOMEN OF THE KATF AND THE OTHERS', had made more than one American swear loudly. A picture syndicated from the CHICAGO TRIBUNE also had shown Ingrid Dows, sitting in her P-38 fighter and ready to take off dead last from the K-1 Airfield, becoming technically the last American to leave Korea. Representative Howard Smith, a democrat with conservative views and a partisan of women's rights, had shown a copy of that magazine in the House while asking caustically who should return to the kitchen after such a spectacle. Many other congressmen had eaten their socks then. As for himself, Joseph Martin had felt shame on seeing to what degree the United States Army had been humiliated by that defeat in Korea.

"I will certainly keep her in mind, Arthur. In the meantime, I will try to spend a last quiet evening here. I hope that these guys from the Secret Service like walking, because I have no intentions to stop doing my daily walks."

"Don't worry about that, Joe." Said Vandenberg, amused. "I believe that they are at least as fit as you are."

17:15 (Washington Time)
Wednesday, August 25, 1948 'C'
Oval Office, the White House
Washington, D.C.

Having just been introduced inside the Oval Office by two Secret Service agents, Ingrid came to attention and saluted Joseph Martin.

"Brigadier General Ingrid Dows, reporting as requested, Mister President."

"At ease, General." Said Joseph Martin in a friendly tone. He was actually sitting in the coffee table corner with Dwight Eisenhower, George Kenney, Chester Nimitz and George Marshall. "Come join us: we need to speak seriously about your future...and that of the United States."

After Ingrid sat down facing him, taking place besides George Kenney, Martin examined her in silence for a moment. She was indeed a very beautiful young woman, even in her blue Air Force uniform, but what impressed him most was her assurance and apparent confidence for her young age. The impressive collection of medal ribbons on her chest also reminded Martin that she was an officer of exceptional valor.

"General Dows, I would like first of all to congratulate and thank you and the women of the KATF for your exceptional services in Korea."

"Thank you, Mister President."

"General, I also learned a number of rather fantastic things about you during the last few days, things that convinced me that I needed your services here in Washington. General Kenney, who is now a civilian and is my Under-Secretary of Defense for the Air Force, told me about your love of flying. I can reassure you right now and tell you that you will be able to continue flying on your free time, and even during your work."

"I suppose that, in view of those present here today, that you now know about my ability to remember my past incarnations, Mister President."

"Exact, General. I also know about your miraculous resurrection in Guadalcanal in 1942. You are decidedly a very special young woman. To return to the subject at hand, Generals Eisenhower, Kenney and Marshall, along with Admiral Nimitz, all strongly counseled me to take you as my special military advisor, a position and title that will be kept discreet in order not to inflame jealousy among our other general officers but that will carry a very heavy weight during my administration. Your true role will also be kept from the Soviets: I do not wish them to know how important you will be to me."

"And from the British as well, Mister President?"

"From the British as well, General Dows." Replied Martin, somber. "They truly disappointed me when they refused to help us in Korea. They seem to pay importance solely to their damn empire. Talking of empire, General, I have a question that have been running through my head since I was told about your incarnation memories. To what degree have you been exposed to personal power in your past incarnations? Have you ever been a king, a minister or a top general?"

Ingrid stared at Martin with her big blue eyes, her face impassive.

"Like most people, my past lives were in majority those of persons of modest fortune or origin, Mister President. Some of my past lives were also those of nobles of low to medium rank. My only experience of true personal power was during the 2nd Century Before Christ, when I was Emperor Wou-Ti, of the Chinese Han Dynasty. Under the reign of Wou-Ti, the Chinese Empire attained its maximum expansion in history and he also repulsed the barbarian Huns along the border with Mongolia. In a purely religious context, I lived two very significant lives. First, I was Aïsha, the third wife and favorite of the prophet Muhammad during the 7th Century. Much earlier, 3,600 years ago, I was Agar, the Egyptian slave bought by the Patriarch Abraham and to whom she gave a son, Ishmaël. According to the tradition of the Old Testament, I was thus the matriarch of the Arabic people. General Arnold already tested me about this in 1942 and found out that I can speak dozens of ancient languages, including Ancient Egyptian, Elamite, Chaldean, Kassite, Aramaic, Ionian Greek, Sanskrit, Olmec, Celt, Norse and Occitan. My souvenirs cover about 7,000 years of history, Mister President."

Martin was left stunned for a moment before he could ask another question.

"And...this gift of remembering your past lives, is it rare?"

"To my knowledge, only me and Nancy Laplante benefited from this gift, having received it simultaneously in 1941. Some people have pretended in the past to remember their incarnations, but they are charlatans, I believe."

"Well, this is all very interesting and I will certainly want to talk more about it at a later time but, right now, we have to decide what to do about Korea. What would be your counsel about it, General Dows?"

"Mister President, as much as I hate to say this, you should not throw good money after bad. The Communists now have a strong hold on the whole of the Korean Peninsula and booting them out would require from us a military effort of huge proportions. Even if we managed to land in strength in Korea and we succeeded in pushing the Communists all the way back to the Chinese border, we would then be stuck guarding with a large part of our armed forces a hostile border far from the United States but close to our two biggest enemies. The only realistic alternative to that would be to use the atomic bomb against both the North Koreans and the Chinese, and maybe also against the Soviets. However, once the Soviets get their own atomic bomb, this could come back to haunt us in the long run. I realize that not hitting back in Korea would be hard on the prestige of the United States in the World, but going back in for a second round could well cost us tens of thousands of lives and billions of dollars in the next few

years alone, Mister President. Instead, I believe that we should concentrate on another, much more constructive goal.”

“And that would be?”

“The rehabilitation of Japan and the establishment of American bases in Northern Japan, something that would allow us to keep close tabs on both the Soviets and the North Koreans, Mister President. I know that we have avoided landing in Japan since it was struck by multiple British nuclear-tipped missiles in June of 1944, and this according to my own advice to President Roosevelt at the time, but over four years have passed and radiations must have greatly diminished by now. While I suspect that the southern half of Japan is still uninhabitable, the northern half, especially the Island of Hokkaido, should be mostly intact and safe. If you decide to go that route, Mister President, then I would further counsel that we go in as saviors, and not as occupiers. What we need now is allies, not more enemies. Besides, with over half of its original population dead and with nearly all of its industrial centers destroyed, Japan can no longer be a serious adversary for us. Using honey rather than bullets will get us a much better return for our money in my opinion, Mister President.”

While she had spoken in terms that would be attractive to Martin and the other officers present, Ingrid had in reality much more humanitarian-based reasons to counsel Martin like this. She had been deeply distressed by the news of the British atomic strikes against Japan in 1944, having been herself a Japanese woman many centuries ago, and had been grieving for the deaths of so many millions of human beings.

Joseph Martin glanced at the others around him as he weighed Ingrid’s words: while her counsels had surprised him, he found them to be both logical and sensible. However, letting the whole of Korea in the hands of the Communists was going to be a hard pill to swallow for the American public opinion. On the other hand, initiating a new war in Korea, with the promise of heavy casualties and ruinous military budgets, was not going to be palatable either to the American people. He could see that Kenney and Nimitz, both of whom had fought extensively in the Pacific, seemed to appreciate Dows’ counsels.

“Admiral Nimitz, what do you think about General Dows’ suggestion that we forget Korea and concentrate instead on Japan?”

“Well, Mister President, I certainly agree with her that retaking and garrisoning Korea would siphon off most of our military resources for the years to come, apart from

being a less than assured success. On the other hand, to be able to establish military bases in Northern Japan would achieve a number of very important strategic goals. For one, we would then be able to solidly block any Soviet expansion in the Northern Pacific. Further, we would then be ideally placed to keep a close tab on both the North Koreans and the Chinese. Finally, we would end up with useful air and naval bases in close proximity to both the Soviet Union and China, something that would be a priceless advantage in any future dispute with those two countries. I am of the opinion to follow her advice on this, Mister President.”

“I also favor her options, Mister President.” Said Kenney, quickly supported by both Marshall and Eisenhower. Now convinced, Martin looked back at Ingrid.

“How would you proceed in order to gain the cooperation of the surviving Japanese, General Dows, or at the least to minimize their interference when we start building bases on their soil?”

“Mister President, this is a project that I had in my mind for years already. I thus already have the main outlines of a plan to achieve our goals in Japan.”

Ingrid spoke for a good ten minutes, with the others closely listening to her and occasionally asking her questions. At the end of it, Joseph Martin seemed most satisfied by her proposed plan and nodded to her.

“General Dows, you have convinced me. You also just earned yourself the title of Special Presidential Counselor for Military and Foreign Affairs. However, the rank of brigadier general strikes me as a rather low one for such an important position. You may be very young, but you have been a brigadier general for over four and a half years now and have had your hands in many of our most important military operations in the past few years. Would anybody here object to seeing a second star on her shoulders?”

“I would actually vote for it at once, Mister President.” Said enthusiastically George Kenney. “Compared to her, many of our three and four stars generals look like military morons.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far.” Replied Marshall, looking crossly at the smiling Kenney. “However, I agree that she easily has the level of military competence and experience of modern warfare needed for the rank of major general.”

“Experience of modern warfare is the key phrase here I believe.” Added Eisenhower. “Too many of my generals, while very senior in years of service, didn’t know or understand much about modern war when we landed in Europe. To give one

such example, I could mention Major General Fredendall, or Lieutenant General Mark Clark.”

“Then it is decided!” Exclaimed Joseph Martin, making Ingrid’s heart beat faster. “General Dows, I will officially nominate you for your second star tomorrow, at the same time that I will publicly give you your latest medal.”

“A medal, Mister President? What medal? For what?” Asked Ingrid, truly surprised. That made Martin look at her soberly.

“A medal that had been unjustly withheld from you by President Truman, and for crass political reasons, General Dows. You remember your air combat on July 8, when you fought off in your piston-powered P-38 eight enemy jet fighters by yourself, shooting down four of them?”

“Uh, yes, I remember that fight very well, Mister President.”

“Then, I will be pleased as President of the United States to reward you for that tomorrow with your second Medal of Honor. No good deeds should go unpunished!”

“I must thank you for such confidence in me, Mister President. If I am to be your special military counselor, then may I raise another subject with you?”

“And what would that be?”

“The future reequipping of our Air Force, Mister President. We were lucky in Korea that the average level of training of our combat pilots was as high as it was, since the enemy opposed us with a jet fighter that was much superior to our own F-80 SHOOTING STAR. The Air Force is presently testing the YP-84 THUNDERJET, a fighter-bomber that is in my mind a pure lemon. We are also presently testing another jet fighter, the XP-86 SABRE, that is promising to be much better than the THUNDERJET, but still a bit inferior to the MIG-15. The problem is that the Soviets, who are presently holding a noticeable advance on us in terms of jet fighters with their MIG-15, are undoubtedly already working on something even better.”

“What is precisely your point, General Dows?”

“That we are presently wasting a lot of money, efforts and time to produce numerous models of combat aircraft which are only fair to mediocre in terms of performances. Our aircraft development programs lack both vision and focus and are wasting too much of our resources to explore a multitude of various formulas, partly for politically partisan budgeting. Instead, we could take a serious lead over the Soviets and the British by fully using the technological information brought from the future by Nancy Laplante.”

"And how are you proposing to deal with that problem, General Dows?"

"Please, Mister President, don't take what I will say now as some proof of demagoguery on my part. I am an experienced combat pilot and have a diploma in aeronautical engineering from the M.I.T.. I also discussed at length with Nancy Laplante about the future progression of aeronautical science and of military aviation. I already know what will work and what won't work. I would like to present and then direct a long term aircraft development program, a program that would rationalize and coordinate our various projects and would give us air superiority over the Soviets for the years to come, apart from saving us hundreds of millions of dollars."

Martin then looked at George Kenney, who had been acknowledged as an innovator during the war in the Pacific.

"What do you think of this, General Kenney?"

"That this proposition is exciting me to the utmost, Mister President. Although the Air Force already has a department dedicated to the development and acquisition of new aircraft, that department is unfortunately buried under excessive bureaucratic procedures and is too often influenced by political factors, especially concerning the distribution of production contracts to various plants favored by some senators and congressmen. I also agree with Dows that this department lacks vision and suffers from excessive conservatism that sometimes turns into delirious imagination. I tried for two years as Chief of Staff of the Air Force, from 1945 to 1947, to rationalize the development and acquisition of new planes, but without much success."

"So, basically, you are confident that General Dows could put some order in our programs on future aircraft, General?"

"Absolutely, Mister President! General Dows never disappointed me when I left her the initiative."

"Then, name her officially as being in charge of all our future aircraft projects and make your air force generals understand that it will be in their interest to cooperate with her. Anything else, General Dows?"

"Uh, no, Mister President." Said Ingrid, not believing her luck.

18:45 (Washington Time)

Lafayette Dining Room, Hay-Adams Hotel

Square Lafayette, Washington, D.C.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy was eating his supper with little appetite, for many reasons. One of them was the growing discord among the Democratic Party following the expulsion of President Truman from the White House. Another reason was the bitterness he still felt about the humiliating defeat in Korea. There was no lack of scapegoats at the moment in Washington in general and at the Pentagon in particular, where the working atmosphere between generals was pure poison. Unfortunately, that did nothing to help the Army avenge its defeat. John then suddenly saw from the corner of one eye a very beautiful young woman in Air Force uniform that was trying to get a table. Kennedy's legendary libido immediately took over his gray mood: what better way to forget about his deceptions than some pleasant female company? His head then swam briefly when he recognized her as being the famous Ingrid Dows, a woman he had dreamed many times of dating. Unfortunately for Dows, the dining room was full, the Lafayette being a favorite stop of those at the center of the power in Washington and being a place where a reservation was normally needed to get a table. Getting up from his chair, John quickly walked towards the entrance, catching up with Dows as she was about to turn and leave, disappointed.

"General Dows! General Dows! Please wait a second!"

Ingrid turned around again and examined from head to toe the handsome but frail young man.

"Yes, mister?"

"My name is John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Democratic Representative for the 11th District of Massachusetts. I am presently alone at my table and it would please me very much to be able to invite you to have supper with me."

"You are too kind, Mister Kennedy. I accept your generous offer." Said Ingrid, smiling. In reality, she had recognized John at first glance, having read with Nancy some historical articles about him. John, proud of his catch, gallantly escorted Ingrid to his table and helped her sit down before taking back his chair and signaling for a waiter to bring a menu. He then smiled to Ingrid, finding her even more beautiful in person than in the pictures he had seen of her.

"You know, I had dreamed about meeting you since you served in Guadalcanal with your air group. I was then the captain of a torpedo boat in the Solomons and we had a picture of you pinned on the wall of our tiny crew mess."

"I am truly flattered by that, John." Replied softly Ingrid, who found the young man to her taste. "We could exchange our stories about the Pacific War during the supper...and after."

"That would please me very much, General." Said John, whose heart had just accelerated. Ingrid gave him her best smile while putting her right hand on his left hand and speaking in a mellow voice.

"Please, simply call me Ingrid."

20:19 (Washington Time)

Room 304, Hay-Adams Hotel

John stiffened, lying on his back, as Ingrid moved her hips at a growing rhythm while mounting him. He exploded inside her as she also reached orgasm with a muffled shout of ecstasy. She then lay down on top of him but raised her head when he groaned with pain.

"Are you okay, John? I didn't hurt you, I hope?"

"No, it's not you: it's my damn back." Answered John in a tight voice. Rising off him with the help of her arms and legs, Ingrid took her weight off the young man and slid to one side.

"Wait, I will give you a little massage that will help you. Turn slowly on your belly."

John obeyed cautiously, his fragile vertebrae making him suffer as he turned around. Ingrid then went on all fours over him, her hands and knees on each side of John in order not to put any of her weight on him. Lowering herself, she then made her breasts caress his back while rocking back and forth.

"I hope that this is not hurting you, John?"

"Not at all!" Replied John with a smile, guessing what she was doing. Ingrid soon went on her knees, sitting on John's legs, to use her hands for a delicate massage on both sides of his spine. As John sighed with contentment, Ingrid concentrated and, continuing her delicate massage, made both of her hands glow faintly. John, not knowing what she was really doing and having his eyes closed, felt a soothing heat replace his back pain as Ingrid healed with the touch of her hands the osteoporosis of his spine as well as his deficient suprarenal glands, ending in less than a minute the Addison Disease that had made him suffer so much since his early childhood. Once

John was healed, Ingrid increased gradually the depth and vigor of her massage, using all the experience that millenniums of life had taught her. When she was finished and made him turn around on his back, John looked at her with near reverence.

“My back: the pain is completely gone. You are an angel, Ingrid!”

“Not yet, John.” She replied with a smile before kissing him and lying on top of him, both of them fully naked. “I am now going to show you that I can be a little devil when I want to.”

Their sulfurous sexual relationship, which went on at intervals during the weeks to come, didn't take much time before attracting comments from the numerous busybodies around Washington. On the other hand, John was as surprised as his colleagues of the Congress by his newfound physical vigor and by the permanent disappearance of his back pains and chronic fatigue. Nobody, not even John, connected his new relationship with his miraculous healing when the young politician put away his crutches for good.

CHAPTER 7 – ATONEMENT

09:04 (Tokyo Time)

Tuesday, September 21, 1948 ‘C’

Niigata military airfield

Niigata, northwest region of Honshu

Japanese home islands

Coming from an American amphibious ship cruising on the horizon in the company of an escorting heavy cruiser, the UH-2 medium helicopter flew directly towards the main tarmac of Niigata’s old military airfield, landing smoothly about forty meters from the control tower. Its rear cargo ramp went down only long enough to let out a single jeep with an attached trailer, then closed, with the helicopter flying out, heading back to sea. In all, the machine had not been on the ground more than a minute. The Japanese in well worn Imperial Navy uniforms that had watched it approach and land had refrained from firing on it because they had received orders to that effect from their superiors. The last batch of leaflets dropped over Niigata by American bombers had after all warned that a peace envoy would be coming. The naval aviator waiting at the base of the control tower with a squad of naval infantrymen armed with long ARISAKA rifles thought to himself that the announced American was either very brave or very stupid for coming utterly alone like this. The Imperial Navy fighter pilot, who had not flown a plane for over three years now thanks to the utter lack of gasoline in Japan, watched with both interest and curiosity as the American jeep, with only one person in it, approached the control tower, a small white flag attached to its radio antenna. That American wore not a combat uniform, but a blue going out dress uniform. The naval aviator then noticed the uncommonly long reddish-brown hair of the American and swore out loud in surprise.

“By the Kamis⁶! They sent a woman!”

The eight naval infantrymen looked at each other with consternation on seeing that their officer was right. That woman also proved to be young and extremely beautiful by any standards, adding to the dismay of the Japanese. She finally stopped her jeep a few

⁶ Kamis : Japanese divine spirits.

paces in front of the waiting Japanese and stepped out of her vehicle, putting back on her service hat before walking to the naval aviator. The latter stiffened on seeing the two stars of a major general on her shoulders and came to rigid attention, saluting her crisply. The woman stopped two paces in front of him and saluted back, letting him see the pilot's wings insignia and the numerous medal ribbons on her chest. She was tall, even for an American woman, and her well adjusted uniform put into value her sensual curves. A further surprise came when she spoke in excellent Japanese.

"I am Major General Ingrid Dows, Special Advisor to President Martin and Special Presidential Envoy to Japan."

"Lieutenant Saburo Sakai, Imperial Japanese Navy." Replied formally the naval aviator before adding to that in a much less formal tone. "Uh, you wouldn't happen to be the one nicknamed 'Lady Hawk', General?"

Ingrid smiled in response to that.

"I just may, Lieutenant Sakai. Would you by chance have flown a few missions over Guadalcanal in 1942?"

"I did, General Dows. We probably met in the air then."

"And I possibly shot a few holes in your plane on that occasion, Lieutenant." Replied Ingrid, now grinning. Sakai also smiled and shot back.

"Or you were the one who ended up with holes in your plane, General."

"Possibly! Well, I would love to continue this interesting conversation at a later time, but I believe that most important things need to be discussed today, for the good of both Japan and of the United States."

Those few last words surprised and confused Sakai, but he had received directives from up high and it was not his place to make such an important envoy waste her time.

"I was instructed to guide you to the prefecture building in Niigata, where you are expected, General. I am sorry if I don't have an appropriate vehicle for you, but we ran out of gasoline months ago in Niigata, as well as in the rest of Japan."

"I understand that times have been hard for Japan during the last few years following those British nuclear strikes, Lieutenant. With some luck and good will, those hard times may be coming to an end. Since space is limited aboard my jeep, I can give you a seat but will have place for only two of your soldiers."

"I was actually going to escort you by myself to Niigata, General, so that will not prove to be a problem."

"Then, hop in, Lieutenant!"

As Sakai got in the jeep, he saw Ingrid grab the handset of the vehicle's HF radio to send a short message.

"Base Plate, this is Lady Hawk, over!... Base Plate, I have been met at the airfield and am about to leave for Niigata, over... Understood, Base Plate. Lady Hawk out!"

She then gave an apologetic smile to Sakai as she put down the radio handset.

"Just a prearranged routine call to my ship, Lieutenant. I suppose that you can speak English, since you were chosen to greet me."

"I indeed do, General, although you may find my English far from being as good as your Japanese."

"Don't sell yourself short, Lieutenant. Which way from here?"

"Take the next road left towards the main gate of the airfield, General."

Starting again the engine of her jeep, Ingrid started rolling at a moderate speed, following the directions given by Sakai. She waited for her vehicle to be out of the base and on a narrow road leading south to Niigata before speaking again.

"No offense to you, Lieutenant, but I somehow expected a higher ranking officer to be waiting for me at the airfield."

"No offense taken, General. In truth, I am the highest ranking officer left at the base right now. In fact, I was still a simple Navy petty officer in 1944. However, the last four years have been truly painful and tragic for Japan."

Ingrid gave him a dismayed look, not having expected the local situation to be so dire.

"You have no superior officer left at Niigata Airfield? But, the radiation readings we took in this region were quite benign, compared to those in the southern regions."

Sakai, influenced by the fact that she was a fighter pilot with an honorable reputation, then gave her more information than he was supposed to give to the expected envoy.

"Please act in Niigata as if I didn't tell you the following information, General: most of our officers didn't die because of the effects of the British bombs. The majority committed Seppuku or were killed when they went against the will of the Emperor. To the evils of the British bombs were added the evils of a short but violent civil war between the militarists who wanted to perpetuate the state of war forever and the supporters of the Emperor, who were ready to sue for peace. Unfortunately, that short civil war cost many valuable lives and destroyed more of our few remaining equipment. The Emperor's faction prevailed, but at a cruel cost."

"And...the Emperor, did he survive?"

Sakai nodded his head once then.

"Hay! You are going to meet with him at the prefecture building."

Immense relief came to Ingrid at those words: her plan was going to have much better chances of succeeding now with the Emperor alive and well.

"Then, I have a confidence as well for you, Lieutenant Sakai: the United States has recently suffered a serious military defeat in Korea at the hands of the Communist Chinese, who were supported by the Soviets. The whole of Korea is now in Communist hands. In exchange for helping Japan to rebuild and recover, my country is hoping to obtain bases on Japanese soil that will allow us to put a check to the Soviet expansion in the Northern Pacific."

Sakai nodded grimly at that, understanding very well her concerns about the Soviets: Japan and the Soviet Union had been at odds for decades already, even before World War Two, disputing the ownership of the Kuril Islands and fighting over their respective zones of influence in Asia. Many Japanese were in fact more wary of the Soviets than of the Americans.

"Thank you for your frankness, General. I see that your President chose his envoy well."

Somehow, that made her smile with amusement.

"Actually, many in Washington said that I was the only one crazy enough to come here alone."

Saburo broke into laughter on hearing that.

"You would decidedly have made a good samurai, General."

"Why, thank you, Lieutenant, truly. Tell me, how did the Emperor escape the destruction of Tokyo, if I may ask?"

"The Kamis were with him that day, General. When those awful bombs struck, he was here in Niigata, conducting an inspection tour. The whole imperial family in fact traveled with him, while most of the Imperial Army staff was killed in Tokyo's destruction. In a way, that proved a blessing in disguise in the long run, as that weakened considerably the militarist faction."

Ingrid nodded her head at that, now understanding much better the situation in Japan.

They kept exchanging pleasantries and tidbits of information on the way to Niigata, with Ingrid keeping her speed moderate due to the poor state of the road, which

had seen better days. They finally entered the port city of Niigata twenty minutes later and became the immediate point of attention of every Japanese in town, as they were the only moving motor vehicle in sight. To Ingrid, it was immediately painfully obvious that the city was overcrowded with refugees sheltering under whatever roof was available, with most of those refugees being visibly sick or starving, or both. Saburo Sakai saw her sadness on her face as she was looking at a group of silent, sullen small children who were frighteningly thin. The tears that came to her eyes then made the naval aviator nod his head once.

“Your president indeed chose well his envoy for this mission, General.”

Ingrid tried to reply to that but found that a big ball was blocking her throat. She was finally able to speak one city block further.

“Lieutenant, here is another confidence for you. Eleven centuries ago, there was a young and talented geisha named Tsuko, who served as a lady in waiting for one of the daughters of the Emperor in Kyoto. She died at the age of 45 from pneumonia, as she was following her mistress on a long trip in Winter. Her spirit then went to inhabit in succession another ten persons as the centuries progressed, to finally link with a newborn German baby girl named Ingrid. I can still remember the life of Tsuko in detail, along with all the other lives my spirit went through during nearly seven millenniums. This unique talent is one of the reasons why I was chosen by President Martin to be his envoy.”

Saburo stared at her in silence for a long moment, dismay on his face. He then turned his head back towards the front of the jeep, keeping his thoughts to himself.

They arrived in front of the prefecture building after another thirty minutes of travel through the narrow, crowded streets. A modern structure made of concrete and brick and rising four levels, its main entrance was guarded not by soldiers in uniforms but by four men wearing the kimonos and daisho⁷ sets of samurai warriors. Their only concession to modern times was the rifles slung across their backs. Stopping her jeep in front of the steps leading up to the main entrance and shutting down its radio and engine, Ingrid then stepped out with Sakai. Returning the bows from the samurai guards, she started climbing the steps of the prefecture, Sakai following two steps

⁷ Daisho : the dual sword combination of the samurai warrior, made of the long Katana and of the short Wakizashi.

behind her. An old man wearing a rich kimono greeted her at the main entrance, hiding his dismay at seeing that a woman had been sent to meet his emperor. The man proved to speak a fair English, in which he spoke at first to Ingrid.

"Welcome to Niigata and Japan, General. I am Fukuda Hiro, Retainer of his Imperial Majesty."

"And I am Major General Ingrid Dows, Special Advisor to President Joseph Martin and Special Presidential Envoy to Japan." Replied Ingrid in perfect Japanese. Fukuda took that in before asking a question, also in Japanese.

"President Martin? President Roosevelt is no more in office, General?"

"President Roosevelt died of illness in 1945 and was then succeeded by his vice-president, who was in turn replaced recently by President Martin."

The imperial retainer nodded at that.

"I understand. Please excuse my ignorance in that matter, General. Unfortunately, our links with the outside world were cut four years ago and we know precious little of what happened since then."

"You do not have to excuse yourself for that, as the disaster that struck Japan was unprecedented in history and most tragic. I was sent by President Martin to offer peace and the help of the United States to rebuild Japan."

"Then, the Emperor will certainly be most happy to receive you, General. This way, please."

Seeing that the persons visible through the open double doors wore their shoes, Ingrid didn't have to leave her own shoes at the entrance, as would be customary when entering a Japanese home. That was probably reserved for when she would be about to enter the imperial apartments. She was effectively asked by Fukuda to take off her shoes once they arrived in front of a double door on the second level guarded by two samurai warriors. Remembering her old imperial etiquette from eleven centuries ago, Ingrid chose to act in the fashion a top imperial general would have acted in front of the Emperor, advancing once the doors were opened to the proper distance in front of the imperial dais and then kneeling and bowing very low. On his part Saburo Sakai stayed outside of the room, waiting besides the imperial guards. Emperor Hirohito, a small, bespectacled man in his late forties, was kneeling on a cushion on top of the dais and kept quiet as Fukuda went to him respectfully to whisper words in his ears. An imperial scribe was also present, kneeling behind the emperor and ready to write down the verbal

exchange to come. Once Fukuda was done, Hirohito made a discreet sign, with Fukuda then speaking in Japanese to Ingrid from behind and to one side of his emperor.

“You may speak, General Dows.”

Ingrid straightened her back then but stayed in her kneeling position, not wanting to insult him by speaking down to him.

“Your Majesty, I am Major General Ingrid Dows, Special Advisor to President Joseph Martin Junior and Special Presidential Envoy to Japan. I come in the name of the United States to offer peace and assistance to your country. While I may appear rude by doing this, President Martin told me to be both frank and blunt, so that there are no misunderstandings between our two countries. When the British missiles struck Japan in June of 1944, over four years ago, Japan had already lost the war and was facing slow starvation while our fleet blockaded your home islands. We were then worried that the militarists in your government would refuse to acknowledge defeat and would fight to the bitter end, dragging down the whole of Japan with them. However, the British missiles changed that equation and we stayed away in order not to expose our own troops to the poison spread by the British nuclear weapons. We took air and water samples periodically around Japan during the following years, until at least the northern portions of Japan were deemed safe enough to visit. President Martin then decided that the time was right to pursue true peace with Japan and sent me.”

Fukuda, probably following a pre-arranged script, replied to that, with the Emperor staying silent and impassive.

“And does President Martin’s offer of peace have preconditions attached to it, General?”

There goes the million dollar question, thought Ingrid, who had been sure that the Japanese would be especially worried about that.

“There are, but they are truly minimal. While the United States will not allow the rebuilding of Japanese armed forces and wishes that the remaining military units, warships and other heavy military equipment still existing be dismantled, it does not wish to occupy Japan. Your authority over Japan will not be disputed and internal control and public security will be left into the care of local Japanese authorities and government officials.”

Even with the mask of impassivity worn by the Japanese present, Ingrid could telepathically sense the immediate and profound relief that came to them when she said

that the Emperor's authority would not be disputed and that Japan would not be militarily occupied. Fukuda then spoke after a couple of seconds, time to recover his wits.

"And there are no other conditions for peace between United States and Japan?"

"Conditions for peace, no! However, President Martin has wishes, in exchange of which he promises the help of the United States to rebuild the parts of Japan that are still fit for human occupation. Our air and water samplings, along with reconnaissance overflights, have shown us that most of Kyushu and the southern and central parts of Honshu are today nearly devoid of life and are still dangerous to live in. In exchange for humanitarian and reconstruction aid, the United States would wish to be allowed to establish and use a limited number of military bases on Japanese soil. We would be especially interested in gaining the use of facilities in the ports of Niigata and Aomori, on Honshu, and Hakodate and Tomakomai, on Hokkaido, plus the airfields of Niigata, Misawa and Chitose. The reason for wishing to use bases in Japan is simple and also plays to the direct interests of Japan: the United States is intent on blocking any further Soviet expansion in Asia and the Northern Pacific. Know that, through a surprise military aggression by North Korean forces supported by Communist China and by the Soviet Union, the American forces in the Korean Peninsula were forced recently to evacuate Korea entirely. While the United States is not in a position right now to retake Korea, it intends to stop the Soviets from grabbing any more territory, including the Japanese Kuril Islands."

"So, the United States would be ready to guarantee Japan's territorial integrity against any Soviet attempts at annexing parts of our islands, is that it?"

"Yes!"

There was some hesitation then, with Emperor Hirohito whispering something into Fukuda's ear. The retainer straightened up and stared at Ingrid.

"What about the Nansei⁸ Islands? We know that the American forces have bases there."

"Those islands are presently under American military occupation, but their status will eventually be reopened for discussion in the future. Thankfully, they were not contaminated by the British bombs." Answered Ingrid, knowing that this would not exactly please the Japanese. However, as a defeated nation, there was only so much that Japan could reasonably ask for, especially after all the mayhem and death it had

⁸ Nansei Islands : Japanese name for the Ryukyu Islands, which include Okinawa.

sowed across the Pacific and Asia during the war. She personally believed the peace terms she had brought to be very generous for the Japanese and had in fact to argue in their favor against the opinions of other advisors of President Martin, who had advocated to simply grab by force what the United States wanted in Japan. Hirohito whispered more words in Fukuda's ear, who spoke again.

"When could the United States start sending aid to Japan if the Emperor agrees to your terms?"

"Immediately!" Replied Ingrid, surprising the Japanese. "As a proof of our good intentions and as a purely humanitarian gesture, without any preconditions, we are prepared to deliver today into the port in Niigata 2,000 tons of food aid, sixty tons of medical supplies and enough tents, blankets and camp cots for 300,000 people. They are aboard the ships from which my helicopter came and I just need to send a radio message for them to start being unloaded."

For the first time during their meeting, Ingrid saw emotion appear on the face of Emperor Hirohito. Also for the first time, Hirohito spoke directly to her.

"Your offer of aid is warmly accepted, General Dows. You may call your ships to start the delivery process. In the meantime, the Imperial Council will study the terms from President Martin. You are of course invited to stay here in this building as an imperial guest until a proper answer is ready to be delivered to your government. Lord Fukuda will go with you to help coordinate the delivery of aid into our port."

Ingrid bowed very low again, then crawled back on her knees while still facing Hirohito, until the etiquette indicated that it was now proper for her to rise to her feet. She felt truly happy as she stood outside the courtroom with Lord Fukuda: today may just be the beginning of a new era, an era where the lives of the Japanese people could be rebuild after four years of hell. In her eyes, that counted a lot more than simply gaining basing rights in Japan or making a new ally. Over fifty million Japanese had paid with their lives for the arrogance and thirst for power of the militarists. With those militarists and their supporters now dead, killed either in the British nuclear strikes or in the civil war that had followed, the time for atonement was over. It was now time for Japan to live again.

CHAPTER 8 – JET AGE

09:46 (Washington Time)

Thursday, October 7, 1948 'C'

Main tarmac of Wright Field

Ohio, USA

Colonel Albert Boyd, head of the Flight Test Division of the Air Materiel Command, or AMC, was waiting with a staff car and driver on the main tarmac of Wright Field, one of the two airfields that composed Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. He smiled as he watched a P-38NC land on the main runway, having recognized the markings on the plane.

“So, Under Secretary Kenney took our Ace of aces as his special advisor. He could have chosen much worse.”

The fighter-bomber, guided by an airman using colored panels, finally stopped about ten meters in front of the staff car, with the two piston engines then shutting down in succession. Boyd walked to the plane as a young woman got out of the cockpit and took off her helmet, parachute and flying vest, leaving them on the seat and closing the canopy before jumping on the ground, a briefcase in her hand. Boyd felt a shock on seeing the twin stars of a major general on the collar of her flight suit, but didn't forget to salute her.

“Welcome to Wright Field, General. I am Colonel Albert Boyd, head of the Flight Test Division. My car will drive you to our meeting with General Thompson.”

Ingrid returned his salute and smiled as she shook hands with him, demonstrating a strength in her grip that was surprising for a woman.

“Thank you, Colonel Boyd. I must say that I have been dreaming for a long time of visiting your flight test center. You must see all kinds of planes come and go here.”

“Oh yes, General! Apart from correcting the deficiencies found on our operational aircraft and to recertify planes that were modified or repaired, we test all the new models of aircraft proposed for Air Force service, plus many of their sub-systems. All this makes for a busy schedule.”

"My visit here should actually lighten up your load significantly, Colonel." Said Ingrid in a mysterious tone. "I also came to announce fundamental changes in the way we will select and develop our future aircraft, starting today."

"Oh? You are interesting me, General."

"I am sorry if I prefer to have all the officers concerned together around me before I give more details on that. Let's go now to the AMC headquarters, if you don't mind."

"Then, if you may take place with me in my staff car, General."

As the staff car started rolling towards Patterson Field, which was adjacent to Wright Field and was home to the headquarters of the AMC, Boyd eyed Ingrid discreetly from the corner of one eye as she looked with interest at the heteroclite collection of planes parked on the tarmac of Wright Field. Despite her extremely young age, which was shocking for an officer of her rank, Boyd knew that Ingrid was a first class combat pilot and an extremely competent and innovative tactical and strategic leader. To see someone rise in the ranks via pure merit rather than solely thanks to seniority or political contacts was refreshing. Boyd also told himself that he was going to have to warn his hot blooded test pilots to show restraint and proper respect to such a beautiful young woman. As their car turned on the road connecting the two bases, Ingrid searched inside her leather briefcase and took out of it a file marked TOP SECRET that she then handed to Boyd.

"Here is your copy of the document that will concern you most in what I will talk about this morning, Colonel. This directive, signed by the Under Secretary for the Air Force and by the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, suspends or cancels many of the aircraft projects actually in development or testing, apart from accelerating other projects. Feel free to give me your frank opinion about this document, Colonel, as you are rightly recognized as our best officer in terms of aircraft development and flight testing. DRIVER, SLOW DOWN! WE NEED SOME TIME TO DISCUSS BEFORE ARRIVING AT AMC HEADQUARTERS."

"Understood, General!" Replied the sergeant driving the staff car, who then slowed his vehicle noticeably. Albert Boyd took two minutes to read the short document, rereading the most important paragraphs to make sure he understood them well. He then gave Ingrid a somber look.

“Over three quarters of the prototypes that I am presently testing or that are in construction are cancelled by this directive, General. I agree with the doubts expressed in this document about those prototypes to be cancelled, but aren't we taking an enormous risk by starting back from zero nearly in every category? We could end up with a long war on our hands and with no new replacement aircraft for at least five or six years.”

“We are already in a long war, Colonel: it is called the Cold War and it will go on for decades. The projects cancelled by that directive were mostly initiated during World War Two and were based on concepts that are now outdated. Others are ideas that, in my opinion, should have never left the office of their authors or owe their existence to beliefs in incorrect technical concepts, or even to political pressures exerted to give juicy contracts to production plants situated in some congressman's district. All of them have the major drawback of not taking into account the information available in the ATHENA files brought from the future by Nancy Laplante. We cannot afford to waste hundreds of millions of dollars on projects that will produce aircraft that are essentially outdated or inferior as they come out of production. Most important of all, we cannot allow our aircrews to go fight in planes with performances that are inferior to enemy planes, like what happened in Korea when we faced the MIG-15. We must also rationalize the whole process by which we choose and develop our planes. The actual system, as managed by the AMC, is a bureaucratic monster which is more of an hindrance than help to real progress.”

“And the Convair B-36, General? It is now about to enter service and has not demonstrated any design flaw during its flight testing. To cancel it now will leave us with no true intercontinental bomber.”

“The B-36 may fill our equipment list, Colonel, but it will be in my opinion a flying coffin for our aircrews and will not stand a chance if sent over the Soviet Union. The Soviets already have jet fighters that can intercept and destroy it with relative ease and they are more than probably working right now on something better than the MIG-15. The B-36 is simply too vulnerable to enemy fighters, is way too big and heavy for most of our airfields and can't maneuver worth shit. What we need is a supersonic bomber able equally to effect low altitude, high subsonic speed penetration flights through defended airspace or to do supersonic sprints at high altitude. We will also need a heavy air to ground missile to arm that new bomber.”

“To create such a bomber will take many years, General. We still know precious little about supersonic flight and none of our production, in-service aircraft have broken yet through the speed of sound. Only experimental models have done so, barely. We will have a lot of fundamental research to do before we could even start to design a supersonic bomber.”

Ingrid's answer to that was to take out of her briefcase another file, this one stamped 'TOP SECRET ATHENA', and to give it to Boyd. The eyes of the latter opened wide on seeing the picture of the fantastic aircraft featured on the first page of the document inside the file. Ingrid then spoke in a sober tone.

“What many people in Washington and in the United States seem to have forgotten is that Nancy Laplante visited our country in December of 1940 and left us a treasure trove of documents and information from the future. Unfortunately, apart from the projects in which she directly contributed to, like the P-38N, the B-25GN, the C-142, the EC-142 and our various helicopters, nobody seems to have used that information from the future since then. I experienced that in 1941, when I and my husband, who was a major in the Marine Corps, arrived in the Philippines from London and found out that none of the information given by Nancy Laplante about the Japanese attack to come had been passed to our commanders in the Pacific. When President Martin named me as his special military advisor, I went to check what had happened to that information from the future. Guess where I found them, Colonel: at the bottom of a dusty file cabinet locked up in an obscure storage room at the Pentagon. When I asked if someone had consulted those files recently, I was told that the last time it happened was in 1943, when I consulted them during my tour in Washington. The main reason why was that their sheer existence was kept secret from nearly everybody in Washington. Well, I have the firm intention to fully use and exploit those files from now on. The file you presently hold in your hands represents only a very small part of the information contained in those ATHENA archives and concerns a future bomber called the B-1B. I have also other documents concerning the theoretical and practical aspects of supersonic flight, as well as design drawings of various types of jet engines. We thus have available to us everything we need to start a slew of aircraft projects that will give us air superiority over all the other countries for the decades to come. To do that, however, we need to rationalize and unify our future aircraft programs and to stop going forward blindly, one little step at a time. From now on, I will personally direct our future aircraft, engines and air weapons programs, with the help of those ATHENA files.”

"A lot of people could object to the fact that one person will monopolize the decisions concerning our aircraft research and development programs, General." Cautioned Boyd. "After all, a lot of money is involved in this. Money means political influence. Many other generals may also object to the cancellation of their pet projects or to the loss of part of their power or influence on our development programs. You could become the target of many people, General."

"I am ready to face them, Colonel." Replied Ingrid in a firm voice just before their staff car came to a stop in front of the main entrance to the AMC headquarters.

Boyd led Ingrid inside and to the office of a slightly overweight major general with graying hair. The man wore the insignia of a flight engineer on his uniform, instead of that of a pilot. After being introduced with Boyd in the office of the commander of the Air Materiel Command, Ingrid shook hands with him and presented herself.

"Major General Ingrid Dows, Special Presidential Advisor and Special Adviser for development and design to the Under Secretary of the Air Force."

Surprised at first by the identity of his visitor from Washington and also shocked by her young age, Major General Thompson nodded his head.

"Welcome to the AMC, General Dows. If you will please follow me, I will lead you to my conference room."

Thompson then looked at his assistant, giving him an order.

"Captain McCarey, advise the deputy commander and the department heads to come immediately to the conference room."

"Yes sir!"

Then leaving his office with Ingrid and Boyd, Thompson started walking slowly while speaking with Ingrid.

"Could you tell me quickly about the exact goal of your visit, General Dows? The office of Under Secretary Kenney was not very clear about that."

"That was intentional, General Thompson: he didn't want a gaggle of politicians to panic when they will learn that many Air Force contracts are about to be cancelled in their electoral districts. Basically, I am here to announce a complete overhaul of our acquisition and development process for our aircraft and helicopters, plus important changes to our existing prototype programs. We are presently wasting a lot of money on projects that are already outdated."

Thompson gave her a critical look but didn't say a word then. They soon arrived at a large conference room, where eight other senior officers ranking from brigadier general to lieutenant colonel joined them. After a round of presentations and handshakes, Thompson had everyone sit down and then gave the floor to Ingrid. The latter then distributed copies of a number of documents from her briefcase, including the list of cancelled projects.

"General Thompson, gentlemen, the first document I gave you was signed by Under Secretary Kenney and orders the termination of a number of projects, while others are to be initiated or accelerated. The second document, which is of direct interest to this headquarters, describes the new system adopted by the Air Force to select, direct and manage our new projects on aircraft, engines, air weapons and other sub-systems. This system will be based on the principle of complete centralization of the management of each project into a dedicated project office. Those project offices will in turn answer directly to me and will direct their project from the initial conception to its operational entry into service. The engineering assistance to programs, as understood here at the AMC, will only kick in after the initial operational capability is achieved. This will cut for good the many present disputes about budget jurisdictions around the Air Force. Finally, the third document I distributed describes the revised organizational chart for the Air Force, as approved by Under Secretary for the Air Force Kenney and by the Secretary of Defense, Dwight Eisenhower. Before hearing your opinions on these documents, I must point out a few crucial points. First, the knowledge brought from the future by Nancy Laplante in 1940 is to be used to the maximum in our new projects, something that was unfortunately not done in the past years. Second, we started with the war in Korea the initial phase of what I call the Cold War, a series of indirect confrontations with the USSR, often via intermediate players and secondary theaters of operations, that will go on for many decades. As our defeat in Korea showed us, we don't have anymore the luxury of conducting our little inter-service or bureaucratic infighting, or of wasting millions of dollars just to satisfy a senator or congressman who wants a contract for his electoral district. Our goal from now on will be to produce truly advanced aircraft, so that we could gain superiority in the air around the World. Lastly, Under Secretary Kenney will not tolerate any delay caused by opposition to his new policies and directives. Gentlemen, the floor is yours."

Ingrid barely had time to close her mouth before the first of a long wave of objections and criticism hit her, coming from all around the table. After having replied as politely

and diplomatically as she could to the first questions and objections, and seeing that the same arguments kept coming ad nauseam, she finally slammed her right fist on the table and raised her voice.

“GENTLEMEN! If you really think that the present system works so well, then explain to me how we could end up fighting an enemy which had superior planes in Korea. We are supposed to work in concert to ensure the national security of the United States, not to build up individual bureaucratic empires or win brownie points with politicians. We are at war and our pilots and aircrews need the best planes and weapons that we can design and produce for them.”

09:12 (California Time)

Monday, October 11, 1948 ‘C’

Lockheed aircraft factories, Burbank

California

Ingrid, jumping down from her cockpit with a leather briefcase in one hand, smiled to the tall and lean civilian pilot wearing sunglasses that had hurried towards her Lockheed P-38NC, freshly arrived from Washington.

“Hello! Do you think that someone here knows how to refill and check out this baby?”

The civilian pilot, a man in his thirties, smiled at her joke and shook her presented hand.

“I believe so, General. Tony LeVier, test pilot for Lockheed. Uh, weren’t you a brigadier general only recently?”

“Yup! My new rank came with my new position as Special Presidential Advisor and Special Advisor to the Under Secretary of the Air Force. I am also Director of Air Force Aircraft Development Projects.”

“My God! That’s a lot of big titles for a delectable young woman like you, General. And to what do we owe you this visit?”

“I come in the name of Under Secretary Kenney to propose a new prototype development contract to your company.”

LeVier’s smile faded on hearing that.

“Oh? Our XP-90 and XP-94 fighter projects just got cancelled by the Pentagon, General.”

Ingrid gave the civilian test pilot a contrite smile.

"I know: I am the one responsible for those cancellations...and for many other ones. There were however good reasons for those cancellations. Would it be possible to meet in private with Mister Robert Gross and with Chief Engineer Clarence Johnson?"

"They are both here in Burbank this morning, General. Please follow me."

Giving in passing an order to a nearby technician to have the P-38 refueled and checked out, Tony LeVier led Ingrid towards a car parked on one side of the Lockheed air terminal building. Inviting Ingrid to take place inside, LeVier then drove towards a large hangar with an administrative annex attached to it that was situated apart from other buildings at the factory. Finally parking besides the annex, Tony led Ingrid to an entrance door guarded by an armed security agent. Tony explained that to Ingrid as he showed his security pass to the guard.

"This is what we call 'The Skunk Works', our research and development center for classified projects. Security around it is quite strict."

"And I approve of it, Mister LeVier. In fact, the project contract I have with me will necessitate a high degree of security and discretion."

"And what sort of plane are we talking about here, General?"

"The prototype of a supersonic fighter-bomber able to top a speed of 1,500 miles per hour."

The shock from those words made LeVier pivot on his heels to face her.

"You...you can't be serious, General?"

"I am very serious, Mister LeVier. I brought with me technical information from the future that will show your engineers how to achieve such performances. Nancy Laplante was my adoptive mother and she educated me about the future."

Tony LeVier stared at her in silence for a moment before entering the building with Ingrid. He spoke again as they were walking together along a hallway.

"I had the chance to meet Nancy Laplante when she came to see us in 1940 to help us improve the P-38. A most remarkable woman indeed."

"And one I miss very much."

They were silent for the rest of the way, until they entered a large office on the second floor of the annex, where they found Lockheed's president, Robert Gross, in conversation with Clarence Johnson, the chief design engineer for Lockheed. After LeVier introduced her, Ingrid repeated what she had said to the test pilot concerning Air Force contracts, then took an envelope from her briefcase and gave it to Gross.

"Here is a government check, covering your research and development costs for the cancelled XP-90 and XP-94. Please understand that the reasons for those cancellations have nothing to do with the quality of your projects, gentlemen. To put it simply, the Air Force has decided to start from scratch and to base its new aircraft programs on the full use of the technical information brought from the year 2012 by Nancy Laplante. Instead of producing many aircraft models with only gradually improving performances, we now want to design and produce planes that will give us a marked edge for the decades to come. To that end, I will provide you with basic guidelines and with the pertinent technological information from the future to help you conceive a long range multirole fighter-bomber able to fly faster than Mach 2."

"You are asking for quite a lot, General Dows." Replied Clarence Johnson, speaking in a guarded tone. "To design the airframe of such an aircraft will be difficult enough, but our bitter experience with the P-80 is that our main problem will be to find a jet engine with enough performances and reliability to power our prototype. To date, the reliability of the jet engines produced in the United States, as well as their performance level, is not very impressive."

"Quite true, Mister Johnson. Know however that I visited last Friday the Pratt & Whitney company to offer them an engine development contract. That contract is for the design of a new jet engine of the low bypass turbofan type, the TF-58, that will serve as the core engine for many of our new aircraft projects. In your case, a variant of the TF-58, to be combined with a ramjet section and to 2D thrust vectoring exhaust nozzles, will power our future XF-83. That variant, the TF-58R, is planned to produce over twelve tons of dry thrust, or over twenty tons of thrust with the ramjet lit up at high speeds. Pratt & Whitney also got ATHENA technological information to help them, including the design drawings of a very advanced jet engine produced in the future. Two of the TF-58R future engines will power your future prototype, if you accept the development contract I am offering you, of course."

"Who will compete with us on this project, General?" Asked Robert Gross, visibly still hesitant. Her answer surprised him.

"Nobody, Mister Gross! What I am offering you is a secret, exclusive contract for the design, development and eventual production of a supersonic fighter-bomber to be designated as the XF-83. That contract is a so-called black project and everything about it will be kept secret. If it could encourage you to take it, know that the XF-83 will be

based on a blend of technology and design concept from two aircraft that Lockheed produced in the future, in Nancy's history, the SR-71 and the F-22."

"It seems that you won't be leaving us much leeway in terms of the general conception of the prototype, General Dows." Remarked Clarence Johnson, resentment in his voice. Ingrid nodded her head gravely and took a file from her briefcase, giving it to Johnson.

"True, but don't take it as an insult to your talents, Mister Johnson. In Nancy's history, you played a major part in the design of the SR-71, so what you will be doing now is in reality to precede your own footsteps. The XF-83 is to be a twin-engine heavy fighter-bomber, with trapezoidal wings of large dimensions and a blended wing-fuselage body that will follow the Area Rule, an aerodynamic concept from the future that is crucial to break through the sound barrier. All the fuel and armament will be carried internally, in order to minimize drag and attain as high a maximum speed and range as possible. The vectoring thrust nozzles of its engines will confer a maximum of agility to our XF-83, which will also be fully equipped for flying at night and bad weather. This all represents a formidable design challenge, but you will find in this file the necessary technological information from the future to help you in your work, along with sketches of what I envision. You will find that the expected dimensions of the TF-58R have already been set by me after discussion with Pratt & Whitney design engineers, so you will be able to base the dimensions of the XF-83 around the planned TF-58R engines. Know that, compared to the specifications I am giving you for the XF-83, those I gave to Pratt & Whitney engineers for the TF-58 and its variants are much more restrictive, as the new engines will be crucial for the design and development of many secret prototype programs. By the way, most of the major aircraft manufacturers in the United States will receive secret, black project contracts, but will not know who is producing what, in order to keep the secrecy to the maximum. I will personally supervise the progress of those contracts, but I will take a special interest in your XF-83. With this said, here is the contract I am proposing to you, Mister Gross. Please read it and tell me if you are interested to take it."

Gross took the document handed over to him by Ingrid and started reading it. He visibly frowned after reading the second page.

"The list of specifications is rather vague, compared to the military design contracts we got in the past, General."

"That's because I have no intentions to limit the imagination of Mister Johnson by asking for specifications that are too restrictive. I want the most performing aircraft that you can produce while following the general design guidelines given by me. The only thing important to me is that your plane attains the minimum performance levels requested, in the requested delays and at a reasonable cost."

Continuing to read the contract, Gross finally nodded his head.

"The terms of this contract seem realistic and are financially interesting for my company, General Dows. I will present it this afternoon to our board of directors, with my personal recommendation to take it."

"Thank you, Mister Gross. Here is my calling card, with my telephone numbers at the Pentagon and the White House. Contact me or leave a message for me at my office when you will have taken a final decision on the contract."

"Certainly, General Dows. Uh, aren't you afraid that members of the Congress will protest the attribution of so many juicy contracts without any call for tenders? You know how much they like to get government contracts for their respective electoral districts."

Ingrid smiled with malice at his remark.

"Don't worry about them, Mister Gross. There will be enough secret contracts to give work to nearly the whole aeronautical industry in the country. The only ones not given contracts by me are Grumman, Vought and Westinghouse. Grumman and Vought because they are the designated main contractors of planes for the Navy, Westinghouse because they already proved that they only produce junk in terms of jet engines. Their existing engines produce less heat than their toasters, for God's sake! Well, on this I will leave you and will hope to see you again soon."

After Ingrid walked out of the office, Tony LeVier and Robert Gross went at once to Clarence Johnson, who was examining the pictures and sketches given to him by Ingrid. What they saw made them open their eyes wide.

"Holy shit! Look at that SR-71!" Exclaimed LeVier. Johnson then pointed to him a man visible under the plane in the picture.

"Do you recognize that guy, Tony?"

LeVier concentrated his eyes on the man, to suddenly open his mouth wide from the surprise.

"But, that's you, Kelly!"

"Yeah, that's me alright." Said Johnson. "It certainly feels good to see that I would produce such a fantastic-looking plane in the future."

Johnson then passed a hand in his hair.

"Shit! I also lost half of my hair on that picture."

CHAPTER 9 – STRATEGIC GAMBLE

01:21 (Taiwan Time)

Sunday, April 15, 2018 ‘A’

YUAN-Class Chinese diesel attack submarine

One kilometer from the main islet of Uotsuri-Shima/Diaoyu Dao

Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, Sea of Japan

After performing a last visual horizon search with his periscope, the captain shouted a series of short orders to his crew in the cramped control room of his diesel attack submarine.

“SURFACE! SURFACE! COMMANDOS TO THE DECK HATCHES!”

As compressed air blew into the submarine’s ballast tanks, making it rise to the surface, the 32 People’s Liberation Army (Navy) Marines that had spent close to 24 uncomfortable hours in extremely cramped conditions inside the submarine hurried to get in position under the forward and aft deck hatches. The submariners posted at each of the hatches soon got orders by telephone and shouted in turn at the waiting commandos.

“WE HAVE SURFACED! CLIMB ON THE DECK!”

With a submariner climbing first the ladder in order to open the heavy access hatch, the heavily loaded and armed Marines climbed up quickly, emerging in the darkness of a moonless night, with a moderate sea around their submarine. Barely visible as a dark mass about one kilometer away was the islet of Diaoyu Dao, as it was called by the People’s Republic of China, the biggest islet in the contested Diaoyu archipelago, which was also known as the Senkaku Islands in Japan and as the Tiaoyutai Islands in Taiwan. Once the 32 Marines were on the wet deck, four inflatable rubber boats, still not inflated, were lifted through the hatches, along with their small outboard engines. Compressed air hoses were next through the hatches, helping to inflate the rubber boats in less than one minute. With the Marines then loading up in their four boats, sailors closed back the access hatches, allowing the submarine to sink back under the surface and leaving the rubber boats to float on the water. The Marines, both anxious and excited at the same time and conscious of the importance of their role in this historic

moment, started up their outboard engines and raced towards the islet of Diaoyu Dao. At about the same moment, another submarine was delivering a further 32 Marines to occupy the much smaller islets of Bei Xiaodao and Nan Xiaodao, closely paired together and situated a few kilometers away to the East. Yet another submarine launched ten minutes later its own 32 Marines to occupy the second largest islet of the archipelago, Huangwei Yu, situated about ten kilometers to the Northeast of Diaoyu Dao. The Chinese Marines were not expecting any resistance on the ground, the islets being uninhabited, and did not encounter any Japanese as they beached their rubber boats and jumped out on the wet sand. Each team of eight Marines then grabbed the handles of their respective boat and carried them at a run to the foot of the rocky promontory that occupied most of the 4.32 square kilometers of surface of Diaoyu Dao. After camouflaging as best they could their rubber boats, the Chinese Marines, heavily loaded with weapons, ammunition and supplies, started the arduous climb up the rocky hill that extended from one end to the other of the islet. They arrived at the summit of the crest one hour later, exhausted, dripping with sweat but also happy. On a command from the platoon commander, one of the Chinese Marine unfurled a big PRC flag attached to an aluminum pole, planting solidly the pole in the ground under the triumphant shouts of his comrades: the Diaoyus were now effectively Chinese territory.

The YUAN-Class diesel attack submarine that had carried them to the archipelago was not resting on its laurels right then, as it was part of a much bigger and complicated plan, along with eleven other YUAN and SONG-Class boats and 26 older MING and ROMEO-Class diesel attack submarines. While the older, much noisier MING and ROMEO-Class boats were on their way to form a patrol line east and north of the Diaoyus and would send warning of any Japanese ship approaching the archipelago, the twelve newer and more quiet submarines were going to take ambush positions at carefully chosen locations. With luck, the Japanese navy would rush in, expecting only a few Chinese maritime coastal patrol boats around what they called the Senkaku Islands. If it did, it would then find out the hard way that China was not going to back away from this fight.

01:32 (Taiwan Time)

Japanese Coast Guard patrol vessel HOTAKA

Three kilometers south of Kuba-Shima/Huangwei Yu islet

"Sir, I am getting a small radar echo close to Kuba-Shima. It just appeared suddenly out of nowhere."

The duty officer of the patrol boat, who had been preoccupied for the last hour about shadowing a group of four Chinese fishing trawlers that had been acting in a suspicious manner, gave an impatient look at his bridge radar operator.

"How close is it from Kuba-Shima?"

"Less than one kilometer, sir."

"And you didn't see it prior to that?" Replied the officer, his tone inferring that his operator had been somewhat negligent. The Japanese Coast Guard was not a combat naval force per say and its ships were not heavily armed, nor did they have much in terms of sensors. However, the surface search radar of their patrol vessel should not have missed any boat within such a short range. A shout of alarm from one of the bridge watch sailors then distracted the young navy lieutenant from the reported radar echo.

"SIR! THE FOUR CHINESE TRAWLERS HAVE TURNED HARD PORT AND ARE NOW HEADING TOWARDS KUBA-SHIMA."

The duty officer took the time to look for himself, using his binoculars, before giving orders.

"ENGINES FULL AHEAD! HELM, STEER TO 340! CUT THE PATH OF THOSE TRAWLERS!"

"AYE SIR!"

Swearing under his breath and wondering what game the Chinese were playing, the lieutenant then activated the ship's intercom.

"Captain to the bridge! Captain to the bridge!"

The boat's skipper, a lieutenant-commander, showed up on the small bridge four minutes later, as the patrol vessel was about to cut the path of the four Chinese trawlers. The duty officer was just starting to explain quickly what was happening when a shout from a lookout made them snap their heads around.

"ONE TRAWLER JUST VEEERED ON A COLLISION COURSE TOWARDS US."

The two Japanese officers froze for a moment, watching the nearest Chinese trawler, now less than a hundred meters away, as it plowed resolutely straight at them. The captain of the HOTAKA then shouted an urgent order to the helmsman.

"HELM, STEER HARD STARBOARD!"

The helmsman reacted at once, but it was already too late. Driven through with fanatical resolution, the trawler's charge caught the patrol vessel halfway in its turn, with the trawler's steel bow slicing through the port aft hull of the Japanese boat. The impact sent all the Japanese present on the bridge down violently on the deck. Electrical power went off at once, while the engine room, now opened to the sea, flooded quickly. The trawler, its bow severely damaged, was nonetheless able to back out after the collision, with its crew starting to put their rescue raft in the water and with another trawler already approaching to assist it. The Japanese sailors struggling to save themselves from their sinking patrol boat however got no help from the Chinese trawlers. What they got instead was machine gun fire that raked their decks and superstructures, killing or wounding the sailors that were visible to the trawlers. The unlucky patrol vessel sank in less than nine minutes, without being able to send a single radio call for help and with its few surviving sailors abandoned on the surface of the sea. As the Japanese survivors struggled to stay afloat, the third and fourth Chinese trawlers sped to close to the shore of the nearby islet and each launched four rubber boats full of PLA (N) Marines. As soon as the second trawler was done rescuing the crew of the first trawler, it also headed towards the islet, launching four more rubber boats loaded with supplies and ammunition for the islet occupation force. The same scenario basically played out near the other islets of the archipelago, but without any Japanese interference, the now sunk HOTAKA having been alone in the area at the time.

04:11 (Taiwan Time) / 05:11 (Japan Time)

Home of Admiral Nakamura Hideki

Yokosuka, Japan

Nakamura Hideki, Chief of the Maritime Staff and head of the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force, woke up with a grumble when his bedside telephone rang. Grabbing quickly the handset, so that the ringing wouldn't wake up his wife, he looked at his alarm clock and swore: a call at such an hour could only mean bad news.

"Admiral Nakamura!"

The old admiral then recognized the voice of Navy Captain Toyoda, the duty operations officer on night shift at the JMSDF fleet headquarters in Yokosuka. Toyoda, a normally calm, controlled man, sounded positively agitated.

"Admiral, we just heard a public radio and television message from the Chinese government announcing that it has seized control of the Senkaku Islands and that it was declaring a one hundred kilometer military restricted zone around them."

"WHAT?" Shouted Nakamura, waking up in a hurry and also waking up his wife with his shout. "Didn't we have a ship or two in that zone?"

"There was a Coast Guard patrol vessel near the Senkaku Islands, but that boat is not responding to our radio calls, sir. I have just tasked one of our P-3 maritime patrol aircraft out of Naha to go investigate: it should be over the Senkaku Islands in two and a half hours."

"Get a fighter escort for that P-3, Captain Toyoda: we should be ready for the worse. What do we have in terms of ships that can be there quickly?"

"We have the HYUGA Battle Group sailing presently off Okinawa, sir, plus one diesel attack submarine patrolling along the eastern coast of Taiwan. The Coast Guard can also send two patrol vessels out of Naha."

"Then, redirect them towards the Senkakus: we need to assess as quickly as possible what the Chinese have landed there, if anything is indeed there. I have a hard time believing that the Chinese government would pull such a stunt, especially after their South China Sea debacle of over two years ago. Have a full situation briefing ready for me on my arrival at fleet headquarters. I should be there in less than thirty minutes."

"Understood, Admiral!"

Nakamura's wife turned around in the bed and watched him get up and head for the bathroom to shave.

"Something's wrong, Hideki?"

"Could be! I will know more in the next hour. Don't worry and go back to sleep."

15:16 (Washington Time) / 04:16 (Taiwan Time)

Saturday, April 14 (Washington) / Sunday, April 15 (Taiwan)

The Oval Office, The White House

Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

Hillary Rodham-Clinton was having a conversation with a group of congressmen about a proposed law bill when her secretary rushed inside the Oval Office after two quick knocks on the door. Hillary would normally have chided her for disturbing her

meeting like this but she noticed at once the concerned expression on the face of her secretary.

“Yes, Alice?”

“Madam President, Secretary of State Rice just called: China claims to have seized by force the Senkaku Islands from the Japanese. It is in the news right now.”

As the congressmen present looked at each other with consternation, Hillary got up at once from her easy chair in the coffee corner of the Oval Office and walked quickly to the television set sitting against one wall, switching it on and tuning it to the CNN News channel. She then effectively saw an anchorman recapitulating the main points of an official declaration to foreign medias just made by the Chinese government. She listened on for a bit more than a minute, then switched off the television set and faced the congressmen.

“I am sorry if I have to cut our meeting short, gentlemen, but you will understand that this is a major crisis that needs immediate attention.”

One of the congressmen nodded his head at that.

“Indeed, Madam President! Two of our biggest trade partners, fighting it off in the Pacific? Will you invoke our defensive alliance treaty with Japan and send in the Navy?”

“Let’s find out first what is really happening. Right now, we only have a Chinese government declaration to go about. Besides, you know that we haven’t been exactly supportive of the Japanese stance and conduct concerning those islands. However, this certainly justifies putting our forces in the Pacific on full alert. Be assured that I will keep the Congress apprised about our position on this as it evolves. Thank you for your time, gentlemen.”

As the congressmen filed out of the Oval Office, Hillary faced her secretary.

“Alice, call the Principals of the National Security Council and tell them that I want to see them in the Situation Room in two hours.”

“Yes, Madam President!”

As her secretary hurried back to her adjacent office, Hillary went to sit back behind her presidential work desk, feeling dread. If this turned into a full blown war between China and Japan, the consequences for the United States and for the rest of the World could be incalculable. In truth, she had always felt that the Japanese position about the ownership of the Senkaku Islands was questionable at best, the archipelago being much closer to mainland China than to mainland Japan. In fact, simple geography would

militate for Taiwan to own the islands, the Senkakus being a mere 170 kilometers from the Taiwanese capital of Taipei, while mainland China was 330 kilometers away and the Japanese island of Okinawa was 410 kilometers away. As for mainland Japan, it was a good 800 kilometers away from the Senkakus. As for the various historical arguments being thrown around by Japan, China or Taiwan, they all could be argued for or against, depending on who you asked. More importantly, as one congressman had just said, Japan and China were two of the largest trading partners of the United States, with China being as well a major nuclear power. This was definitely going to need more finesse than brawn.

12:54 (California Time) / 04:54 (Taiwan Time)

**Unit # 103, 1827 16th Street, Santa Monica
California, U.S.A.**

Nancy had been living for less than a month in her new condo in Santa Monica but she already loved it. It had been vacant when she had bought it for 700,000 dollars, a fair price considering its size and its fabulous location in Santa Monica. With two large bedrooms, two full bathrooms, one washroom and a huge lounge and dining room distributed around two levels, along with three balconies and a dual spot in the underground gated garage, her new place sat less than 200 meters from the Santa Monica Freeway, giving her an easy access to the whole of the Los Angeles area, including Hollywood. It was also less than two kilometers away from the beautiful Santa Monica Beach, where she had taken to running daily on the sand and swimming to keep in top physical shape. Nancy had however decided to keep her old condo in Boucherville and her lakeside cottage north of Montreal as secondary residences, for many reasons. One reason was sentimentality, as she still loved Montreal. Another was to keep them as jump points for the Time Patrol in this century, with the secret underground module under her cottage being especially important to her. She had also kept her old 2010 Mitsubishi OUTLANDER, parked in her condo's garage in Boucherville, as a ready mean of transport around Montreal area for herself and for visiting Time Patrol agents. Sylvie Comeau, who had been missing terribly her native 1941 Montreal, had already used Nancy's Boucherville condo once with her two adopted Neanderthal children, Kin and Ani, to discreetly tour modern Montreal with them. As a consequence of keeping her old car in Boucherville, Nancy had made a further dent into

her savings account and had bought a new car, an inexpensive and economical compact model, for her Los Angeles area travel. She had toyed for a moment with the idea of buying a more expensive and prestigious, flashy car, like a Porsche 911 Turbo, but had decided against it for many reasons. One was the state of the road traffic in the Los Angeles area, with its massive road jams that made the use of a fast sports car redundant. Another was to avoid the attention of both car thieves and paparazzi photographers, the latter becoming more and more of a pest for Nancy. With a new role promised to her in a soon to be produced major film, life in this century was again looking good to her after the pain of having to move away from Montreal.

Nancy was tossing for herself a fresh salad in her big kitchen when her cell phone rang. Fishing it out and looking at the caller I.D. number, she smiled to herself and opened the line.

“Yes, Christiane, what can I do for you today?”

Christiane Amanpour’s tone of voice told Nancy at once that something serious was up.

“Nancy, I’m afraid that CNN will need your services in Japan, badly. I hope that you are available at this time.”

“I am free for another three to four weeks. What is going on in Japan? I haven’t watched the news since early this morning.”

“News are still sketchy, but the Chinese just seized by force the Senkaku Islands from the Japanese and have announced a military restricted zone around them.”

That sobered up Nancy quickly. Even though she made a point of not reading in advance about the detailed future of the 21st Century, in order not to involuntarily create a causality loop by her actions, she fully realized how dangerous the dispute about the Senkaku Islands, or Diaoyu Islands, could become. She also knew how difficult and dangerous covering such a crisis could be.

“Can CNN press the Japanese consulate in Los Angeles in issuing quickly to me a visa as a reporter?”

“We certainly can do that for you, Nancy. While we have affiliate reporters in Tokyo that will be able to cover the political reactions there for us, what we need is somebody that can get close to the disputed area and report from there. You would be perfect for that.”

“Agreed! I will do my best to cajole my way aboard a Japanese ship as an embedded reporter. I will fly out to Japan as soon as I can get a visa.”

“Thanks, Nancy! You are saving my skin...again. I will advise you soonest about your visa.”

Amanpour then closed the line, leaving Nancy thoughtful in front of her kitchen counter as she started listing in her head the special equipment she would need to bring with her to Japan. One thing was already clear in her mind: guns would not be part of that list.

07:49 (Taiwan Time)

230 kilometers east of the Senkaku Islands

Sea of Japan

The atmosphere was tense inside the main cabin of the Japanese P-3C ORION maritime patrol aircraft as it flew towards the main islets of the Senkaku Islands. Even while still well out of the newly declared Chinese restricted zone, the operators of the P-3C had already detected multiple radar and radio signals coming from the direction of the Senkakus, including a powerful radar signal from a Chinese KJ-2000 early warning aircraft. Everything indicated that the Chinese already had a significant air presence over the Senkakus, something that did not augur well for the four-engine turbo propeller patrol aircraft. The two F-15J fighter-bombers escorting the P-3C were decidedly proving to be a wise precaution for this mission.

“Electronic Warfare Officer to Pilot: I am now intercepting encrypted data link transmissions coming from that suspected KJ-2000 airborne surveillance aircraft. My guess is that this KJ-2000 is not alone over the Senkakus. We can possibly expect Chinese fighters over there.”

“Are you seeing any return transmissions to that KJ-2000?” Asked the pilot of the P-3C via his intercom. The EW officer checked his instruments again before answering.

“None yet, but that could mean that whatever is there is keeping strict electronic silence and is taking its cues from the KJ-2000. I can however certify that we are now well within the effective detection range of that Chinese airborne radar: the Chinese know that we are coming, sir.”

That made the pilot pause as he weighed the risks that this entailed to his aircraft and crew. Even with two F-15Js as close escorts, his P-3C would be hideously vulnerable in any aerial engagement, and this didn't even take into consideration the threat of missiles from possible Chinese ships close to the islands. Up to now they had not detected any

Chinese warships east of the Senkakus on their surface search radar, but their passive electronic surveillance gear were picking up plenty of Chinese naval radar signals from beyond the Senkakus. The pilot then decided to kick the decision to continue on or not upstairs.

"Communications Officer, send an encrypted message to Fleet Headquarters, exposing what we have already been detected and asking if we should push on to the Senkakus. Emphasize that we need a quick decision on that."

"Understood, sir!"

The copilot gave a sarcastic look at his commander.

"A quick decision from Fleet Headquarters, sir? Those desk jockeys are more argumentative than my grand-mother. We may well be back in Naha before they finish debating what to do next."

That made the pilot chuckle.

"You're quite right about that, Tetsuo. Still, I don't like the way things are looking right now."

As the pilot had predicted, the Fleet Headquarters did not reply at once to their query. Instead, it was the leader of the pair of escorting fighter-bombers that contacted the P-3C a few minutes later.

"Himeji Two, this is Ryu Leader: my air search radar is now picking a total of seven aircraft circling over Uotsuri-Shima. We may hit a rather rough welcome committee, over."

The pilot and copilot of the patrol aircraft exchanged knowing looks before the pilot replied on the radio.

"Understood, Ryu Leader. We are waiting for instructions from Fleet Headquarters. In the meantime, we are continuing on course, Himeji Two out!"

The pilot then heard a brief break in the radio static, as if the leader of the fighter pair had been tempted to say something but had refrained at the last moment. In that he could not blame the F-15J pilot: this mission was sounding more and more ill advised by the minute. However, the necessity of ascertaining what the Chinese presence was on the Senkaku Islands could not be denied. Another two minutes later, they finally received a response from Fleet Headquarters. It was not however the one the commander of the P-3C had hoped for, making him swear.

"We are to push on and 'test' the Chinese response? Do those idiots in Yokosuka realize what that could mean for us?"

"That sounds to me like an order coming from the Prime Minister's office, sir." Volunteered the copilot. "This crisis is as much a political as a military one."

"You may be right, Tetsuo. Still, I don't like it one bit. I will let our escort jocks know about this decision now."

As he expected, the response from the F-15J leader visibly lacked in enthusiasm. Then came another piece of unwelcome news from the electronic warfare officer of the patrol aircraft.

"Sir, that KJ-2000 has started to emit strong radar jamming signals targeted at the air search radars of our two F-15s and at our own air navigation radar."

"How effective is that jamming?"

"Unfortunately too effective, sir. Our radar is now all but blanketed by parasites, while the radars of the F-15s will certainly suffer some range degradation due to it."

"Damn! What a fine time to turn half-blind. Very well, do your best to counter that jamming."

The next transmission the pilot and commander of the P-3C got was ten minutes later, as they were about to enter the Chinese military restricted zone declared around the Senkakus. This time it came from the F-15J leader and was made in an urgent tone.

"Himeji Two, this is Ryu Leader. I can now see on my radar two widely separated pairs of fast moving aircraft, with one pair on each of our flanks. We are being caught in a pincer!"

"Ryu Leader, we are aborting the mission." Replied the P-3C commander after only a short hesitation. "This is becoming hopeless."

"TOO LATE! I HAVE MULTIPLE MISSILE LAUNCHES!"

Blood rushed to the pilot's brain as he realized at once that his aircraft was very well about to be destroyed. He then got back control on himself and gave a number of orders, both on intercom and on the radio.

"EVASIVE ACTIONS! EW OFFICER, FIRE MISSILE COUNTER-MEASURES! COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER, SEND THE FOLLOWING TO FLEET HQ: WE ARE UNDER MISSILE FIRE!"

The P-3C pilot then concentrated on turning around his aircraft and going to full power. On his part, the F-15J leader decided to fight back, splitting his pair in order to face both of the enemy pairs of fighters. The F-15Js, their radars still impaired by the jamming from the Chinese KJ-2000 airborne surveillance aircraft, fired in turn a salvo of AIM-120 AMRAAM long range air-to-air missiles. The Japanese AMRAAM and Russian-made Chinese Vympel R-27 missiles, NATO codenamed AA-10 ALAMO, crossed path before their radar guidance seekers locked on their respective targets. None of the aircraft were yet within visual sight of each other before missiles started exploding. The radar jamming from the KJ-2000, which was still well beyond effective missile range from the Japanese F-15J fighters, weighed heavily in the outcome of that encounter, with the Japanese missiles seeing their own effective detection range dramatically reduced. Both of the F-15Js were hit and shot down, along with three of the four Chinese SU-30MKK FLANKERS. The surviving Chinese fighter was then free to fire more missiles, this time at the fleeing P-3C ORION. One missile was decoyed away by the ORION, but another exploded in proximity to it, putting two of its engines on fire and peppering its fuselage with shrapnel. The Chinese SU-30MKK quickly caught up with the wounded patrol aircraft and then finished it with a burst from its 30mm internal cannon. The message from that brief air battle, while expensive for both sides, was loud and clear for the Japanese authorities and for the rest of the World: China was ready to fight a war for the possession of the Senkaku Islands. Whether Japan was also willing to wage war was the next pertinent question.

That question became moot less than one hour later, when the HYUGA Battle Group, which had been rushing in at a speed of 25 knots, was attacked nearly simultaneously by both Chinese submarines and aircraft as it was arriving on the edge of the restricted zone around the Senkakus. With the Japanese rear-admiral that commanded the battle group still awaiting for newer, less restrictive rules of engagement, or ROEs, from Tokyo and with two of his escorting destroyers busy prosecuting a sonar contact from an old, noisy MING-Class diesel attack submarine, the HYUGA was ambushed by one of the modern YUAN-Class diesel attack submarines prepositioned around the restricted zone. With its sonar equipment all but blanked out by the noise from the high speed run of the flotilla, the 18,000-ton helicopter carrier and its destroyer escorts never heard the quiet YUAN-Class submarine until it was too late. Four out of the six heavy torpedoes fired at the HYUGA struck its port side and

exploded, causing immediate and massive flooding and taking out its main power. Taking rapidly a heavy list to port, the HYUGA was hit a few minutes later by the second and ultimate salvo from the Chinese submarine. As an antisubmarine helicopter from the destroyer HARUNA was dropping in the ocean a torpedo that would prove fatal to the Chinese submarine, three more heavy torpedoes struck the port side of the HYUGA, sealing its fate. Another torpedo of that last salvo, missing the HYUGA, went on and hit the destroyer AKIZUKI, which was approaching to rescue the crew of the flagship, seriously damaging it.

As the remaining seven intact Japanese warships destroyed the MING-Class submarine, which had actually been playing the role of decoy for the waiting YUAN-Class boat, they came under massive air attack from a Chinese force of eight H-6M medium bombers and 22 JH-7A attack aircraft. All of them were equipped with anti-ship missiles and they were supported by four more JH-7A with electronic jamming pods. With a swarm of 102 Chinese missiles swamping their air defenses, all but two of the Japanese destroyers were hit and either sunk or gravely damaged, with the unlucky AKIZUKI absorbing one of the missile impacts. A second wave of Chinese aircraft that followed 45 minutes later finished off the destroyers KONGO, HARUNA and MAKINAMI as they lay nearly powerless on the surface, unable to withdraw to safety. Only one destroyer, escorting the badly damaged AKIZUKI, returned to port intact. That savage blow to the Japanese navy however proved costly as well to the Chinese. Apart from losing two attack submarines, they lost two medium bombers and nine attack aircraft in the battle. However, China was able and willing to absorb such losses. As for the Japanese government, it now had no choice but to prosecute this war to the fullest, on pain of losing face in front of its own people and of the rest of the World.

23:26 (Washington Time) / 12:26 (Taiwan Time)

Saturday, April 14 (Washington) / Sunday, April 15 (Taiwan)

Situation Room, The White House

Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

The mood was somber indeed around the conference table of the Situation Room in the White House, as Admiral Huntsman, the commander of the United States Pacific Command, gave his part of the briefing via a video satellite link.

"...a total of nearly 2,000 Japanese sailors are also dead or missing at sea, while a further 49 returned as wounded. The popular mood in Japan is now downright ugly, with unanimous calls for revenge. I am afraid that there is now no way that we could convince the Japanese to show restraint, Madam President."

"Have the Japanese asked yet for any help from us, Admiral?" Asked Hillary Rodham-Clinton, who had already spent eight very stressful hours today and who felt the fatigue.

"Officially, not yet, Madam President. The Japanese Prime Minister doesn't wish to show so-called weakness by asking for our help at this time and thus making others around the World say that Japan has to rely on us for its own defense. Unofficially, Admiral Nakamura, their Chief of the Maritime Staff, has contacted me to ask urgently for discreet delivery of extra stocks of ship-borne missiles, particularly surface-to-air and anti-ship missiles. Their fleet, like the rest of their armed forces, is notoriously weak in terms of quantities of war stocks held in inventory. Their navy may have very modern ships and well trained crews, but it is not in my opinion ready to face a long war against an enemy as huge as China. To that request I answered that I would refer it on an urgent basis to Washington. Should we heed the Japanese request for missiles, Madam President?"

"Yes, Admiral! Spare what you can, but be discreet about it."

"And what are the marching orders for my fleet, Madam President? Is the United States going to join Japan in this war?"

"No!" Replied at once Hillary, both surprising and shocking Huntsman. "Your ships and aircraft are to stand well clear of the Chinese declared restricted zone around the Senkaku Islands, and this until further notice from me. We will limit for the moment our assistance to Japan to providing logistical and intelligence support."

"But, we do have a military alliance treaty with Japan, Madam President."

"Admiral," said firmly Hillary, "the official position of the United States at this time concerning the Senkaku Islands is that the ownership of these islands and their surrounding waters is a matter of international dispute between Japan, Taiwan and China, and that resolving that dispute is up to either some multilateral agreement between the parties concerned, or to the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea and to the United Nations. By officially buying the Senkaku Islands and declaring it Japanese-controlled territory in 2012, Japan was the first to skew the rules of that game."

Seeing by the expression on Huntsman's face that he didn't like what she had said, Hillary looked straight at the camera linking the Situation Room with the Pacific Fleet headquarters and raised noticeably her voice.

"Do you have a problem with this, Admiral Huntsman?"

Realizing that the President was ready to have him relieved if he kept balking, Huntsman shook his head.

"No, Madam President! Your directive is clear."

"Good! You will get official policy guidelines concerning the Senkaku crisis by tomorrow morning."

Hillary then signaled to her military aide to cut the link with Hawaii and looked at the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"General, this present crisis may just cause a meltdown in international trade and banking, with grave consequences for the economy of the United States. The diplomatic and military consequences could also be dire. The last thing I need now is for someone in the military chain of command to play a Curtiss LeMay on me. If Admiral Huntsman ignores or undermines in any way the guidelines approved by me, then I want him relieved of command at once."

General Raymond Odierno understood at once her reference to General Curtiss LeMay who, as Chief of Staff of the Air Force during the Kennedy administration, had done his best to undermine the directives from President Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, judging him to be 'too soft on Communists'.

"I understand, Madam President. Talking of intelligence support to the Japanese, we have fresh overhead imagery of the Senkaku Islands that were just analyzed. What they show is a rather disturbing picture."

Odierno then signaled for his aide to project a series of high resolution satellite pictures on the giant viewing screen of the Situation Room. He then commented them for Clinton.

"Without baffling you with our usual, obtuse military jargon, Madam President, I can tell you that these pictures show that the Chinese have effectively occupied the Senkaku Islands and that they are in the process of landing sizeable garrisons on them. We can see on these satellite pictures a number of amphibious landing ships landing various combat and support vehicles, including some surface-to-air missile systems and at least two air surveillance radars. They are also landing a large quantity of supplies. To make a long story short, the Chinese are in the process of fortifying the Senkakus.

Given a week or two, it will be next to impossible for the Japanese to retake by force those islands without sustaining horrendous casualties in the process. Unfortunately, today's naval battle all but insured that the Japanese will not back down from this fight."

"And by providing them these satellite pictures, we will only push them into rushing in head first before the door slams shut in their face." Added glumly Hillary. "This is decidedly looking like it's turning into a lose-lose situation for us."

16:05 (Japan Time) / 15:05 (Taiwan Time)

Monday, April 16, 2018 'A'

Headquarters of the Japanese 1st Airborne Brigade

Camp Narashino, Narashino

Chiba Prefecture, Japan

"Excuse me, General, but a reporter is here to see you."

Brigadier General Shimori Kenji, Commander of the 1st Airborne Brigade, looked up from the operational plan he was drafting and at his personal aide, irritation on his face.

"This is no damn time for me to waste with a reporter, Captain! Turn him away!"

"But, sir, she has a letter of introduction from the Defense Minister authorizing her to go in operation with our brigade as an embedded reporter."

"WHAT? DID YOU SAY THAT SHE'S A WOMAN?"

"Yes, General." Said the captain, feeling in his small shoes. "She's the famous CNN war correspondent, Nancy Laplante. She came with one of the minister's aides." Shimori frowned, but nodded his head nonetheless.

"Hay! Let her and the minister's aide in."

As the young captain left, Shimori hurried to cover or turn over his papers and maps concerning the Senkaku Islands, then put on a mask of welcome just before a Japanese man in a good suit and a tall gaijin woman in informal civilian outdoors clothes entered his office. The trio exchanged polite bows before the Japanese civil servant spoke.

"We are very sorry to disturb you at such a time, General Shimori, but the Minister of Defense deemed this to be important matter, politically speaking. I am Kurozawa Nishi, Second Aide to The Honorable Minister of Defense, and this is Miss Nancy Laplante, war correspondent for the American news network CNN. This letter of introduction and safe conduct from the Minister will explain the reasons of our visit."

Shimori took the document presented by Kurozawa and read it quickly. What he saw made him look with utter surprise and disbelief at Laplante, who stood a good five centimeters taller than him.

“The Minister told you about our impending operation, miss?”

Nancy nodded gravely, not wanting to appear pushy or arrogant.

“Only after I basically guessed in advance by myself what is coming and then asked him to be allowed to land with your assault troops on Uotsuri-Shima, General.”

“But, but, how could you have guessed all that, Miss Laplante?”

“General, I do not wish to brag or to appear to brag, but I served twelve years as an intelligence officer in the Canadian Forces and went through enough combat situations around the World to be able to figure out what is going to happen in the next few days. If Japan wishes to retake the Senkaku Islands from China, it will then have to do it in a hurry, before the Chinese can fortify the islands and land sizeable garrisons on them. This means having to move fast and strike hard. Your brigade, along with the 1st Helicopter Brigade and the Special Forces Group, is the only Japanese force capable of performing quick response combat operations. Also, only two islets of the Senkaku Islands are big enough to justify an helicopter assault on them: Uotsuri-Shima and Kuba-Shima, with Uotsuri-Shima being by far the biggest and most important.”

“Wait! How do you know that we are planning to land by helicopter there? Did the Minister tell you that?”

“No, he didn’t tell me that, General.” Answered calmly Nancy. “An amphibious landing by ship would take way too much time to prepare and launch, while a mass parachute jump would be folly, with most of the jumpers probably landing in the water around the islets and drowning. Only an heliborne force can take quickly the Senkaku Islands, now that there are Chinese troops on them. As you can see in the Minister’s letter, I have already signed a waiver absolving the Japanese Self-Defense Forces from any responsibility concerning my personal safety and asks only that I be allowed to go along with your assault troops and to land with them on Uotsuri-Shima. I already have my own field gear and clothing, including water and rations for five days in my backpack. As for ensuring the operational security of your operation, I will record my film footage and will only retransmit it to CNN with the permission of one of your officers in the field, or when the operation will be over. I also stressed to the Minister that I am considering myself neutral in this conflict, for obvious professional reasons, and he accepted that, General.”

Shimori looked at her with grudging respect: it was evident that she was a true professional when it came to war. In fact, even though he hated to think about it, he was probably the amateur compared to her. In his long career as an officer in the Japanese Ground Self-Defense Force, he actually had never been fired upon in anger and had never killed an enemy in battle. That, except for a very few, had been true of all the members of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces until yesterday, something that often led to snide remarks by American soldiers stationed in Japan, many of whom had fought repeatedly in Iraq and Afghanistan. Giving back to Nancy Laplante her ministerial letter of introduction, the brigadier general bowed to the minister's aide.

"Thank you for escorting Miss Laplante to my headquarters, Mister Kurozawa. You can tell the Minister that his directives will be followed and that Miss Laplante will be able to go with our paratroopers to the Senkaku Islands."

"And I thank you for your comprehension, General. I wish you and your troops the best of luck in the incoming operation."

"Thank you, Mister Kurozawa."

The minister's aide then left the office, leaving Shimori alone with Nancy Laplante. The general took the time to close the door behind Kurozawa before looking with puzzlement at Nancy.

"Could you just tell me how you managed to convince the Minister of Defense to let you come with us to Uotsuri-Shima, Miss Laplante?"

Nancy smiled to him while shrugging her shoulders.

"Actually, it's quite simple, General: The Honorable Minister of Defense happens to be one of my biggest fans."

As Shimori rolled his eyes, Nancy became most serious.

"I suppose that your troops and helicopters will have to depart soon for the Senkakus, General."

The Japanese general gave her a somber look in response.

"We actually fly out tonight, Miss Laplante. Our helicopters will then land on the decks of our ships, which are about to leave port right now. Our soldiers should land on Uotsuri-Shima just before dawn tomorrow."

19:08 (Japan Time)

Camp Kisarazu, Kisarazu

Chiba Prefecture, Japan

A young Japanese paratrooper who had just jumped out of his truck, along with his big backpack and his Howa TYPE 89-F assault rifle, looked quickly around him at the sprawling helicopter base. Camp Kisarazu was the base of the 1st Helicopter Brigade, which was tasked to transport them to the Senkaku Islands after a first stop aboard the helicopter carrying destroyers of the Senkaku Task Force. The young paratrooper was understandably nervous, since this would be the first time he would be in real combat, like nearly all of his comrades. His platoon sergeant then shouted a few orders, making his men form a single file and then leading them, along with the other platoons of their battalion, towards the long line of parked CH-47J heavy transport helicopters. Due both to space limitations aboard the ships of the task force and to the limited number of helicopters available, it had proved impossible to include the whole airborne brigade in the operation. As a consequence, only the 1st Infantry Battalion (Airborne) and part of the 2nd Infantry Battalion, plus the heavy 120mm mortars of the Airborne Artillery Battalion, would participate in the operation.

Each platoon was assigned to a specific CH-47J, with the men told to put down their gear and wait outside for the moment. The officers and NCOs then went to a last minute orders group given by Brigadier General Shimori near one of the helicopters. The paratroopers, left to themselves for a moment, did their best to calm their nervous tension by chatting and smoking in small groups. One of the soldiers then noticed something and made a remark to his group.

“Hey, isn’t that a woman over there, near the command group?”

All eyes went at once to the distant silhouette, which wore dark civilian clothes and had long dark hair.

“It sure looks like a woman, and a civilian at that.” Said a second soldier. “Some functionary from the Ministry of Defense, maybe, or a public relations officer.”

“I hope that she is pretty.” Said a third soldier. “Then, maybe we could convince her to come with us aboard the ships.”

The obvious thinking behind those words made the soldiers of the group laugh briefly. The young men then fell mostly silent, thinking about their own wives or girlfriends, whom they may very well never see again. While having wished fervently to eventually see real combat as soldiers, most of them had never believed that the Senkaku Islands

dispute would come to this, the first true combat operation by the Japanese ground forces since 1945.

At the orders group, the assembled officers and senior NCOs were in for a shock when Brigadier General Shimori started speaking to them.

"Gentlemen, I know that this operation's plan was already cooked up in a big hurry, but I decided on further, last minute changes to it."

What Shimori did not say was where he got the ideas for these last minute changes. He was a proud man and believed himself to be a most competent combat officer, but he also had enough of an open mind to recognize a superior plan, even when it came from a woman. He just didn't say that openly, so that his authority on his men would not be diminished. With a corporal holding a flashlight to illuminate a photo map of the main islet of Uotsuri-Shima, he pointed at the long ridgeline running west to east along the top of the promontory occupying most of the four kilometer square island.

"Apart from our heavy mortar teams, which will still land on the northern beach line, the helicopters will land the men of our 1st Battalion along the ridgeline, right on top of the summit, instead of landing them at the foot of the promontory. This way, we will be able to immediately dominate any enemy position on the island. The same thing will be done with the men of the 2nd Battalion tasked with taking Kuba-Shima."

"But, General, it will be very difficult to find space to land on top of that ridgeline, especially at night." Objected the commander of the helicopter unit, a lieutenant colonel.

"Probably, but it will also help keep our casualties from enemy fire low. Furthermore, the airstrikes planned for just before our assault will cut down much of the trees topping the ridgeline, thus facilitating our landings. If your helicopters can't lower enough to touch the ground, then your helicopters will do a hover and the men will either jump down or rappel down. Do you have enough rappel ropes in your unit's stores to fit two rappel ropes per helicopter, Colonel?"

"Uh, I will have to check on that, General."

"Then, do it at once, Colonel!"

As the aviator hurried away, one paratroop company commander raised one hand to ask a question.

"Why this last minute change to the plan, General? It may sow confusion among our men."

"Because it will save them the nearly impossible task of climbing that mountain under fire, Major. It is easier to push a rock downhill than to roll it uphill. Also, the force on top position has a big advantage in a close combat fight, especially if grenades are exchanged. Remember our few urban combat practices: the accepted doctrine is to fight from the roof down whenever possible. Well, think of the ridgeline as being the roof and the beaches as being the basement. Our landings may be more difficult because of this change, but it will avoid us a lot of grief further on, once combat starts."

The officers around him nodded in understanding, seeing the wisdom of his decision.

"Uh, General, may I ask who is that woman that came with you?" Asked a young captain. Shimori smiled to that, having expected that question.

"That woman is a war correspondent from CNN that will land with our troops on Uotsuri-Shima. Her name is Nancy Laplante."

"The so-called Terminatrix?" Nearly shouted the captain, while exclamations went around the group.

"Also known as 'The Taliban Exterminator' and 'The Shadow Dancer'. Yes, gentlemen, we will have a true combat veteran and a first class fighter with us. Concerning her, here are my instructions about how to interact with her. First, understand that she is here as a foreign reporter, so has to technically stay neutral in this war. She is not armed and will not fight on our side, however much you would love that. Second, I already instructed her about the operational security rules of this operation. She will record her footage at first and will not retransmit it without our permission, or before the end of this operation. If she wants to interview our men, or even some Chinese prisoners, let her do it. Third, she has her own equipment and supplies, so don't worry about having to support her logistically. She even has her own means of communications, thanks to a satellite telephone and a portable satellite link unit. Fourth, according to an understanding between her and me, she will be free of her movements once on the ground. She may even camp separately by herself, away from our troops. Do you have any questions, gentlemen? No? Then, have your men rest for the moment, until we get those rappel ropes I requested. We should be departing in about one hour. Dismissed!"

With the officers and NCOs returning to their respective sub-units, a final inspection of the soldiers' weapons and kits was conducted. It was completed before a truck showed up and dropped two long ropes besides each helicopter, with the

helicopter crews then fixing the ropes to the rescue winch assemblies above the forward side doors of the CH-47Js. Once secured, the ropes were pulled inside and rolled, ready to be thrown out and unraveled if needed. As that was done, Nancy made a quick tour of a few of the groups of waiting soldiers, to record personal interviews with individual paratroopers. The black helmet she wore, which had been modified to act as a fixed mount for a video camcorder broken down into its sub-assemblies, attracted a question from one of the soldiers she was interviewing.

“Excuse me, miss, but I never saw a helmet like yours before. Why fix parts of a camera to it like that?”

“Well, you never saw a helmet like mine because there are no others around, soldier. I designed and built it myself, using the components of a video camera model that I often use as a war correspondent. It basically allows me to film in action while letting my two hands free, something that could save my life in a combat situation. The lens and camera unit itself are fixed to the left side of my helmet, while the remote viewing panel, mounted on a swivel point, can be flipped in front of my left eye to help me point the camera and zoom in. A semi-directional microphone is fixed on the right side of the helmet, along with a dual white and infra-red lamp. The power pack and retransmission unit are fixed around the back of the helmet and the whole thing is protected by a waterproof and shock-resistant cover. I can also adapt a light intensification scope to the camera lens, to shoot scenes at night. It is a recent addition to my field equipment and this assignment will be the first time I use it.”

“Wow! That’s quite nifty, miss! You look like a sort of space Marine with this on, like the ones in the movie ‘ALIENS’. I loved that movie.”

“You did? Good for you, trooper!”

As Nancy was going to another paratrooper to interview him, she suddenly stopped cold and stared at a corporal that was a bit older than the other paratroopers around him. The corporal also was staring at her but was visibly reluctant to be near her. Nancy then smiled to Jiro, the ex-Yakuza assassin that had originally been contracted to kill her in Tokyo in 2015 at the instigation of the Israeli Mossad. The man had proved unable to kill her then, not because he was no good as an assassin, but because he had a secret crush on her, something that Nancy had sensed at the time and had used to counsel him to leave the Yakuza. It seemed that Jiro had followed her advice after all. With a quick approving nod to him, Nancy then moved on to another group. A comrade of Jiro who had noticed their mutual reactions gave him a curious look.

"She acted as if she met you before, Jiro."

"Uh, we did, in Tokyo in 2015. She signed an autograph for me."

"That's it? I thought from your reaction that you dated her or something."

Jiro let out a deep sigh of regret at those words.

"I wish I had, Isamu. I wish I had."

The order to board the helicopters finally came and the nearly 900 Japanese paratroopers hurried inside the waiting machines, which soon started their turboshaft engines in long whining noises. An old couple sitting on the balcony of their apartment, situated just outside the base, watched the long line of heavy helicopters fly over them, their positioning lights flashing on. The couple had watched the news about the Senkaku crisis on television nearly all day and the man, a World War Two veteran of the Imperial Japanese Army, understood at once where all those helicopters and soldiers were heading. Struggling to get up on his old legs, the veteran then shouted as loudly as he could towards the departing helicopters while rising his fist in the air.

"MAKE THE EMPEROR PROUD, MEN! BANZAI! BANZAI! BANZAI!"

03:56 (Taiwan Time)

Tuesday, April 17, 2018 'A'

Flight deck of the helicopter carrier JS IZUMO

206 kilometers east of Uotsuri-Shima

Sea of Japan

Nancy was about to step on the loading ramp of the CH-47J heavy helicopter she was assigned to ride in when the young paratrooper following her in the line spoke to her in a low voice, trying to be discreet.

"Miss Laplante, you have seen combat often. Are you still scared when you go in battle?"

Instead of feeling insulted, Nancy smiled to the soldier, who was visibly apprehensive.

"Only liars, idiots and fools pretend that they don't get scared in combat, trooper. You want to know a secret of mine? On my first battle, I pissed in my panties. But don't tell that to anyone."

"Uh, of course, miss."

The young paratrooper, now feeling a bit better about himself, then followed her inside the helicopter. The order to start the engines was given four minutes later, with the helicopters soon lifting from the deck of the recently built, 20,000-ton ship that was the flagship of the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force. They quickly disappeared in the dark, moonless night, while the ships that had transported them turned around to wait at a relatively safe distance from the Senkaku Islands, away from marauding Chinese submarines.

At about the same time, the Chinese KJ-2000 airborne surveillance aircraft on station above the Senkakus/Diaoyus suddenly found its radar scopes filling with parasite signals and becoming nearly useless. The Chinese radar operators aboard the plane were not really surprised by that, having expected the Japanese to eventually try to jam their radars. This could mean either the coming of the expected Japanese riposte to their stinging naval defeat of two days ago, or an attempt at deception. However, when the plane commander tried to radio that information to the mainland and to the ships and planes around the islands, he promptly got jammed on his radio frequencies as well. Fuming, the Chinese officer could only hope that his four escorting SU-30MKK fighters would catch on the fact that they were being jammed and react accordingly. Those four Chinese fighters were however finding out that their own air search radars were being swamped by intense jamming from multiple sources, leaving them with only their infrared search and track sensor balls, orIRST, as working detectors. That system had however only a limited range.

Unbeknown to the Chinese, a powerful air armada was already rushing at them, intent on preparing the area for the arrival of the paratroopers and their helicopters. The first wave of that armada consisted of no less than twelve F-15J fighter-bombers tasked with clearing the skies over the Senkakus of any Chinese plane and with sinking any Chinese ships nearby. Another twelve F-15J, with orders to keep their external fuel drop tanks on for the moment, followed some distance behind, with the task of establishing a strong air superiority umbrella over the islands. Following in a third wave were 36 Mitsubishi F-2 fighters loaded with GPS-guided JDAM bombs and with napalm canisters, with the job of eliminating as much as possible of the Chinese ground garrisons on Uotsuri-Shima and on Kuba-Shima, and this before the arrival of the paratroopers. With the day-old satellite pictures of the Senkaku Islands provided by the United States, the

Japanese air staffs had been able to carefully pinpoint every visible Chinese position, vehicle or weapon system on the islands and to program their exact GPS coordinates into the fire control computers of the F-2 fighters, coordinates that would let them drop each bomb within ten meters of their assigned targets. With a total of 144 500-pound JDAM bombs carried by the F-2s, the attack force had more than enough firepower to blanket the Chinese garrisons' positions. More aircraft stood ready on the ground in Okinawa, fully armed and fuelled, with the mission of taking the relay from the first air armada during the hours of daylight to come and thus keep the local air superiority in Japanese hands. One aircraft in support of the operation was however nowhere to be found in the Japanese air inventory, for the good reason that it was American. Standing well off the Senkaku Islands, an E-3B AWACS airborne surveillance aircraft fed a constantly updated air plot picture of the area to its base in Okinawa via an encrypted directional data link. From there, the data was rerouted by landline to the nearest Japanese airbase, where Japanese air controllers used that data to direct the air armada via a secure radio link. Apart from providing satellite photos and an AWACS surveillance aircraft, the United States was also discreetly helping Japan by allowing Japanese crews to use the war stocks of airborne and shipborne missiles kept in its bases in Okinawa and mainland Japan, thus alleviating a major concern of the Japanese military staff.

The first clue that the four Chinese SU-30MKK fighters flying over Diaoyu Dao/Uotsuri-Shima got that they were under attack was when theirIRST sensors detected the heat signatures from the rocket motors of approaching missiles. The second clue they got was when their missile warning detectors went mad as they picked up the active radar seekers of dozens of AMRAAM air-to-air missiles as they switched to final guidance mode. Near panic, the Chinese element leader tried to contact the surveillance aircraft that he was supposed to protect, but could not break through the radio jamming. Neither was he able to even speak with his wingmen to give them instructions. Unable in the dark to give hand signals to his wingmen, he then understood with bitterness that each of them were now totally on their own. That bitterness quickly turned into cold resolution and he then concentrated on doing his best to avoid the incoming missiles. With some luck, he would survive them and would then be able to go on the attack. Luck was however not with him or with his wingmen that night. Firing radar decoys and maneuvering violently their aircraft helped them evade six of the

incoming missiles, but the other eighteen AIM-120D found their marks, obliterating both the four FLANKER fighters and the KJ-2000 surveillance aircraft. The six Chinese destroyers and two amphibious ships off the islands were then set upon by the twelve F-15J fighter-bombers of the Japanese first wave, which fired volleys of anti-ship missiles at them. Three of the F-15Js were shot down or heavily damaged by the blizzard of surface-to-air missiles fired in desperation by the Chinese ships, while a third of the Japanese missiles were decoyed or shot down by the Chinese close-in weapons systems. That, however, did not save the destroyers and amphibious ships, which shook from hit after hit by anti-ship missiles and sank one after the other in the following twenty minutes.

On the two bigger islets of Diaoyu Dao/Uotsuri-Shima and of Huangwei Yu/Kuba-Shima, the Chinese ground garrisons of the islets could only watch with growing apprehension the ballet of streaking missiles and explosions in the night sky, then the fireballs from the missiles hitting the nearby warships that were supposed to protect them. Realizing too well that they would soon be next, the Chinese soldiers ran to their combat positions, hastily dug up and prepared during the last two days. Less than twenty minutes later, what felt to them like the end of the World struck. In less than four minutes, the garrisons of the two islets were clobbered by 144 500-pound bombs that fell out of the night sky and hit with unnerving accuracy their positions, camouflaged vehicles and gun and missile emplacements. As for the long, narrow strips of beaches of Diaoyu Dao/Uotsuri-Shima, their adjacent slopes, where the Chinese had dug defensive trenches, were also blanketed with 48 napalm canisters that exploded in spectacular fireballs. In those four minutes, the Chinese lost more than half of their men and all of their heavy support weapons, save two portable anti-tank missile launchers, one portable anti-aircraft missile launcher and three light mortars. Worse, they lost all their long-range communications equipment, along with their three air and sea surveillance radars. With the nearby ships sunk, the Chinese garrison commander found himself unable to report these attacks to the mainland and call for support. However, that last point was not as damaging as he believed, as four of the sunken ships had time to give the alarm by radio to their mainland base. By the time that the Chinese PLA(N) Marine colonel cautiously stuck his head out of the trench he had jumped in, the alert was already sounding in the bases lining the coast of mainland China and was being transmitted to all the Chinese ships at sea.

05:01 (Taiwan Time)

**Japanese main heliborne assault force
Three kilometers east of Uotsuri-Shima**

“ONE MINUTE TO THE OBJECTIVE!”

The shouted warning from the cargo master of their CHINOOK heavy transport helicopter made the nervous paratroopers check their weapons one last time, while Nancy grabbed an hold on her backpack and waterproof equipment case. They could see nothing outside through the few Plexiglas windows, the Sun not being up yet, but they could hear distant explosions and cannon fire as the AH-1S attack helicopters escorting the big twin rotor transport helicopters swept the ridgelines and summit of the main islet with preventive rocket and cannon fire. Brigadier General Shimori, in whose helicopter Nancy was traveling, then shouted an order.

“ALTERNATE NUMBERS, STAND UP AND PUT ON YOUR PACKS!”

The odd-numbered soldiers sitting inside the cargo cabin then got up and, held steady by the even-numbered soldiers, put their heavy backpacks on their backs and slung their weapons across their chest. Holding firmly to overhead straps, they helped in turn the even-numbered soldiers to get up and put on their packs. Nancy had now started filming with her helmet-mounted camera and stood last in her line. She had a last, emotional thought about her young children in 1948 ‘B’ Jerusalem as her helicopter veered hard left to line up on the ridgeline that dominated the whole of Uotsuri-Shima. Despite all her powers and her abilities to travel through time, she could very well be killed in the next few minutes or hours, either from Chinese fire or if her helicopter crashed on landing. The rear cargo ramp then opened up, showing a patch of dark sky and some undefined dark mass below. Tracer bullets could be seen zipping through the sky, fired either by defending Chinese troops on the ground or by the door gunners of the heavy helicopters. A trail of fire suddenly homed in on the third CHINOOK in line and struck it near its rear-mounted engines, exploding in a flash and a bang. With its rear rotor broken and its engines on fire from the impact of the portable anti-aircraft missile, the CH-47J went down at once in a mad spiral and, barely missing the edge of the ridgeline, fell down nearly 200 meters before hitting the rocky slopes and exploding in a huge fireball, instantly killing its five crewmembers and 32 paratroopers. Brigadier General Shimori tightened his jaws when he saw the helicopter go down and explode, but did

not say anything then, not wanting to distract his men from their oncoming task. His helicopter then slowed down to a near hover as it prepared to land. It however did not go down all the way, a number of still standing trees being in the way in its intended landing spot. The cargo master then relayed a message from his pilot.

“WE CAN’T LAND! USE THE RAPPELLING ROPES!”

“TROOPERS, ABOUT TURN AND RAPPEL DOWN!” Shouted in turn Shimori, who had been nearest the rear cargo ramp. That order put him last in his line to exit, but also made at once Nancy first of her line, something that Shimori had not anticipated. Before Shimori could say something more, Nancy stepped forward without any hesitation and, grabbing with two hands the rappelling rope hanging down outside of the forward starboard side door, slid down the ten meters to the ground, with a paratrooper imitating her at the port side door and rope. As soon as she touched the ground, Nancy held on to the rope and pulled on it, putting tension in it and thus easing the job of the paratrooper following her down the rope. She kept her hold on the rope as soldier after soldier slid down with commendable speed and efficiency. That still left the big helicopter hideously vulnerable to enemy fire as it hovered for nearly a minute just above the ridgeline while the 32 paratroopers, including Brigadier General Shimori, slid down. All in the while, Nancy’s helmet-mounted camera was filming the action, thanks to its light intensification night lens. As soon as Shimori was down on the ground besides Nancy, the pilot of the helicopter hurriedly put back full power and veered off, disappearing into the night, soon imitated by the other CH-47Js. Shimori gave a quick nod of approval to Nancy before pointing the nearby summit along the ridgeline to his soldiers.

“LET’S TAKE THE SUMMIT! FOLLOW ME!”

This time, Nancy let the Japanese paratroopers pass in front of her and took position in the tail of the long line assaulting the summit. The slope of the ridgeline was fairly steep and the rough, rocky ground made the walk treacherous but, thankfully, they did not encounter active resistance on the way to the tip of the island. What they found there was what had been a Chinese observation post that had been blasted to bits by a JDAM bomb. The mangled bodies of at least six Chinese soldiers, as well as a tripod-mounted artillery rangefinder and one heavy machine gun, could be seen around the shallow blast crater. Brigadier General Shimori embraced the scene quickly, then gave more orders.

“Major Kagami, we will establish our command post here, along with one platoon. Our men will drop their backpacks here as well under the nearby trees before

proceeding further. I want them to be as light as possible for the rest of the assault. Captain Minemoto, you will lead your company down the ridgeline towards the eastern tips of the island and secure those tips. Major Ishi, you lead your company westward down the ridgeline and clear it of any Chinese troops. Leave one platoon at the western tip and then continue down to the shoreline, where you will start sweeping the southern beaches.”

Nancy waited silently nearby until Shimori was done giving his orders, then crouched besides him.

“General, if you have no objection to that, I would like now to go establish my own camp a bit off to the northwest of this position, among the trees, so that I won’t be in your way. Do I have your permission to announce to the World that Japanese soldiers have landed on the Senkaku Islands, General?”

Shimori smiled to her in the dark.

“Well, the Chinese certainly know by now that we are here. Go ahead and transmit your report to CNN, Miss Laplante. Just make sure not to divulge any unit identification in your report.”

“Understood, General! Thank you for your comprehension.”

Nancy then left Shimori and walked to the northwest down the gentle, forested slope of the ridgeline until she got to a point where the down slope started becoming much steeper. Choosing that spot as her base camp, she put down her backpack and equipment case and looked for the safest patch of ground in case she came under artillery or mortar fire. She quickly chose a small, shallow cave in the sloped, rocky ground as the best spot for her tent. Only then did she take out her satellite retransmission unit and field laptop computer, connecting them to her helmet-mounted camera and starting to edit quickly the footage she already had taken. Setting up as well her small tripod-mounted video camera and directional microphone she used to make so-called ‘talking head presentations’, she finally established a satellite link with the communications room of the CNN Center in Atlanta, getting a senior technician on the line there.

“Hey, Kelly! It’s me, Nancy! I am ready to send a video report home, and it is a hot one. I suppose that Wolf Blitzer is on the air right now at this hour?”

“Correct! You want to be put on the air live, or on tape?”

“Live! Believe me, this is hot. Tell the on-air manager that I have big news concerning the Senkaku Islands crisis.”

"Ah? That will definitely interest him, then: Wolf is presently discussing with some egg-head 'expert' what the Japanese response to the Chinese takeover could be." It was Nancy's turn to laugh.

"Then, I will be most happy to burst the bubble of that expert on air. I will talk live on air once you will have recorded in advance some hot video footage I just took, so that CNN could have a high quality video file handy before I start speaking with Wolf."

"Then, start your download, Nancy: I'm ready to record here."

Nancy did so, with the technician coming back on line after about two minutes later.

"Download of your video file is completed and saved. I sent a copy to the live news desk, so that Wolf can quickly show it to the viewers. I will now transfer your call to Wolf on line. Hold the line."

It effectively took only a few seconds before the image of the current news anchorman, sitting at his on-air news desk, appeared as a small window in one corner of Nancy's laptop computer' screen.

"Nancy? Can you hear me? You seem to be somewhere outside at night: your picture is quite dark."

"That's because I don't dare switch on a light that could attract gunfire on me, Wolf. I have big news about the Senkaku Islands crisis: Japanese forces just landed on them and are in the process of evicting the Chinese presently on the islands. It is now fifteen past five in the morning, Taiwan time, and the assault by heliborne troops started just after five O'clock. You should now have on your computer my prepared video presentation, which will take about three minutes to play and was taken at first inside the helicopter that was carrying me and some of the Japanese soldiers now fighting to retake the islands. I will stay on line to answer your questions afterwards."

Nancy then allowed herself to relax a bit and drink some water from her canteen while Wolf played her video on CNN.

Alerted by the on-air manager, Christiane Amanpour and Parisa Khosravi, the senior vice-president of international news gathering for CNN, hurried to a television monitor in order to view together Nancy's report from the Senkaku Islands. Christiane felt her heart accelerate when she understood the kind of risks Nancy had taken and was still taking in order to send this report.

"She's positively incredible! She must have been one of the first to land on this islet."

“I don’t know how she managed to convince the Japanese to let her go with their assault troops, but this is one hell of an exclusive.” Added Parisa, gleeful. “The other networks will have to pay through the nose to obtain the syndication rights to use this footage. I will call the NHK network in Tokyo right away: they deserve to get first shot at this.”

Even before Parisa could complete her call to Tokyo, the CNN phone lines were ringing off the hook with calls from competing news channels anxious to get the syndication rights to Nancy’s footage. Her report also sent shockwaves in Washington, Beijing and other capitals, while spontaneous celebration parties started at once around Japan, with national pride climbing to new heights in the country.

That national pride was however being paid for with human lives, both Chinese and Japanese, as the surviving Chinese soldiers on Uotsuri-Shima and Kuba-Shima fought tenaciously to hold what ground they still controlled. However, without heavy support weapons, with over half of their men dead right from the start of the battle and facing more than twice their numbers in Japanese soldiers, the Chinese were steadily pushed back from their positions. After over four hours of ferocious combat, a total of only about sixty Chinese soldiers were left, cornered in three widely separated pockets near sea level and the beaches, where they found themselves under constant machine gun fire coming from the promontory above them and also suffered from Japanese mortar fire. Nancy, who had been filming from 400 meters away the battle against the biggest group of Chinese holding out, felt bad for the Chinese. They had fought bravely and tenaciously against a superior force, despite running gradually out of ammunition and suffering a steadily rising number of casualties. This could only end in a massacre if a surrender could not be organized. Unfortunately, any surrender would probably mean ostracism in China, or worse, for these soldiers once they were returned there after this war. Those soldiers probably realized that and were likely to choose to die fighting instead. The worst part was that the political and military leaders in China had probably already written off these soldiers and were not even thinking about them anymore, being too busy planning and preparing a response. Part of that response had already come in, in the shape of a strong air attack from mainland China. That attack had however hit a brick wall when it had encountered the two squadrons of Japanese fighters waiting for them over the Senkakus. With the supporting American E-3B AWACS surveillance aircraft now orbiting safely from the proximity of Taiwanese airspace, the Japanese

fighters had been ready for the Chinese onslaught and had shot down dozens of Chinese warplanes before they could even get within visual distance from the Senkakus. That however left a large number of Chinese diesel attack submarines still lurking around in the waters surrounding the Senkakus. Those submarines kept the Japanese ships from approaching the islands, thus leaving helicopter resupply as the only mean of supplying the Japanese force on the islands and of evacuating the dozens of wounded soldiers. This war may have brought new fame to her name as a war reporter, but Nancy could only feel sadness as the killing went on. Then came the news that both China and Japan had officially, and also belatedly, declared war on each other.

19:56 (Washington Time) / 08:56 (Taiwan Time)

Wednesday, April 18 (Washington) / Thursday, April 19 (Taiwan), 2018 'A'

Office of the Secretary of State of the United States

State Department Building, Washington, D.C.

U.S.A.

Peng Li, Ambassador of the People's Republic of China in Washington, sat stiffly in a sofa of the anteroom with his two aides, studiously avoiding the eyes of the three men sitting in an opposite sofa on the other side of the room. Japanese Ambassador Naruhito Takashi, on his part, did the same with his own aides. Naruhito would have been scandalized however if he could have read the thoughts of his younger aide, an expert in maritime commerce in his thirties. The aide was actually eyeing discreetly the young and very beautiful translator that Peng had brought with him. The translator, in reality a covert agent of the Chinese Ministry of State Security, did notice the attention of the Japanese man and felt amusement at it. Sitting at her reception desk near the door to the office of Secretary of State Susan Rice, the American secretary watched the five men and one woman like a referee would watch two prize fighters about to pummel each other. The secretary then answered a call on her intercom and got up.

"If the gentlemen and the lady will please follow me, Secretary of State Rice is ready to receive you."

There was a moment of hesitation at the door, as both group tried to get in first but refused to mingle. The American secretary finally had to invite the Chinese to go first, using the pretext that a lady was in that group in order not to insult the Japanese. Once inside the large office, the Chinese and Japanese diplomats realized at once that this

was not going to be some gentle diplomatic discussion. Two sofas had been placed at a slight angle right in front of Secretary Rice's work desk, behind which she sat with a stern face: this had all the appearances of a remonstrance to two unruly kids. That impression was confirmed when Rice didn't rise from her chair to greet them, something of an insult in diplomatic language.

"If you may sit down, lady and gentlemen, we have grave matters to discuss."

Rice, an experienced career diplomat rather than a political appointee, waited for the Chinese and Japanese delegations to sit on their respective sofas before speaking again.

"Ambassador Peng, Ambassador Naruhito, I have called you in here in order that a stop could be put to the senseless conflict that is bringing chaos to the whole area of the Sea of Japan. Before any of you may protest about his justifications for his respective nation's actions, let's just review what effects on the United States and the rest of the World this conflict already had. First off, Taiwan, a neutral state in your conflict, has seen its maritime and commercial air traffic drastically curtailed and inhibited by the armed hostilities just off its shores, something that in turn had severe and deleterious effects on its economy and trade, part of the latter being done with the United States, by the way. Second, those same hostilities have also severely curtailed both sea and air commercial links between South Korea, another neutral state in this conflict, and the rest of the World. Third, as a result of the near shutdown of the maritime routes passing through the Sea of Japan and the Taiwan Strait, World maritime traffic is now in chaos, with shipping costs and insurance coverage shooting through the roof. That impacted severely in turn on the prices of good and merchandises here in the United States, and I won't even mention the financial and banking meltdown that has resulted on Wall Street."

Susan Rice then set her eyes on the Chinese ambassador.

"Ambassador Peng, I could understand if Chinese ships stopped or even seized a Japanese-owned and operated commercial ship in or near the actual conflict zone. However, having one of your submarines sink in international waters a Japanese super tanker ship heading towards the United States and coming from Saudi Arabia via the Strait of Malacca was inexcusable. While owned by a Japanese shipping company, that tanker was nowhere near the conflict zone and was transporting Saudi crude oil bought by an American company. As a result of that unjustifiable attack, all the tanker traffic across the Pacific has drastically raised its transportation fees, something that has

already caused an instant doubling of gas prices at the pumps in the United States. Furthermore, the unrestricted submarine warfare your country has just declared concerning ships entering Japanese waters is totally unacceptable to the United States.”

“May I remind the Honorable Secretary of State that, from 1939 to 1941, Germany had declared a similar campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare in British home waters, when American cargo ships were travelling regularly to the British Isles. Yet, the United States accepted that state of affair and did nothing about it.” Replied Peng Li in a polite tone. “I may also add that the United States is not exactly a neutral player in this crisis, as it is providing vital military support to Japan against China.”

“As Russia is providing military support to China.” Countered Rice. “Yet, we have not called Russia on the carpet concerning this crisis. We called in the two countries responsible for triggering chaos in the Western Pacific.”

“Excuse me, Secretary Rice,” then cut in Naruhito, “but China started this war by using first lethal force to take the Senkaku Islands from us. Our ships and aircraft were then fired upon as we tried to see what was happening. China is clearly in the wrong here and should be held responsible for the present consequences.”

“It is true that China used lethal force first, Ambassador Naruhito.” Recognized Rice. “However, China would probably not have used such force if Japan had agreed in the past years to continue negotiations with both China and Taiwan concerning those islands, instead of officially buying them and declaring control over them. Please understand this, both you and Ambassador Peng: thousands of young men have already died in the last four days and more will most probably die in the next days, and all that for a few worthless rocky outcrops in the middle of the ocean. The true reason for this war is nationalism, stubborn, blind nationalism. That nationalism is endangering the livelihoods of billions of people and hurting the economies of dozens of countries that have nothing to do with these islands and couldn’t care less to whom they belonged. Know this, gentlemen, and tell that to your respective governments: the President of the United States has spoken with the President of Russia today and both agreed together that this conflict must end now, before it escalates further. Tomorrow, the United States will petition the United Nations Security Council to have the question of the ownership of the Senkaku, cum Diaoyu, cum Tiaoyutai Islands, decided by the International Tribunal of the Law of the Sea, with its final decision to be binding.”

"My country will veto any such petition, Secretary Rice, and you should know it." Replied at once Peng Li, raising his tone of voice. Rice's reaction was to look at him severely.

"Then, know that Russia will react at such a Chinese veto by immediately cutting off any further military aid to China. On our part, we are now informing the Japanese government that any and all American aid of military nature to Japan, including military intelligence, will stop as of tomorrow if Japan refuses to submit to international arbitration. You all know how much this could cost politically to President Clinton in view of the sympathies often expressed towards Japan in the United States. However, the cost to all of us and to the World if this conflict persists or even worsens is simply too great to accept. If both China and Japan refuse to end this conflict, then they will have to fight each other in isolation to the rest of the World, without the help of anyone else. Please tell your respective governments to return to diplomacy rather than continue using military action."

Naruhito, as unhappy about this as Peng was, spoke next.

"And, for the sake of argument, Secretary Rice, if both of our governments agree to let the International Tribunal of the Law of the Sea decide the ownership of those islands, who will occupy them in the meantime? As you said yourself, thousands of our young men have already died on or around them and simply abandoning them, free to be occupied by trespassers, will not be acceptable to either my government or to the Japanese people."

"The United States is already considering the possibility that United Nations observers from nations considered neutral by all parties could be posted on the islands to prevent anybody from trespassing in the meantime, Ambassador Naruhito. My government has already made contact with the governments of Indonesia and of Australia concerning this matter. Would those two countries be acceptable as neutral parties to your governments in the case that negotiations resume, gentlemen?"

"If, and this does not engage my government to anything yet, the ownership of the islands is to be judged by an international tribunal, then my government will probably be amenable to the use of Indonesia and Australia as neutral observers, Secretary Rice." Answered Peng after a short hesitation. Naruhito was next to answer, also reluctantly.

"Japan would also be ready to consider Indonesia and Australia as neutral parties to our dispute, Secretary Rice."

“Excellent! Then, I will not detain you further, gentlemen, as I believe that you will have much to communicate to your respective governments. Thank you again for coming, lady and gentlemen.”

The six diplomats got up from their sofas in unison before walking out, still studiously avoiding mixing up. Susan Rice sighed heavily once they had left: she was not expecting the next few days or even weeks to be easy, even if both China and Japan agreed to international mediation tomorrow. In any case, President Clinton and the United States probably just had lost a lot of its clout and influence in Japan by refusing to support it militarily without question, something that some members of Congress and various influential public figures will assuredly be quick to criticize.

15:13 (California Time)

Thursday, May 3, 2018 ‘A’

Unit # 103, 1827 16th Street

Santa Monica, California

Putting down on the floor of her lounge her bags and backpack, Nancy went next to her favorite sofa and heavily sat in it, exhausted by the long air travel and by the repeated changes in time zones. She had stayed on the Senkaku Islands until yesterday, in order to film and report on the arrival of the first United Nations observers in the archipelago, and this after both China and Japan had militarily evacuated the islands, taking with them their dead. She then had flown to Taiwan, where she had taken a flight to Tokyo in order to recuperate the rest of her luggage left there. Finally, she had taken a plane out of Tokyo early this morning to return to California.

After a few minutes taken to relax a bit, Nancy got up from her sofa and went to check her answering machine, as well as the unopened emails in her desktop computer. She smiled triumphantly when she saw one email that she had been waiting for anxiously: it was from the Universal Studios and confirmed the start date next week for the production of the next movie in which she would feature in a leading role. The saga of the Shadow Dancer had not ended with that spectacular jump from the top of the tower at One, World Trade Center, far from it!

CHAPTER 10 – INDOCHINA

14:17 (California Time)

Wednesday, November 7, 1951 'C'

Main hangar of the Aircraft Development Division

North Base, Muroc Air Force Base

California, USA

"So, General, what do you think?"

Ingrid, a big smile on her face as she came down the ladder hooked to the port side of the cockpit of the XF-83 prototype, waited to be on the ground before answering Clarence Johnson, Lockheed's head designer and the man who had produced the secret prototype delivered to Muroc AFB during the cover of darkness last night.

"That it seems to be all that I was hoping it to be. It looks like a splendid plane. We will now need to see how it performs in the air."

"Well, Tony LeVier already is already swearing only by it, General. We only tested its basic flight characteristics at subsonic speeds, to make sure that it was reasonably safe to fly during its military testing, but he was adamant that this baby will easily break through the speed of sound the moment you will push the throttles past the half power setting. It had this much excess power left to try. By the way, is it true that you got qualified as a test pilot?"

"It is! Then Colonel Boyd, now Brigadier General Boyd and commander of this base, cycled me through his last test pilot class, at my request. It was hard work, but my engineering degree sure helped me during that course."

"So, when do you expect to fly it for the first time, General?"

"In three nights, after our Air Force ground crews have had time to familiarize themselves a bit with the prototype. Your offer of temporary help by your own Lockheed technicians assigned to the project is of course accepted with gratitude, Kelly."

"Hell, General, I am as anxious as you to find out what that baby can really do. I will certainly be there on the night of your first flight."

Ingrid nodded once at that as she examined again the big prototype. It was really big compared to typical fighter planes of this time period, as big in fact as a medium bomber.

Its needle-like nose was flanked by two huge rectangular engine air inlets and connected to a long, wide fuselage that contained both the two huge TF-58R combination turbofan/ramjet engines and the multiple internal weapons bays of the aircraft, plus voluminous internal fuel tanks. The weapons bays would not house any armament for the moment, being used instead to accommodate over a ton of flight test instrumentation. The four internal 30mm cannons were for the time being the only armament mounted on the prototype. Also, the nose did not contain yet the intended air intercept radar planned for the F-83, it being still in development, a much less sophisticated radar taking its place for the moment in order to at least allow the prototype to fly at night and in bad weather. Overall, the XF-83 looked quite similar to what the future F-22 had looked in Nancy's time, except maybe for its canard surfaces and its lack of stealth features. One big difference that was not detectable to the naked eye was the fact that it was mainly built with a special type of steel alloy, instead of aluminum alloy or of composite materials. While the use of steel made the plane heavier, it also made it able to resist the aerodynamic heating expected from high supersonic speeds. The extensive use of steel honeycomb structures, one of the novelties pushed for by Ingrid, had however limited greatly the corresponding weight gain and had at the same time helped partly insulate the internal structure from the heat caused by aerodynamic friction. She had also insisted that all the fuel tanks and cells use flexible, rip-resistant fuel bags, as the information from the future had warned her about the severe fuel leak problems the SR-71 had experienced with its wet wing tanks, leaks caused by thermal expansion of the plane structure at high speeds. In that and many other points, Ingrid was happy to see that Clarence Johnson had been able to walk on his pride and had followed her counsels in order to avoid problems that the future had warned her about.

Pushed by curiosity, Clarence Johnson started walking towards another prototype parked inside the hangar, followed by Ingrid. The Lockheed engineer stopped a few meters to one side of the plane, which had long wings with only moderate backward sweep and two big engines flanking the fuselage.

"This is the Republic XA-3 prototype, right?"

"Correct, Kelly. It is meant to be a rugged, simple tactical fighter-bomber and is designed to be resistant to battle damage. As such, the emphasis went on its ruggedness, reliability and payload, rather than on pure speed and advanced electronic

systems. The engines, cockpit and critical systems are heavily armored and the nine weapons pylons will allow it to carry a very heavy load of munitions. It is also armed with four 30mm internal cannons. Its engines are two TF-58s, pure turbofan variants of the same engines found in your XF-83. While they will produce much less maximum power than the TF-58R, they will be very economical, especially by today's standards, and will thus give to the XA-3 a good combat radius of action. It will basically be the jet equivalent of the old P-47 THUNDERBOLT, which excelled at ground attack. Being of much simpler and more conventional design than the XF-83, the XA-3 was delivered over three months ago already. Even though it was designed to be basically an armored flying bomb truck, the test pilots here at Muroc already love flying it. It is easy to handle, is very agile and has tremendous accelerations at low speeds, especially when flying without any payloads. I tried it myself a number of times and it was great fun to fly. Up to now, we have not found any basic flying vice in its design."

"Damn! This makes me curious to see what prototype you will receive next, General."

"Please, Kelly, call me simply Ingrid: you are a civilian, not one of my subordinates. To answer you, we expect within two weeks to receive the North American XF-10, a prototype light fighter that can be adapted to aircraft carrier use, and the Curtiss XA-5, a strike aircraft with vertical takeoff and landing capability. Then, we expect just before year end to receive the Northrop XB-50 heavy supersonic bomber prototype. A lot of people are impatient to get it, not the least myself. That XB-50 will be critical to fill a big gap in our aircraft inventory: that for an intercontinental jet bomber. After New Year, we will start receiving the prototypes of our various new transport aircraft. The development of our prototype high thrust, high-bypass turbofan engine, the General Electric TF-2000, didn't go as smoothly as that of the Pratt & Whitney TF-58, but it is now back on track."

"So, things are going quite smoothly it seems for your various development programs, Ingrid. You placed a big bet indeed three years ago, but now your bet is paying off, big time. In contrast, I heard through a few engineer friends of mine that work for either Vought, Grumman or Westinghouse that the Navy's new jet aircraft programs are a complete shambles."

"That doesn't surprise me one bit, Kelly. Those idiots at the Navy's Bureau of Aircraft refused to listen to me at all when I proposed to help them. Well, if they thought that they were so smart, then let them learn their lessons the hard way. The sad part is

that it will be low-ranking Navy pilots that will pay for their stupidity, while these admirals will probably scurry away to cover their own asses.”

“Covering your own ass is indeed a time-honored practice in big bureaucracies, Ingrid, be they civilian or military ones. Well, I will leave you now with your new baby. Have fun with it!”

“I sure will, Kelly!” Answered Ingrid with enthusiasm.

19:51 (California Time)

Saturday, November 10, 1951 ‘C’

Main hangar of the Aircraft Development Division

North Base, Muroc Air Force Base

With the lights inside the big prototype hangar switching to dim red lamps, in order to protect the secrecy of the prototypes from distant photographers, the aircraft towing vehicle pulled the XF-83 out of the hangar and onto the tarmac, well off from the hangar. Mechanics then decoupled the aircraft’s nose wheels leg from the towing ‘A’ frame and drove the towing vehicle out of the way. An engine startup unit then rolled to besides the prototype and technicians proceeded in starting one by one the two huge turbofan engines, coordinating their actions with the two crewmembers inside the tandem cockpit. In combat situations, the F-83 was designed to be able to start its engines without any ground assistance if need be, but Ingrid wanted to go very gradually during the test trials of the prototype. The XF-83 represented a dizzying amount of completely new, even revolutionary technologies and systems designs that had already cost tens of millions of dollars to develop and she was unwilling to risk it all by rushing through the test phase.

“Ready, James?”

“As much as I will ever be, Ingrid.” Replied Captain James Ridley, the flight engineer, from his rear seat. His job during this flight and the ones to follow would be to carefully watch all the flight parameters and how the various systems would respond, then note any potential problem or question mark that would need further checks. He would be backed on that by dozens of various instrumentation packages that would record everything during the flight, with the recorded data to be sifted through carefully afterward by a team of engineers from both the Air Force and Lockheed. With all that rested on this test program, now was not the time for improvisation or rashness. On her

part, Ingrid was extremely conscious of her crushing responsibilities in all this. If the XA-3 was any indication, the various development programs she had initiated in October of 1948, three years ago, were going well and delivering their promises. Her two engine programs in particular, for the twelve ton thrust in basic version of the Pratt & Whitney TF-58 low bypass turbofan, and for the 24 ton plus basic thrust General Electric TF-2000 high bypass turbofan, had been the key to all her aircraft projects. Variants of either of those two engines would actually power her various new aircraft, something that by itself was going to save an incredible amount of money to the United States Air Force in the long run through commonality of parts and reduced needs for training of the ground maintenance crews. General Hoyt Vandenberg, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, had been quick to catch on to that factor and had heartily approved, having experienced firsthand during World War Two the headaches that a multitude of aircraft types and engines in service could cause in terms of maintenance. The TF-58R variant of the turbofans powering the XF-83 had a larger diameter and was much longer than the basic TF-58 turbofan because the core turbofan engine was positioned inside a wider steel tube that surrounded it completely and had common air intake and jet exhaust with the turbofan. At low speeds and on the ground, the core TF-58 would function alone, each of the two engines of the XF-83 delivering a very respectable twelve metric tons of thrust with the economy in fuel typical of turbofan engines compared to the pure turbojet designs that were presently common. Once near the speed of sound, or even past it if things went better than expected, fuel would be injected into the rear section of the ramjet tube, where the hot exhaust from the core turbofan would ignite it and thus augment tremendously the total thrust of the engine. This was the same principle as used in the post combustion sections of other engines, but that extra thrust also came at the price of much higher full consumption. In fact, a variant of the TF-58 with a rear post combustion tube, designated TF-58P, had been developed and had proved already able to deliver a maximum thrust of seventeen metric tons with post combustion. The TF-58P was the engine powering the prototype of the XF-10 light all-weather supersonic fighter to be delivered in two weeks. Where the TF-58R variant of the XF-83 really differed, though, was at high supersonic speeds. A ramjet engine, having no moving parts except for its variable geometry air intake, could basically function at much higher internal temperatures than other jet engines, where the thermal resistance of the turbine blades in particular constituted a barrier to increased performances. A ramjet could thus in theory be developed to deliver an amount of thrust at supersonic speeds that no other

type of engine could approach. Furthermore, the data from the future had taught Ingrid that, as the Mach number went up, ramjet engines became more and more economical in terms of mass of fuel burned for every kilometer of distance covered. Preliminary wind tunnel testing had confirmed that notion to a point, but the lack of proper ground test facilities had limited the data on that. Thus, the future high speed test flights of the XF-83 were going to be truly ground-breaking and would cover completely unexplored territory.

Ingrid had that in mind as her two engines were being started in turn under the supervision of James Ridley, who was also a qualified jet pilot. With her two engine lit up and turning without apparent problem and with the technicians now safely out of the way, she then pushed her engine throttles forward progressively, staying in pure turbofan mode, and making her aircraft roll forward. She followed the taxiway leading to one end of the main runway of North Base and pivoted on the spot once at the start of the runway, to face the long ribbon of concrete lit up by light beacons on each side. After a last check of her instruments, she contacted the control tower of North Base on the radio.

“Muroc North, this is Lady Hawk, ready for takeoff, over.”

“Lady Hawk, from Muroc North, you have the authorization to take off, over.”

“Thank you, Muroc North. Taking off now.”

Ingrid then pushed her engines into maximum dry turbofan mode. Even without ramjet boost, the total thrust of her engines was close to the present loaded weight of her plane, pushing her and Ridley in their ejection seats under the acceleration. Ingrid always loved the sensation of power that this gave and she truly enjoyed that moment as the XF-83 rocketed down the runway. She was able to pull the nose up and make her wheels come off the ground in record time, attracting a pleased comment from Ridley on the intercom.

“We rotated off the runway in less than 1,800 feet, Ingrid. That’s a very respectable performance right from the start.”

“And the climb rate is nothing to piss on either, even though I could push my climb to a steeper angle. We will soon see how it handles once at 40,000 feet.”

Once they were at an altitude where no commercial air traffic, or most of the military air traffic as well, would be in the way, Ingrid turned around her plane to head

back in the direction of Muroc. She wanted to stay mostly over the deserted areas around Muroc, in order to avoid being picked up on radar by civilian air controllers in Los Angeles. Few people knew that the XF-83 even existed and she didn't want anyone not in the know to have a hint of its performances, especially the Soviets.

"Alright, James, let's see now how this beast handles. Starting the phase one flying characteristics now."

"I copy that. The voice tape recorder is on and I am ready to monitor our parameters. Go ahead, Ingrid."

"Starting with roll rate, now!"

Pushing her control stick to one side, she made her XF-83 make a simple roll, checking how stable it would be, then made a second roll, this time in the opposite direction.

"Longitudinal stability is good. Roll rate is good. I am going to try maximum roll, without exhaust vectoring. Rolling now!"

This time, she pushed her stick to the side in one quick motion. The rotation rate nearly made her helmet bang against the internal surface of the canopy.

"WHEW! I think that we have a bronco here."

"Sure do, Ingrid." Said Ridley, smiling inside his oxygen mask. "Try the other way."

That roll proved as energetic, making Ingrid grin.

"Hell, I like this beast already. I am trying a barrel roll now."

Turning around every three minutes in order to stay over the general area of Muroc Dry Lake, Ingrid performed a series of basic air maneuvers with her prototype while Ridley carefully monitored how their plane reacted and also noted the engines fuel consumption. After forty minutes of flight testing, and with no extreme maneuvers yet tried, they came to the end of their scheduled test list and made a last turn towards Muroc, to return to base. Ingrid wished that she could indulge herself right now and pull some more energetic maneuvers before landing, but she was the head of the program and had to show the example and be responsible.

"God, I can't wait for my next flight in this baby."

"The same here, Ingrid." Replied Ridley. "Up to now, I did not detect any negative reaction from the aircraft and it seems to be a stable beast. I guess that we will know more about that when we do the slow speed and stall tests."

"That's in two more test flights, James. How is our fuel consumption up to now?"

“Compared to our turbojet-equipped F-80 and F-86 fighters, this plane consumption rate is truly minimal. I would say that the fuel consumption rate of our TF-58s on pure turbofan mode is no more than half that of our existing turbojets. This, along with the huge internal fuel tanks of this baby, should give a very good range to the F-83.”

“Something an interceptor and long range strike aircraft can always use. Well, here are the lights of the runway ahead.”

The landing phase was used for more testing, with the XF-83 proving to be a stable and well-responding plane at low speed and with a nose up altitude. The landing itself was very smooth, attracting an admiring comment from Ridley.

“Hell, Ingrid, it felt as if you’ve been flying this plane for a long time already.”

“It felt the same to me, James. It seems that this beast and me are made for each other.”

“Don’t say that at the mess, Ingrid: it could break the heart of all those who are secretly in love with you.”

That made Ingrid chuckle briefly.

“And are you part of those secret lovers, Captain?”

“Me and most of the rest of the Air Force, yes, General.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere, Captain.”

“I know, General.” Replied Ridley, sighing heavily and making Ingrid laugh again. “I will have to take my frustrations on my wife...again.”

This time, they both laughed at that joke.

14:14 (Washington Time)

Tuesday, January 29, 1952 ‘C’

The Oval Office, The White House

Washington, D.C.

“You asked for me, Mister President?”

“I did, General. Please sit down.”

Ingrid took the sofa offered by President Thomas Dewey, who was sitting in an easy chair facing her in the coffee corner of the Oval Office. Dewey was a relatively small man who had a balding head with thin black hair and a short moustache. In his previous

posts as a New York special prosecutor and as Governor of the state of New York, he had built a solid reputation of honesty and efficiency, a reputation that had helped him win the 1948 presidential elections as the Republican candidate. Since Joseph Martin had briefed him about her in the process of transferring power to Dewey in January 1949, the latter knew about her ability to remember her past incarnation and about her resurrection in 1942 on Guadalcanal. He had thus kept Ingrid on in her roles of Special Presidential Advisor and of Director of Air Force Aircraft Development, despite attempts by many conservative politicians, who were jealous of her influence in the White House, to have Dewey get rid of her. Both however didn't know each other very well yet and Ingrid's personal rapport with Dewey was not as warm as that with Joseph Martin, who had nearly treated Ingrid like a niece during his stint at the White House.

Once Ingrid was sitting, Dewey looked at her in silence for a moment, apparently weighing her for some task to come before speaking softly.

"How are your new aircraft projects going, General?"

"They are going quite smoothly up to now, Mister President. We have now received in Muroc the prototypes for all the projects I initiated in 1948 and are going through their flight tests methodically. The first model, that of the A-3 ground attack aircraft, should be certified ready for acceptance into service and series production in about two months, unless we hit an unforeseen snag in the meantime. I am also happy to announce to you that the prototype XF-83 fighter-bomber has now attained a maximum tested speed of 1,080 miles per hour, and this strictly on pure turbofan mode alone. We still have to test it with its ramjet engines lit up, something that should come in about six weeks."

"But, that's very good news indeed, General." Said Dewey, visibly impressed and happy. "What kind of maximum speed are you expecting of the XF-83 when it will be at full power?"

"To be frank, Mister President, nobody can say for sure, even me. The high supersonic flight domain and the detailed workings of ramjet engines are still mostly uncharted territory for us. What I can promise is that we will easily break through Mach 2, or 1,480 miles per hour, at high altitude and will probably get close to Mach 3, or over 2,200 miles per hour. More importantly, the XF-83 has already proved to have a very long range compared to our existing fighters and is capable of flying across the Atlantic, all the way to our bases in Germany."

"My God, these are very good news indeed, General. They should help shut up all those congressmen screaming about us sinking hundreds of millions of dollars into secret aircraft projects."

"Well, Mister President, if that could take some political heat off your back, I could always arrange a visit to Muroc in a few months for the benefit of the members of the Senate Military Affairs Committee."

"That would be much appreciated, General." Said Dewey, smiling. "However, I have to say that I called you in for a reason unconnected to your new aircraft projects. I was told that you speak a very good French, am I right?"

"I effectively do, Mister President." Answered Ingrid, now a bit confused and surprised. Dewey's next question confused her even more.

"And would you speak Vietnamese as well, by chance?"

"Uh, yes, Mister President. My incarnation during the 18th Century was as a Vietnamese peasant living in the Mekong Delta. Why do you ask?"

"Because I intend to send you to Indochina for three or four weeks as part of a military delegation that will study the communist insurgency the French are facing there, in order to find possible solutions to that conflict and also to find out what assistance we can give to the French in that fight. Major General Oliver Smith, of the Marine Corps, has already been designated by me as the official head of that delegation, but you would act as our expert in air force matters. You will of course be acting as well as my special advisor, something that should give you quite a lot of clout."

By then, Ingrid's face had sobered up noticeably and she measured her words carefully in response to Dewey's declaration.

"Mister President, may I speak frankly?"

"Of course, General! That is why I have you as a special presidential advisor, so that I can get advice from other than mere sycophants."

"Thank you for your confidence, Mister President. What I wanted to say is that, in my opinion, we should not help the French in retaining Indochina as one of their colonies. Their colonial rule there is in fact the center of the problem. As for the local insurrection being a communist one, I have my doubts about that. I suspect that simple nationalism has a lot more to do with this conflict. However, I agree that, if the situation is allowed to continue to rot, then the Soviets and the Communist Chinese are liable to try to profit from it in order to extend their influence in the region."

To her surprise, Dewey sat back in his chair with a happy smile.

"I see that I chose well in calling you to come here, General. That was precisely the kind of opinion I wanted to hear from you. Up to now, I have had only a litany of anti-communist rantings from Secretary of State Dulles about the situation in Indochina, which he sees as a Soviet and Chinese plot to grab another country after Korea. What I want of you is to go there, discreetly examine the true causes of the problem and identify the actors involved, then come back and report to me in confidence, so that I have a second, educated opinion about what to do about it. I hope that an absence of four weeks won't hurt your new aircraft programs, General?"

"Not really, Mister President. I can always put Brigadier General Boyd, the commander of Muroc Air Force Base, in temporary charge: he is a very competent and experienced manager of test programs, as well as an outstanding test pilot in his own right. When would I be leaving for Indochina, Mister President?"

"In a week, as soon as General Smith could finish assembling and preparing his team. You will of course have to liaise with him before that. Know that he got the same directives from me as you did. What I want are facts, not what the French want us to believe...or what Secretary Dulles wishes me to believe."

13:40 (Indochina Time)

Tuesday, February 5, 1952 'C'

Tan Son Nhut Airfield, Saigon

Indochina

Major General Oliver Smith was the first to step out of the C-54 SKYMASTER and on the mobile staircase that had been pushed against the side of the transport aircraft. A French military band then started playing the 'Stars and Stripes', prompting Smith to come to attention and salute while on top of the staircase. He climbed down the staircase once the music stopped, the members of his team following close behind him. All the officers were in their full dress uniforms, while Henry Morgentau, the State Department representative, wore a dark suit and while his two secretaries were in formal dresses. A French Army three stars general was on hand with a few senior officers at the foot of the staircase and exchanged salutes and handshakes with Smith. The latter then presented the members of his team as they came down the staircase with their hand luggage. Ingrid, fourth in line behind General Smith, attracted stares of mixed surprise and admiration from the French officers, something that didn't surprise her one

bit. She then surprised them even more by speaking to them in excellent French. By comparison, the spoken French of the other American officers, save for Smith, who had studied from 1934 to 1936 at the French *École Supérieure de Guerre*⁹ in Paris, was mostly heavily accented and sometimes a bit hesitant. The French lieutenant general, looking at the medal ribbons on the chests of his American guests, particularly on Ingrid and on General Smith, gave a suitably impressed look to Smith, speaking in French to him.

“I can see that the United States has sent some of its best people on this mission, General Smith.”

“We consider this mission of paramount importance, General Girardon. The United States will certainly do its best to help France here in Indochina.”

General Girardon bowed slightly at that.

“And France appreciates that help, General Smith. Would you make us the honor of reviewing the honor guard with your officers?”

“With pleasure, General Girardon.” Replied Smith, who then looked at his team. “Drop your luggage besides the staircase and follow me.”

The American officers quickly found themselves paired with their French equivalent from the reception committee as they went on to inspect the thirty-man honor guard. Ingrid ended up side-by-side with a French Air Force colonel named Jacques Morin, who whispered to her as they walked slowly in front of the soldiers presenting arms to them.

“Are there many female pilots in your Air Force, General?”

“A few hundred maybe. We have however only 53 female fighter pilots at this time, including me. What type of plane are you flying here?”

Morin snickered at her question.

“Right now, I am chained to a desk at the Grand Headquarters. In real life, I fly a F8F BEARCAT. I still manage to fly the odd mission when the General doesn't bury me under paperwork. And you?”

“I was flying prototypes at Muroc Air Force Base before being designated for this mission. I can't wait to go back there.”

Morin looked at her with envy then.

⁹ *École Supérieure de Guerre* : French for Higher War School, the equivalent to the American War College.

“Flying prototypes... I would give anything to be able to do that. You will have to tell me about that at supper this evening, General.”

Ingrid gave him her best apologetic smile.

“I’m afraid that I won’t be able to tell you much: most of it is classified.”

Morin did his best to hide his disappointment at her answer.

“Well, then we could talk about our respective war flying. Would that do?”

“That would be fine by me, Colonel.” Said Ingrid, admiring discreetly the fit, handsome man in his late thirties. They then kept mostly silent until the welcoming ceremony was completed and seven staff cars rolled forward to pick them up. Airmen loaded the luggage of the Americans in the cars before the convoy drove off towards downtown Saigon, escorted by two army jeeps mounting machine guns.

Seeing that Ingrid seemed fascinated by the scenery around them as they were driven towards the downtown part of the city, Jacques Morin didn’t bother her with small talk. After all, the word was that the American delegation would be in the country for at least a month. He would thus have ample time to try dating this young and most beautiful woman. Morin couldn’t know that the reason Ingrid was so enthralled by the city scenes was not because she was totally new to the country. Rather, Ingrid was being overcome with melancholy as the sights, sounds and smells reminded her of her past life as Tran Qui Khiem, a Vietnamese peasant from the nearby Mekong Delta that had lived here two centuries ago. The staff cars soon entered the downtown districts and were quickly submerged in the dense traffic of cars, trucks, mopeds, bicycle taxis, hand carts, ox-driven wagons and pedestrians. Morin was a bit intrigued when he saw Ingrid, who had rolled down her window to better see and listen, smile with apparent contentment as she observed the city life around. His curiosity turned into unmitigated surprise when Ingrid exchanged a few words in Vietnamese with a young street girl trying to sell flowers to her while their staff car was stuck in traffic. She then concluded a deal and bought a couple of flowers from the child. He looked at her with near dismay as she smelled happily the flowers.

“You speak Vietnamese, General? But I thought that this was your first time in this country?”

“It is, Colonel.” She replied while smiling to him. “There are however ethnic Vietnamese merchants in the Philippines, where I was stationed before. I also speak Chinese for the same reason.”

“Chinese too? That is quite impressive, General.”

She gave him a malicious look that made his heart beat a bit faster.

“I am a girl full of surprises, Colonel. Do you know if tonight’s supper will be a formal affair or if we are basically on our own?”

“We are on our own, as the formal reception for your delegation will be tomorrow evening. Uh, I was hoping to invite you for supper at a good restaurant I know.”

“Is it an ethnic Vietnamese or Chinese restaurant or is it an European one?”

“It is actually a French restaurant. Would that do?” Said Jacques, hopeful. She gave him a moody look.

“Colonel, do you mind if we go instead strolling around and taste the street fare? I am dying to see Saigon from up close.”

Jacques Morin hesitated then, but it had nothing to do with liking or not local cuisine.

“General, I should warn you that the streets are not totally safe in Saigon: Vietminh sympathizers sometimes shoot officials or lob grenades in crowded places around the city, especially during the evening.”

Instead of discouraging her, his words only made her shrug.

“Then I will bring my pistol with me. You have a pistol yourself, I suppose?”

Morin nodded slowly, eyeing this most special American general with renewed interest.

“I have a service pistol. Then, we may want to change into more informal clothes than these dress uniforms for supper.”

“Would you mind if I change into a combat uniform? It will be a bit more anonymous than this and my pistol belt would then look more normal with it.”

“Alright! We will go in combat uniforms. Can I pick you up at, say, five O’clock, at your hotel?”

“Five will do, Colonel.” She answered while her right hand discreetly rested on top of his left leg, bringing hidden excitement to him. “Come on foot, though: I really want to see the street life from up close.”

“As you wish, General.” Replied Jacques, now ready to agree to about anything she wanted. The way she smiled while looking into his eyes told him that this night could be an interesting one.

16:52 (Indochina Time)

Lobby of Majestic Hotel

District 1, downtown Saigon

Jacques Morin, dressed in tropical field uniform and wearing a pistol belt at his waist, showed up in the lobby of the four-star Majestic Hotel, where the American delegation was lodging, a bit in advance of the time planned with Ingrid. In truth, he was quite anxious to have a chance to be with her in a less formal setting than in the early afternoon. As usual, the lobby of the Majestic Hotel hosted numerous French, European or other Western businessmen and journalists, being one of the better hotels in Saigon. It was also well protected, with plenty of French Army patrols around to keep Vietminh terrorists away and with armed security guards as part of the hotel staff. As he walked towards the reception desk, Jacques spotted Ingrid, who had risen from a sofa and was walking towards him. She wore a khaki combat uniform that somewhat hid her body's curves, along with a blue beret and a pistol belt. The latter immediately attracted his attention: it was no regulation army web belt or holster. Instead, her wide belt was made of black leather and supported both a low-slung pistol holster attached along her right leg and a number of magazine and accessories pouches. The holster itself was most unusual, being made so that the equally unusual pistol in it was drawn out by pulling it forward instead of up. As for the pistol, a big and angular weapon, it sported some kind of futuristic-looking scope on top of it. Jacques pointed at it as Ingrid stopped in front of him.

"Where the hell did you find this weapon, General?"

"It is from the future." She replied with a smile, drawing a stunned look from Jacques. "I got it from my adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante."

"Nancy Laplante was your adoptive mother?" Said Jacques a bit too loudly. Ingrid signaled him to keep his voice low, as she could see that a number of persons in the lobby had snapped their heads around to look at her and Jacques.

"Please keep your voice down, Colonel. Let's go out in the street: we will be able to speak more discreetly there."

Both of them were soon on the crowded sidewalk outside the main entrance of the hotel. Seeing a bicycle taxi parked nearby, Ingrid hailed it in Vietnamese, then smiled to Jacques.

"Do you mind if we visit Cholon, the old Chinese town, first?"

Jacques was tempted to ask her how a first time visitor to Saigon could know about Cholon, but he simply shrugged: Ingrid was turning out to be one big bundle of surprises and he might as well simply take her as things went.

“Now is probably the best time, in fact: Cholon is definitely not safe at night for Europeans.”

That earned him a warm look from Ingrid.

“Thank you for your comprehension, Colonel.”

Both then got in the narrow bench seat of the bicycle taxi, also called a cyclo. This actually forced Ingrid to sit tightly against Jacques, something the Frenchman didn't complain about. He didn't complain either when her hand came to rest on top of his leg. Ingrid spoke in Vietnamese to the driver, then sat back as the bicycle taxi started rolling on Dong Khoi Street, enjoying the sights around her. Jacques waited a couple of minutes, giving her a chance to look around at leisure, then spoke up.

“Ingrid, that's a German name. Were you born in the United States?”

She shook her head slowly before replying.

“No! I was born and raised in Berlin.”

Ingrid then spent a couple minutes telling an abbreviated story of her life to Jacques, who listened to her with genuine interest as they rolled through the streets of Saigon.

“Well, that is quite a story, General. Your achievements are most remarkable, especially in view of what you had to go through.”

“I was lucky to meet a woman like Nancy Laplante.” Said Ingrid softly, gazing in the distance. “Without her, I would have probably died as a simple German Luftwaffe auxiliary during the war, killed by allied bombs or by Soviet troops. I understand that there are a lot of German men fighting here as part of your French Foreign Legion, right?”

“Correct! Many of them joined the Legion at the end of the war to escape being interned in prisoner of war camps. Now, they are fighting and dying for France. It is both ironic and sad at the same time.”

“Yes, and I fought for the United States myself after being pardoned from the Tower of London. Now, I am here to help France win this war. This is a strange world indeed.”

“Indeed!” Said quietly Jacques, who was silent for a moment before speaking again. “Do you think that the United States will come and actually fight the Vietminh with us? We certainly could use your help right now.”

“It will depend on a lot of things, starting with the politicians in Washington.” Replied Ingrid, noncommittal. Despite a few more nudges from Jacques, she didn’t elaborate further on that subject, so he abandoned it and instead used the next few minutes to point to Ingrid a few spots of tourism interest along their road.

Ingrid waited until they were well inside the Chinese district of Cholon, with its narrow and crowded streets, before making the driver stop so that they could step out. She paid the driver, giving him a sizeable tip as well that earned her a big grin and a low bow, then started walking with Jacques on the sidewalk. The dense crowd of Vietnamese pedestrians, with a few rare Europeans mixed in, paid little attention to the armed French officer but looked with intense curiosity and some surprise at the armed young woman in foreign uniform. Ingrid ignored the stares and whispered comments and slowly made her way towards a nearby market place while browsing with Jacques at the shop fronts. Her fluent use of both Vietnamese and Chinese as she browsed around attracted more stares from the Vietnamese, who were accustomed to Westerners who mostly never bothered to learn the local language. As she arrived in the market, Ingrid was attracted by an appetizing smell to a small restaurant serving its customers from a service counter. One look at small yellowish rolls being scooped out of a pan of boiling lard by a gray-haired woman made her salivate.

“Cha Gio! Fried meat rolls! I haven’t eaten those in ages! Do you mind if we eat here, Colonel?”

“Go right ahead, General.” Replied Jacques, amused by her reaction. He actually really didn’t mind, as Vietnamese cuisine could be truly delicious. The one thing he still couldn’t stomach was Nuoc Mam, a fish sauce that the Vietnamese unfortunately seemed to use in most of their dishes. Before he could protest, Ingrid then proceeded in ordering and paying for enough food for the two of them, not letting him time to offer to pay for the meal, as her use of Vietnamese confused him. They soon were eating Vietnamese style, sitting on low stools in front of the service counter and with their plates on an equally low table. Ingrid, using expertly the chopsticks provided with the plates, ate with obvious delight, attracting a smile from Jacques.

“For a first-timer in Indochina, you seem to feel right at home here, General.”

“Asian cultures always attracted me.” Replied Ingrid with a meat roll stuffed in her mouth. She of course couldn’t tell Jacques that she had lived previous lives as a

Vietnamese peasant, an Indian elephant handler, a Japanese Geisha and a Chinese emperor, among many others.

Ingrid had to restrain herself from overeating, as she was nearly overwhelmed by the experience of eating food she had not tasted in nearly two centuries. She kept the conversation to small talk, not willing to discuss sensitive subjects here in public. Jacques must have understood that, as he also kept to small talk. When they both got up to bring back their empty bowls to the service counter, Ingrid was truly full and in a happy mood.

“Let’s see if I can find something nice around this market, then we will go back to my hotel’s district.”

Jacques looked at the low sun, then at his watch.

“We should make it quick then, General: there isn’t much daylight left.”

“I promise you not to take too long.”

She actually kept her promise, spending no more than forty minutes browsing around the market. By the time they took a return ride in a cyclo, Ingrid had bought an elegant and most sexy white and gold embroidered silk Chinese dress that had a long opening along both legs, plus a pair of matching shoes and a silk purse. When they entered the downtown sector of Saigon, Jacques had the taxi driver make a detour so that they could pass in front of a large French colonial style building with armed soldiers posted at its entrances.

“This is our forces Grand Headquarters. You and your team will be working from it tomorrow morning.”

“Good! I will now know how to get to it from my hotel. Talking of my hotel, could we go to my room, so that I could drop a few things there?”

The way she said that while smiling at him made Jacques’ heart accelerate. His hopes were further raised when she took his hand and put it on her upper leg, near her groin.

“We certainly can do that, General.”

Jacques couldn’t believe his luck as the bicycle taxi made its way to the Majestic Hotel, with his hand discreetly caressing her leg. Ingrid only smiled more widely when he started fondling her groin. By the time they got off the bicycle taxi and entered the Majestic Hotel, both of them were thoroughly aroused. The moment that Ingrid closed and locked the door of her room behind her, she and Jacques glued themselves

together for a long kiss while their hands roamed freely. Ingrid then stepped back and held him at arm's length, a malicious smile on her face.

"Let's forget this 'General' and 'Colonel' business and call me 'Ingrid'. Go sit on the bed, Jacques. If I am to undress, I might as well do it properly."

Guessing what was coming, Jacques didn't protest and sat on the bed, then admired Ingrid as she performed a slow strip while dancing in front of him. In this she proved to be quite talented, to Jacques' delight. He was surprised however when Ingrid took off her combat trousers and boots, revealing an ankle holster with a compact pistol wrapped to her left leg and a leather holder wrapped to her right leg. The right side holder had a retaining pouch for one spare pistol magazine on the inner leg side and a sheath for a short combat knife on the outer leg side.

"Mon Dieu, Ingrid! You are better armed than a Marseille gangster!"

"I was told that Saigon could be dangerous, so I didn't take any chances." She replied, smiling, while undoing the two leg holders. She then threw them to him. "Be careful, the pistol is loaded and ready to fire."

"Aren't you afraid of a possible accidental discharge?" Said Jacques while cautiously taking the pistol out of its holster to examine it. Ingrid shook her head at that.

"Not with this Glock 30 pistol. It was imported from the year 2012 by Nancy Laplante and features a number of integrated safeties that make firing it by accident nearly impossible. It has a capacity of ten .45 caliber rounds, more than enough to get out of potential trouble. And yes, I know very well how to use it, as I have been practicing pistol shooting regularly for the last ten years."

"Ten .45 caliber bullets in such a compact pistol? That's impressive! It is also surprisingly light."

"That's because the frame is made of a very tough plastic instead of metal. But let's forget my gun: you should concentrate on these."

She undid her bra as she spoke and threw it playfully at Jacques. That got Jacques' undivided attention and he put away the weapon to admire her dancing. A fairly tall woman standing 175 centimeters, Ingrid had firm, perky breasts and well-rounded buttocks, while her body was that of a fit, athletic girl. She sported a deep, nearly integral suntan that only emphasized the look of health radiating from her body. Once totally naked, she danced towards Jacques and, taking hold of his head with both hands, pulled his face against her right breast. He licked her nipple for a while as his hands fondled her buttocks, then undressed quickly himself and dropped on the bed with her.

She did stop him then for a moment, reaching inside the drawer of her bedside table and taking out a condom in its wrapping.

“Hold on, big guy! Let’s have fun safely. You know what having a baby would do to my career as a fighter pilot.”

She actually turned that into more fun, playing with his penis in order to put the condom on him. Jacques didn’t regret waiting the extra minute taken for that, as Ingrid then proceeded to literally spend him dry.

20:49 (Indochina Time)

Medicinal herbs store, main market square

Cholon District, Saigon

Duong Manh Tien was refilling his jars of medicinal products from larger bags taken from his back room when someone knocked on the door of his shop. The thin, graying man grabbed a revolver hidden under his service counter before going to the door and speaking through it.

“It is late! The shop is closed.”

“Let me in, Bac¹⁰ Tien: I really need some tiger balm for a wound.” Replied the voice of a young man. Tien, recognizing the voice as well as the secret message in the answer, unlocked his door and opened it long enough to let in his visitor, then locked it again behind him. The young man that had come in took a large envelope from under his shirt and presented it to Tien in a respectful manner: it didn’t bring any good for someone to treat Duong Manh Tien with less than the respect due to the head of the Vietminh underground in Saigon.

“I have some pictures that I took today that could be of interest to you, Bac Tien.”

“Are they about the Americans that were greeted by the French early this afternoon?” Asked patiently Tien while taking the envelope and pulling black and white prints out of it. The young man opened his eyes wide, clearly surprised.

“You know already, Bac Tien?”

Tien smiled through his beard.

¹⁰ Bac: Uncle in Vietnamese. Often used to call someone with affection. Ho Chi Minh was often called Bac Ho.

“I would make a poor underground leader if I didn’t know such information already, young Cam. I had men at the airport who saw them arrive, while I had more men and some women gathering what they could about them in Saigon. One of the Americans, a young woman, even came here to the Cholon main market to eat and shop around. She was most beautiful indeed and made me wish I was younger myself.”

“Well, I did take pictures of that woman in the market, Bac Tien. Earlier today, I also took pictures of the group of Americans as they arrived at their hotel, the Majestic. I was also able to get their names from the hotel registry. I annotated the prints accordingly and asked Phuong to check the archives of the newspaper to see if there was anything about them. She brought me the results of her search as I was developing my film. The information is in the envelope with copies of the pictures.”

Tien nodded his head in satisfaction: Cam was a young and promising press photographer whose contacts in the biggest daily newspaper in Saigon were often very useful to obtain quickly background information on visiting Frenchmen and other foreigners. Journalists may be potentially dangerous for a people’s socialist democracy but they still had their usefulness. Tien got closer to the nearest lamp and examined carefully the prints one by one. There were a total of six American officers, plus a civilian man and two civilian women. From the rows of medal ribbons on the dress uniforms of the officers, they were all obviously well decorated veterans. Tien was however surprised to see that the young female officer had as many ribbons if not more than the graying general leading the American delegation. The names of the old general and of the female officer, written on the bottom of the prints showing them, sounded familiar to Tien but he couldn’t remember fully where he had seen them. Continuing to look through the prints, he then got to the pictures of the female officer taken by Cam in the Cholon market. Those got his full attention, as he had seen her only from across the market square. The pistol she wore was visible in detail in a close-up shot and made him frown.

“What kind of pistol is this? I never saw anything like this before.”

“That is understandable, Bac Tien: it came from the future.”

“WHAT?”

Cam, obviously savoring the fact that he had been able to throw off the normally unflappable Tien, produced two pocket-sized books from a fishnet shopping bag he held in his left hand.

“Phuong was able to quickly recognize the female officer and then borrowed those two books from the shelves of the newspaper. Both books were written by that young woman and were actually big bestsellers in many countries, including France. Her name is Ingrid Dows and she is a major general in the American Air Force. She also happens to be the adopted daughter of the famous time traveler, Nancy Laplante. Look at the cover of the first book, the one titled ‘Nancy Laplante, Fighting Lady’.”

Doing that, Tien saw the picture of a tall woman in British combat uniform being carried on a stretcher by two soldiers, a bayonet still stuck in her upper left leg and a mean-looking pistol in her right hand. The pistol shown on the book cover was actually of the same type as that carried around by the female American general. Tien nodded again, then looked at the cover of the second book, titled ‘Female fighter pilot’. It featured the picture of the female officer he had seen in the market square, smiling while wearing a fantastic-looking flying helmet and sitting in the cockpit of a fighter aircraft. That was when Tien remembered where he had seen her name before.

“Her? She caused no end of grief to the people’s forces in Korea.”

“That she did, Bac Tien.” Agreed quietly Cam. “I quickly read through her book about herself and found out that she was actually the top ranking American Air Force officer left in Korea by the time the people’s forces were squeezing the imperialist forces inside their pocket around Pusan. She is also the top American fighter pilot of all times, with a total of 128 air victories confirmed against Japanese, Soviet and North Korean planes. Also in the second book, I found a picture of her with Major General Oliver Smith, who was then a brigadier general.”

Tien quickly sifted through the second book, looking at the pictures in it and finding the one just mentioned by Cam.

“So, two of the best combat officers the Americans have are here, paying an official visit to the French. This cannot be good news for our cause. You worked very well indeed, Cam. I will let it be known in high places.”

“Thank you, Bac Tien.” Replied proudly Cam, bowing low. “I have however one last piece of information for you about that Ingrid Dows: she speaks fluently both Vietnamese and Chinese, on top of French and, of course, English.”

Tien nearly swore at that.

“Then it will make her all the more dangerous for us. I will have to ask for instructions concerning her. Too bad that she is fighting for the imperialists: she is both

beautiful and brave. Could you try to find me copies of those two books, so that I could study them at leisure? If not, I will keep those.”

“I will do my best, Bac Tien.”

Cam was about to go when Tien stopped him and then went to a shelf behind his counter, picking up a small sealed glass jar. He next gave the jar to Cam while smiling.

“Here is your tiger balm, young man. I hope that your wound will heal quickly.”

15:08 (Indochina Time)

Wednesday, February 6, 1952 ‘C’

French Grand Headquarters

Saigon

Major General Smith was reading and annotating some documents provided by the American embassy when Ingrid knocked on the open door of the office provided to him by the French. Like Smith and the rest of his officers, Ingrid was in combat uniform and was carrying a pistol. She also had a few sheets of paper in her hands.

“Could I speak with you for a minute, Oliver?”

“Anytime, Ingrid! Take a chair.” Said Smith jovially. Ingrid put the sheets of paper she had on top of his desk before positioning a chair in front of him and sitting on it.

“These are my initial findings on the state of the French Air Force in Indochina. They are however based only on the data provided to me by the French. I would like to go see by myself on the ground what the reality is like. It would also let me observe the tactics and flying procedures of the French, along with the counter-tactics used by the Vietminh.”

Smith nodded once at that as he grabbed her notes and started reading them.

“That sounds both reasonable and necessary to me, Ingrid. I myself am finding that the information from the French that I saw had, well, a certain overoptimistic spin to it. The French also seem to be bedeviled by a belief of racial superiority over their opponents that could prove fatal to them if they are not careful.”

Smith was then silent for a minute as he read and digested the notes made by Ingrid. While her English prose could not be called masterful, her style was both simple, direct and concise, something he appreciated as an experienced field commander: flowery

bullshit was something he had no time for in a war zone. The data about the French aircraft strength made him frown.

“Hell, this looks like a nice collection of museum pieces, Ingrid. I even see some old German and Japanese planes in the lot. They don’t have a single jet aircraft in Indochina?”

“Not one, Oliver. The French Air Force is only now fielding their first jet fighter, a French design that is frankly already obsolete, but even that aircraft is not scheduled to serve in Indochina. Their best fighter aircraft in theater will thus be still the F8F BEARCAT. Even those planes, while excellent for strafing missions, have a limited bomb-carrying capacity and are beset by a chronic lack of spare parts and a weak logistical support system. I was told by Colonel Morin that French pilots are ordered to not drop their external fuel tanks once they are empty and to bring them back to base, because the French have a limited supply of them. That forces French pilots to fly into combat with external tanks full of explosive fumes, which of course makes them extremely vulnerable to ground fire. I inquired about this and found out that the order to keep the tanks on came from high up, right here in this GHQ. When I tried to explain to the brigadier general of logistics responsible for this the dangers of that practice, he simply refused to listen to my arguments.”

Smith rose an eyebrow at that and, grabbing a pen, jotted down a note on a pad.

“What’s the name of that twit, Ingrid?”

“Brigadier General Lemonier, Chief of Air Logistics, sir. However, the biggest shortcoming of the French Air Force in Indochina, apart from old aircraft in insufficient numbers, is the limited amount of tactical and medium bombers. Also, in terms of heavy bombers, the only thing the French have here is a single squadron of PB-4Y PRIVATEERS, a maritime patrol variant of our old B-24. What the French need the most now is a good tactical air-to-ground fire support capability. In view of the terrain and of the guerrilla style of warfare used by the Vietminh, my opinion is that the best type of aircraft for the job would be armed helicopters. Transport helicopters in sizeable numbers would also make the French forces much more mobile and flexible in their responses. Remember our operations in Korea, where the roads were frequently cut by enemy ambushes.”

“I remember that well, Ingrid.” Said Smith, thoughtful. “Your helicopters were often the only way to evacuate or move our troops around when the roads were controlled by the enemy. I agree with your opinion about the use of helicopters in

Indochina. Brigadier General Lejeune has already reported to me that the biggest headache of the French Army here is the lack of mobility of their troops. The roads are limited in both numbers and capacity and are also highly vulnerable to guerrilla ambushes and road blocks. The French lost many small garrisons because the relief columns sent to help them were too late or were ambushed on their way in. Evacuation by helicopter would also have saved many of the French troops trapped by the Vietminh in the jungle or in the mountains. The problem here is that the means of the French military are very limited. France is recovering well from the damage caused by the Second World War but its economy is no powerhouse still and they have many other colonies to worry about on top of Indochina.”

“Oliver, this actually leads me to my second big point. I firmly believe that a purely military solution to this crisis is unrealistic. While it is not in our team’s mandate to do so, Washington should try to make the French understand that, sooner or later, they will have to give real independence to this country.”

Smith gave her a doubtful look then.

“And what about the Vietminh, or the Chinese? If the French left Indochina now, the communists would simply overwhelm it and grab everything. That is not something Washington, nor I, are ready to let happen.”

“Nor do I, Oliver.” Replied Ingrid, now more cautious in her presentation. “The best solution in my mind is a relatively quick military victory over the Vietminh, concurrent with the building up of a credible and strong local Vietnamese government that would enjoy true popular support. Whether the French like it or not, the reason the Vietminh have been so successful in grabbing control of the countryside is the fact that the French rule is very unpopular with the general Vietnamese population. The only things the peasants and merchants see from the French are taxes and stifling regulations, while they get precious little back in terms of public services and infrastructure improvements.”

Smith sat back in his chair while staring at Ingrid. Her maturity and depth of thinking kept surprising him in such a young woman. On the other hand, what she was proposing was quite far fetching indeed.

“That is quite a political program, Ingrid. The military aspect of it is also far reaching. Do you have specific recommendations about this?”

“I would need to do some ground observation first to confirm my initial impressions, sir. A few things can be however done quickly without much fuss. The first

thing would be to provide immediate logistical help to the French forces. We still have mountains of old equipment and stocks in the States that could be transferred to the French at little cost to us. I am talking especially about ammunition, bombs, external drop tanks, aircraft and vehicle parts and fuel. That would at least let the local French forces in Indochina fight to their maximum potential.”

“Sold!” Said Smith while jotting down another note. “The other members of the team made the same basic recommendation. Anything else?”

“Yes! We should provide the French with sizeable numbers of helicopters, both attack and transport types, along with the appropriate training and spares. I know for a fact that our first generation helicopters, the ones we started using in 1942, have already started being replaced with newer, higher performance machines. The older models should be transferred directly to the French forces, with training teams provided as well.”

“Another good point.” Agreed Smith, noting it down. “It will however take at least a year before the French are able to use them operationally.”

“I realize that, Oliver. A possible interim measure would be for American crews to man those helicopters, but that would be politically sensitive and would widen the scope of this war, something I don’t want to see happen.”

Smith immediately stopped writing and shot a sharp look at Ingrid.

“So, what should we do then?”

Ingrid sighed, not knowing exactly how to push her arguments.

“Could I speak frankly, Oliver?”

“You always will have that permission with me, Ingrid.” Said softly Smith. Ingrid nodded, then looked straight into his eyes, her voice firm.

“Sir, my personal belief is that the French are incapable of winning this war by themselves. They have neither the military capabilities nor the political will to apply the needed solutions to the present problems in Indochina. Even if we swamped them in military equipment and supplies, their political program of continued de facto colonization will eventually draw the whole Vietnamese people against them and they would then still lose what is essentially a guerrilla war. The only realistic hope in my mind is for us to convince the French to eventually leave Indochina and for us to then lend financial and economic support to the local governments of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, so that they have a chance to win the hearts and minds of their populations back from the communists. We must win over those populations if we are to obliterate the communist

threat to Southeast Asia. Also, we should call a spade a spade and be ready to tell the Chinese to stop harboring the Vietminh, on pain of direct military actions against them.” Smith blew air out, impressed by the audacity of her proposals.

“Ingrid, the State Department would lynch you if it could hear you right now. However, I have to agree with you on those points.”

“Does that mean that you will forward my ideas up, Oliver?” Said Ingrid, hopeful. Smith nodded grimly.

“Yes, but I fully expect them to be shot down by Washington. In the meantime, continue assessing the needs of the French Air Force and study the situation in Indochina.”

“Thank you for your comprehension and support, Oliver. Next, I have a request to pass on to the French. I would need a jeep and a driver, plus the needed supplies to drive north along the coast to inspect the various airfields and installations between Saigon and Hanoi. I would like to be able to leave early tomorrow morning.”

“This could be a dangerous trip, Ingrid.”

“I know. However, I won’t be able to do my job while hiding here in Saigon. I will probably need a full week to conduct that inspection trip. I will also need a letter signed by a senior French commander authorizing me to inspect and photograph at will the local installations, so that I don’t get embroiled into some misunderstanding with some French local commander.”

“That sounds reasonable enough, Ingrid. Go start packing right away for your trip. I will take care of your requirements with the French immediately. Thanks again for your comments.”

Getting up from her chair, Ingrid then saluted Smith, who was senior in terms of time in rank to her, and left his office. The general watched her leave, then grabbed his telephone to call Lieutenant General Girardon’s Aide, who spoke English. Explaining what he needed for Ingrid took only a minute, with the French officer promising to take care of everything right away. To Smith’s satisfaction, Girardon’s Aide showed up in his office less than an hour later with a safe-conduct signed by Girardon and with the information that a jeep with an armed driver would pick up Ingrid at her hotel at eight in the morning. Thanking and then dismissing him, Smith swiveled his chair around to look at the large map of Indochina pinned to the wall of his office. Nearly a third of Vietnam and nearly all of Laos and Cambodia were marked as being controlled by the Vietminh, including one part of the Vietnamese coast that Ingrid would have to travel through.

Smith suddenly had second thoughts about letting her go on her trip. He finally decided to keep to his agreement: trying to shield her from danger would be both unfair to the other members of his team and insulting to Ingrid.

07:41 (Indochina Time)

Thursday, February 7, 1952 'C'

Majestic Hotel, Saigon

The French soldier that had stopped his jeep in front of the Majestic Hotel didn't even have time to step out before Ingrid came out of the main entrance with a backpack, a kit bag and a carbine. The driver still came out to her and saluted her after coming to attention, addressing her in French.

"Sergeant Michel Kellerman, reporting as your driver, General!"

Ingrid returned his salute, then presented her right hand, which Kellerman shook.

"Pleased to know you, Sergeant. You wouldn't happen to be German, by chance?"

"I was born in Hamburg, General." Answered the sergeant in a neutral tone. "I enrolled in the French Foreign Legion after the war."

"And my maiden name is Ingrid Weiss, born in Berlin. I served for a while as a Luftwaffe auxiliary, then was captured by the British. While held in London, I fell for an American officer when the United States were still neutral in the war, then married him. You must have served during the war, didn't you?"

This time, the hesitation was clear on the part of Kellerman before he answered.

"Yes, General, I did."

"In what branch of service?"

"The Waffen SS, General." Said flatly the sergeant, making Ingrid's smile fade. It was her turn to be hesitant then.

"Well, we can talk more about this later. Let me put my things in the jeep and we will then go."

Kellerman pointed the small trailer attached to the back of the jeep and covered with a tarp.

"Then put your kit in there, General: our water, rations and fuel are there already, along with some camping equipment. Let me just undo the tarp."

Kellerman quickly undid part of the tarp cover, pulling it aside and making a space for Ingrid's kit among the boxes of rations and the jerrycans of water and fuel. Ingrid put in her kit bag but kept her backpack with her. She explained why in German while opening a box of C-rations in the trailer.

"I will keep my backpack with me, in case we have to get out of the jeep in a hurry. I will also pack two days' worth of rations in it, if you don't mind."

Kellerman nodded approvingly at that.

"That is a prudent move, General. We could be easily ambushed along the way by the Vietminh. I have..."

Kellerman suddenly froze while staring at Ingrid's pistol, strapped in its leg holster.

"Where did you get that pistol, General?"

Her face now wooden, Ingrid turned to face Kellerman while her right hand grabbed her pistol and undid the retaining flap. She then pulled out her pistol, holding it half pointed at her driver.

"Where did you see it, Sergeant? Was it in my adoptive mother's hand at the time?"

Kellerman took a slow step backward, his eyes reflecting mental turmoil as he stared Ingrid.

"The She-Wolf was your adoptive mother, General?"

"Yes, she was! Where did you meet her, Sergeant?"

Kellerman took a deep breath before answering her, apparently resigned to her reaction, whatever it would be.

"In the submarine building yards in Hamburg, General. We came to a hair of capturing her. She certainly was worthy of her nickname then, I have to say. I myself barely escaped capture at the time."

After a moment, Ingrid holstered back her pistol, to Kellerman's relief, then surprised him by offering her hand.

"Consider that past history, Sergeant. We have a dangerous trip to do together, so let's work together as two Germans can do."

Kellerman smiled and shook her hand firmly.

"Hell, I have been fighting for the French for six years now. It will be nice to be able to speak in German to a senior officer for a few days."

"That's the spirit! Let me pack those rations now."

That and fixing again the trailer's tarp cover took only a few minutes. Ingrid then carried her backpack to the jeep, dropping it besides a French Army pack on the back seat. She then saw the vehicular HF radio set fixed to a mount in the back of the jeep, a sight that pleased her.

"Excellent! At least we will be able to keep in contact while traveling. What is our radio call sign?"

"Blue Hawk, General. I have the list of call signs and frequencies in my pocket."

"Good! Let's roll now! I will tell you our itinerary in detail once we are out of the city...and out of earshot. We will first head east on the main road towards the coast."

"I see that you don't trust the locals as well, General." Said with a grin Kellerman, still speaking German. Ingrid nodded, serious.

"No, I don't. I know how they think." She said while taking place in the front passenger seat of the jeep. The removable canvas top was in place but the doors were not, simplifying getting in and out quickly in case of an ambush. Ingrid thought to herself that ambushes would be a very real possibility during this trip as Kellerman started the jeep, then shifted into gear and drove away from the hotel. As soon as the jeep had turned the next corner, the driver of a bicycle taxi waiting near the hotel went to a small shop and made a quick telephone call. Once that was done, he calmly returned near his bicycle taxi and resumed his observation of the people entering and exiting the Majestic Hotel.

14:31 (Indochina Time)

Nha Trang Airfield

Southeastern coast of Indochina

The French lieutenant manning the main gate of the Nha Trang Airfield with a squad of soldiers looked with a mix of surprise and suspicion at Ingrid, who was still sitting in her jeep in front of the lowered gate barrier.

"You want to take pictures of the airfield, miss?" He said in French. "Do you have an authorization for this?"

"Certainly, Lieutenant." Replied patiently Ingrid while reaching inside a leg cargo pocket and taking out the envelope with the safe-conduct signed by General Girardon. "By the way, please call me 'General' and not 'miss', Lieutenant."

At first, the young Frenchman didn't reply, clearly skeptical. His attitude changed when he saw the signature on the letter handed to him by Ingrid. Coming to rigid attention and saluting her, he gave her back the letter while apologizing in an embarrassed tone.

"I'm sorry, General. We were not warned of your arrival."

"That is understandable, Lieutenant. Could you tell me where the air operations building is?"

"Certainly, General!" Answered the lieutenant, pointing at a wooden hut 300 meters away beyond the gate barrier. "That is the operations building, next to the pilots' quarters and the kitchens."

"Thank you, Lieutenant!" Said Ingrid, smiling and returning his salute. The lieutenant then turned around to shout at the soldier manning the barrier.

"Raise the gate!"

The moment that the barrier was up, Sergeant Kellerman put his jeep into gear and drove inside the airfield, heading towards the air operations building. The lieutenant at the main gate followed the jeep visually for a moment, then shook his head and looked at his senior NCO, a sergeant.

"Did you see the age of that so-called major general? The Americans could at least let their officers grow out of their diapers before promoting them."

Making Kellerman stop their jeep in front of the air operations building, actually a single-level tropical hut about fifteen meters long and ten meters wide, Ingrid jumped out and climbed quickly the few steps leading to the front porch of the building. She saluted back in passing the three French pilots that had been slouching on long chairs and were now standing at attention while looking at her with unmitigated surprise.

"At ease!" She said in French to them before entering. She found herself in a corridor running most of the length of the building's front façade, with many doors along the walls. Looking at the plaques on the doors, she found one marked 'air operations' and opened it, entering a fair sized room with a number of work desks lined up behind a service counter. Wall map boards and a number of radio sets completed the furniture of the room. Ingrid looked at the French Air Force female corporal manning the service counter while taking out her safe-conduct, speaking to her in fluent French and giving her a big smile.

"Good afternoon, Corporal. I am Major General Ingrid Dows, United States Air Force, and I would like to speak to the commander of this airfield."

The young French woman seemed lost for a second, while the five other NCOs and the two officers in the room snapped their heads towards Ingrid. The corporal finally got over her surprise and smiled back while eyeing the fighter pilot wings over the left breast pocket of Ingrid's combat shirt and her rank insignias on her shirt collar.

"I will see if Commandant Lorient is in his office, General. Would you like to sit in the meantime?"

"No, thank you, Corporal: I just rode in a jeep all day."

The corporal nodded in understanding, then hurried around the counter and left through the door. Ingrid used the minute or so that it took for the corporal to come back to examine the aircraft status blackboard sitting on an easel in a corner. The unit occupying the airfield seemed to be a transport squadron flying a mixed lot of rather old planes. Ingrid couldn't help smile when she saw that the French in Nha Trang used German-made, ex-Luftwaffe Junkers 52 transport planes and Fieseler STORCH light liaison planes, respectively designated by the French as TOUCAN and CRIQUET. The status board also showed what looked like a temporary detachment of four F8F BEARCAT propeller-driven fighters. All four BEARCATs were marked as gone on a mission. The female corporal then came back and came to attention besides her.

"Commandant Lorient will see you now, General. Please follow me."

Ingrid did so and walked behind the corporal along the hallway, soon stopping with her in front of a door. The corporal knocked and opened the door after getting a curt answer, sticking her head inside.

"Commandant, Major General Dows is here."

"Let her in, Madeleine." Said a man's voice from the inside. The corporal opened wide the door and stepped aside, letting Ingrid walk in. A short, slightly pudgy man in his late thirties saluted her from behind his desk, then walked around it to shake her hand.

"Commandant Alfred Lorient, Commander of Nha Trang Airfield. To what may I owe the pleasure of your visit, General?"

Ingrid shook his hand, then gave Lorient her safe-conduct.

"I am part of a small American military assistance and advisory team that arrived in Saigon this Tuesday. My particular job is to review the operations and procedures of your air force in Indochina and see how the United States could be of help to France here. I am presently touring your airfields in the country in order to survey them and assess their capacities to support aircraft. I will need to take pictures extensively and

will also need a map of this airfield. Here is my safe-conduct, signed by General Girardon in Saigon.”

Loriot read quickly the document, then gave it back to her with a smile.

“You are welcome to do as you wish in Nha Trang, General Dows. Your tour may take quite a few days of hard, dangerous traveling. What kind of vehicle do you have?”

“Your Grand Headquarters loaned to me the services of a jeep and of an army driver. We have already surveyed the airfields in Bien Hoa and Da Lat since leaving Saigon early this morning.”

“Good! I hope that you will be spending the night here, General: traveling at night is dangerous, what with those pesky Vietminh.”

“That was my plan, Commandant Loriot. Could I abuse your hospitality and ask for meals and accommodations for me and my sergeant until I depart early tomorrow morning for Da Nang?”

“But with pleasure, General!” Replied Loriot, truly happy to host such a beautiful young woman. “Just let me call my adjutant.”

Going to his telephone on his desk, Loriot picked up the receiver and composed a number, then waited for an answer before speaking on the line.

“Guillemin? This is Loriot. I need you in my office right now...Thank you.”

Less than a minute later, a tall and thin air force captain showed up at the door of Loriot’s office, knocking on it. Loriot signaled him to walk in.

“Come in, Guillemin! General Dows, this is Captain Guillemin, my adjutant. He will make sure that all your needs are satisfied during your stay on this airfield. Captain, this is Major General Dows, of the United States Air Force. She and other American officers are in Indochina in order to see how they could help us in this war. She and her driver will need accommodations overnight and will eat at our kitchen. Also, General Dows will have to take pictures of the airfield. Please see to her needs with diligence.”

Guillemin saluted Ingrid and showed her the door.

“If you will follow me, General, I will lead you to your quarters.”

Ingrid nodded and, before leaving, smiled to Loriot.

“Thank you very much for your courteous assistance, Commandant. I will see you at supper, after I survey this airfield.”

“I will reserve a place for you at my table, General.”

Loriot watched Guillemin leave with Ingrid and, waiting a minute or so, walked out of his office, going to the air operations office. Once there, he signaled his operations officer, who also doubled as his intelligence officer, to approach the service counter. Lieutenant Pierre Massena did so while still holding an old aviation magazine he had been looking at with the other personnel of the air operations office.

“Yes, sir?”

“Lieutenant, the name and face of that American major general felt somewhat familiar to me. I know that you read a lot of American aviation magazines. Could you look through them to see if you can find something on that Ingrid Dows?”

Massena grinned at his request and showed him the cover of the magazine he was holding. Loriot then saw that the front cover featured a large picture of Ingrid, standing beside a P-38 fighter aircraft and dressed in flying gear.

“I already did, sir. Our guest is the top American fighter ace, with a total of 128 confirmed victories in World War Two and the Korean War.”

Loriot nearly ripped the magazine out of Massena’s hands and read quickly the article on Ingrid, written after the evacuation of the American forces from Korea.

“Hell! I wish that we could have prepared for her visit. Supper will be very interesting indeed this evening.”

16:05 (Indochina Time)

Nha Trang Airfield

Ingrid was nearly finished taking a series of pictures of the airfield with her Air Force-issued camera when the sirens of an ambulance and a fire truck made her snap her head around. The two emergency vehicles raced by her, heading towards one end of the airfield’s taxiway, made like the main runway of PSP metal plates. Quickly putting back in place the cover of her camera’s lens, Ingrid ran to her jeep, parked nearby with Kellerman sitting behind the wheel. As she was about to sit inside the jeep, she heard the noise of piston-engine aircraft approaching. Looking up and towards the Northwest, from where the noise came, she saw a flight of four F8F BEARCAT fighter aircraft. All four appeared intact from a distance but Ingrid knew from long air combat experience that this could be deceiving. Sitting down on the passenger seat, she looked at Kellerman.

“Get ready to follow the fire truck, Sergeant.”

“Yes, General!” Replied the ex-Waffen SS. Both then watched on as the first BEARCAT lined up on the runway to land. While its flaps and landing gear were down properly, its pilot seemed to have trouble keeping a straight glide path. Ingrid then understood what could be the problem.

“I think that the pilot is wounded. He is piloting as if he is about to pass out, probably from loss of blood.”

The pilot of the BEARCAT made his aircraft touch down after floating above the runway for a few seconds and bounced twice, veering left and right in the process and nearly leaving the runway. The French pilot still managed to land without damaging his aircraft, veering abruptly off the runway as soon as he had slowed down, in order to leave the landing strip free for the use of his three comrades. He then shut down his engine while he was still rolling at maybe ten kilometers per hour. Ingrid saw his head sag down soon afterwards and stay immobile. The ambulance was the first to get to the now immobile aircraft, with Kellerman's jeep close behind and the fire truck following a few seconds behind. Ingrid, who was very nimble and agile and also was accustomed to climb on all kinds of aircraft, was the first to climb on the left wing of the BEARCAT and get to the cockpit. Using the external emergency latch, she slid open the bubble canopy as a medic joined her on the left wing. Ingrid stepped aside and let the man examine quickly the unconscious pilot, still strapped in his seat. She used that time to examine the aircraft itself. Three slugs had punctured the left wing from under, apparently without causing any serious damage there except to the aluminum skin. One slug had however kept going and had punctured the side of the cockpit. The medic then shouted to his partner, who was climbing on the wing.

“He was hit in the left leg and has lost a lot of blood! Help me take him out!”

The two medics soon had the pilot out of his seat and laid down on a stretcher that was then hauled cautiously down from the wing and carried into the waiting ambulance. By then, the three other aircraft had landed and had taxied to their maintenance apron. As the ambulance raced away, Ingrid examined carefully the damage done by the anti-aircraft fire. The holes were small, probably caused by 7.62 mm bullets from a medium machine gun. The damage inside the cockpit was insignificant, with only the cockpit wall and lower side of the pilot's seat being punctured. Examining the upper surface of the left wing, then jumping down to examine the lower surface, she found no evidence of oil or hydraulic fluid leak. The self-sealing fuel cell inside the left wing had worked properly,

with no fuel leaking as well. Michel Kellerman looked at her with surprise and confusion when he saw Ingrid climb into the cockpit and sit in it.

“What are you doing, General?”

“Roll it to its proper spot, Sergeant. Clear the propeller and join me on the apron with the jeep.”

Not bothering to strap herself in, Ingrid quickly started the engine again, then gradually increased the power until she was rolling towards the other three BEARCATs. She made the aircraft pivot around expertly once on the apron and stopped it in line with the other three fighters, then shut down the engine and switched off the power. Commandant Lorient was there to greet her when she jumped down on the ground.

“Thank you for clearing the taxiway, General. You seem fairly familiar with this type of aircraft. I thought that you flew jets.”

“I do.” Replied with a smile Ingrid. “However, I flew P-38s in the Pacific and in Korea and, as a test pilot, certified on 27 various types of aircraft, including a BEARCAT equipped with an experimental reconnaissance pod. How is your pilot?”

Lorient’s face reflected worry then.

“One bullet lodged in his left leg and may have shattered the bone. He will live but he will not be flying for at least a few weeks now. That is too bad, as the outpost of Muang Phin, in Laos, is screaming for air support. The three other BEARCATs are being refueled and rearmed now in order to do one more mission before darkness falls.”

“Then, have this aircraft rearmed and refueled as well, Commandant.” Replied Ingrid in a firm voice. “I believe it to be airworthy, even if it is a bit punctured.”

“But, who will fly it? You?”

“Why not, Commandant Lorient? I am here in Indochina to assist and advise your air force and I intend to do just that. It will also give me a chance to observe the tactics and procedures used by your pilots. The moment the Vietminh will shoot at me, it will give me the right to shoot back.”

Lorient debated the question mentally for a few seconds, obviously undecided. He finally gave Ingrid a grudging nod.

“Alright, General. I will let you fly on the next mission. I may get some heavy flak for that but the men of our outpost are in serious danger of being overrun and we are by far the nearest air support element available to them.”

Lorient then turned around and shouted at the mechanics servicing the other three fighter aircraft.

“REFUEL AND REARM THAT AIRCRAFT AS WELL. DON'T DO ANYTHING MORE THAN PUT TEMPORARY PATCHES OVER THE HOLES.”

Loriot looked back at Ingrid as mechanics ran to the BEARCAT.

“I will lead you to our quartermaster, where we will get you some flying gear.”

“No need for that, Commandant.” Replied Ingrid, grinning. “I have my own flying gear with me in the kit bag stored in my room. Let me get it and I will then report to the air ops room to be briefed on the mission.”

Loriot scratched his head as Ingrid ran to her jeep and was then driven away at top speed towards the pilots' quarters by Sergeant Kellerman.

“How the hell am I going to explain this to Saigon?”

Sixteen minutes later, Ingrid entered the air operations office, wearing full flying gear and with her personal flying helmet under one arm. The three French BEARCAT pilots, along with Lieutenant Massena and Commandant Loriot, were there and waiting for her around a map table.

“So, what is the tactical situation at your outpost?” Asked Ingrid to Loriot.

“I will let Lieutenant Massena, my operations officer, describe that, General. Lieutenant?”

Massena nodded, then used a pointer to show to Ingrid a small spot on a large map of Indochina laid on the table. Ingrid, taking out a notepad and a pen, wrote short notes quickly as Massena spoke.

“Our outpost at Muang Phin, in Laos, is occupied by a battalion of Legionnaires supported by about 200 Laotian militiamen, or should I say was supported, as most of the militiamen have fled by now. Muang Phin is an important outpost, as it sits on a crossroad and controls the road between Quang Tri, on the coast of Vietnam, and Savannakhet, on the Laos-Thailand border. If the Vietminh can take Muang Phin, they will have a much improved freedom of movement inside Southern Laos and will cut off many other outposts, forcing them to use long detours to get supplies. The commander in Muang Phin evaluates the Vietminh force attacking him at over 5,000 men, nine times his own force. The enemy is equipped with light mortars, recoilless guns and medium machine guns, plus the usual panoply of rifles, submachine guns and grenades. Our first air strike from our local fighter-bomber detachment has cooled down a bit the enemy's ardor but Muang Phin is now reporting by radio that the enemy is apparently massing for another attack.”

“Any anti-aircraft heavy machine guns around Muang Phin?” Asked Ingrid, prompting one of the three French pilots to answer her.

“We saw only tracers from medium machine guns come up, General. Mind you, the Vietminh may bring in some heavier weapons any time by now. There are a number of low hills around the outposts that would be suitable for anti-aircraft pieces, so we will have to be careful while flying over Muang Phin. The outpost itself sits maybe 200 meters off the main crossroad, to the east of it, and consists of a series of huts and sandbag bunkers surrounded by a wire perimeter. There is maybe a hundred meters of open grounds around the outpost, with thick jungle surrounding it. When we flew over it, most of the huts were already burning.”

Massena then handed a folded map to Ingrid.

“This is the tactical flying map of Captain Larose, who came back wounded. It is yours now, General. The compass heading is 325, with return heading being 145. Winds are moderate from the Northwest and flying distance to Muang Phin is 582 kilometers. Cloud cover is now sitting at 1,200 meters and is fairly sparse. The flight’s call sign is Gladiator, while Muang Phin’s call sign is Green Urchin. The outpost can be contacted on 81.6 megahertz, while our local frequency here is 64.9 megahertz.”

“What will be my call sign?” Asked Ingrid, drawing hesitant looks from the French.

“Uh, since you are not officially part of our Air Force and are acting as advisor and observer, I was planning to make you act as wingman to Sous-Lieutenant Marcel Teulier.” Said Lorient, a bit embarrassed. “You would thus be Gladiator Four. I hope that you won’t mind, General.”

Ingrid smiled, amused at the notion of being under the orders of a junior officer seven rank levels below hers. Lorient was however right about the political angle of this problem.

“Gladiator Four it will be. What armament is being loaded on our planes?”

Her question drew more hesitant looks from the French, with Lieutenant Massena answering her after a short pause.

“We were debating that when you came in, General. We have here 500 pound general purpose bombs, five inch rockets and napalm drop tanks. What would you advise for this mission?”

“Go with napalm. Bombs will be wasted in the jungle and rockets are more suitable for hard targets. Napalm on the other hand will neutralize a wider area and will

also burn away the foliage, taking away some cover from the Vietminh. Releasing it from low altitude and high speed will really spread its coverage as well.”

Loriot nodded and looked at Massena.

“Then we will have napalm tanks loaded on the BEARCATs.”

“Yes, sir.” Replied Massena, then turning towards the female corporal at the service counter. “Julie, call the flight line and tell them to load two napalm drop tanks on each BEARCAT.”

“Right away, sir!”

As the corporal was placing her call, Ingrid presented her right hand to the nearest French pilot.

“I am pleased to be able to fly with you guys. While in the air, call me ‘Lady Hawk’.”

“And I’m Lieutenant Jacques Francoeur.” Replied the Frenchman, who was about the same age as her, while shaking her hand. “My wingmen are Lieutenant Robert Saulniers and Sous-Lieutenant Marcel Teulier. It will be an honor to fly with such a distinguished pilot as you, General.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant. How about going to our planes now?”

“It is effectively time to go, General: Muang Phin must be anxious for more air support.”

Ingrid looked at Loriot at that point.

“What about other air elements? Is anything else available at this time?”

Loriot shook his head, grim.

“Our squadrons in the North are presently busy around Lang Son, near the Chinese border, which is also under attack. We also are suffering from a lack of pilots, many of which are down with malaria and other tropical diseases. To be frank, even one pilot of your caliber will be of great help to us right now, General.”

“Well, like I said before, I am here to assist and advise.” Replied Ingrid, smiling. “It will be quite ironic to fly for you though, after serving in France with the Luftwaffe in 1940 and 1941.”

“You were a ‘Boche¹¹’, General?” Exclaimed Jacques Francoeur, stunned, making Ingrid grin with malice.

¹¹ Boche: French expression during World War One and Two to designate German soldiers.

“Aber, naturlisch, Herr Leutnant! I was then a very young auxiliary frolicking around such aces as Adolph Galland and Walter Oesau. I will be more than happy to pass on their teachings to you and your comrades.”

Francoeur shook his head in disbelief but didn't say more, grabbing his own flying helmet and leading Ingrid and the two other pilots out of the office and outside the air operations building. The four of them piled in the waiting jeep of Sergeant Kellerman, which then drove off towards the parked BEARCATs.

The French ground crews were still loading napalm tanks on the planes when they jumped out of the jeep near the first aircraft. Ingrid then put on her futuristic helmet, which featured a gold-tinted reflective visor, attracting an envious look from Francoeur.

“Damn, I wish that our Air Force had helmets like yours, General.”

“My helmet is not the standard US Air Force issue, Lieutenant: it was a gift from an admirer of mine.”

“Was your watch also a gift from an admirer?”

Ingrid simply nodded but didn't say more: her watch had been given to her by Ken Dows 'B', who had shopped for it in the United States of 2014. It was made of titanium alloy, had a quartz movement powered by a battery connected to mini solar panels incorporated to the wrist strap, and had multiple dials and moving crowns actually designed for use by combat pilots. Apart from her watch and of her FPH 500 fighter aircraft helmet, her other flying equipment from the future included a PSP V79 ballistic air survival vest, which, apart from having a floatation collar and multiple equipment pockets, had ballistic panel inserts proof against 7.62 mm bullets. Her flying suit, while cut to the same design as the standard USAF suit in service in 1952, was made of advanced, fire-resistant and waterproof fibers. Even her boots were made of advanced Gore-Tex materiel. As for her Glock 21, .45 caliber pistol, now holstered in a shoulder holster strapped over her PSP V79 vest, it was fitted with a Bushnell HOLOSight holographic sighting system. For this time period, she was truly flying in high fashion and contrasted sharply with the French pilots, who wore well-worn flying coveralls and simple floatation vests, plus hard helmets with separate goggles. The French mechanics around her also stared for a moment at that most unusual sight, then resumed their work. Ignoring the stares, Ingrid made a quick ground inspection of her aircraft, then climbed onto the left wing and sat in the cockpit to review the instruments

panel and various controls. She had seven hours on that type of aircraft but wanted to make sure that she would know instantly where everything was while in combat.

Ten minutes later, the chief mechanic signaled that the planes were all loaded and ready and made his ground crews stand safely away from the four fighters before giving a thumbs up signal. With Lieutenant Francoeur in the lead, the four BEARCATs rolled single file along the taxiway and went to one end of the main runway. Ingrid felt her usual joy at flying off on a mission as she pushed her engine throttle forward and followed Sous-Lieutenant Teulier along the runway. The BEARCAT, while not as performing as the jet fighters she was now accustomed to fly, was still a powerful and nimble fighter with good accelerations and rate of climb. It was actually a pleasure to fly, making Ingrid feel truly alive with the power of its 2,100 horsepower Pratt & Whitney R-2800-34W Double Wasp radial engine as she flew off towards the Northwest with the three French pilots. Keeping formation with them didn't take much of her attention, especially since the enemy had no Air Force to worry about, so she used the hour of flight it took them to get to Muang Phin to study her map and the ground below, trying as much as possible to learn the local topography as seen from the air. Since they were flying at a thousand meters of altitude, below the cloud cover, she was able to have a good look at the jungle-covered hills and mountains of Vietnam, interspaced with numerous rivers. A bit more than halfway, as they were starting to fly over Laos, a radio call came from the outpost of Muang Phin.

"Gladiator, this is Green Urchin, over!"

"Green Urchin, this is Gladiator. Send, over!" Replied Lieutenant Francoeur.

"Gladiator, we are again under heavy attack. What is your estimated time of arrival, over?"

"We will be over you in about 24 minutes, Green Urchin. What is your situation?"

"We are receiving accurate heavy mortar fire right now, Gladiator. The enemy must have brought in some heavy weapons in the last hour. We can also see enemy soldiers approaching through the surrounding jungle, over."

"Green Urchin, can you give me the approximate location of those mortars, over?"

"Our best estimate is that they are firing from the ridge of the hill 1,500 meters to the Northeast of us, Gladiator. Their fire has taken out one of our north side bunkers and the enemy is now trying to infiltrate from that direction. You better hurry, Gladiator."

“Roger, Green Urchin. All Gladiator call signs, push your throttles to maximum now!”

Ingrid, like the other two pilots, didn't reply and did as ordered. Now flying at 670 kilometers per hour, the four BEARCATs came in sight of Muang Phin less than twenty minutes later. Explosions were visible in and around the embattled outpost, with smoke also rising from burning buildings. Ingrid's phenomenal eyesight then caught small, intermittent muzzle flashes coming from the top of a hill to the Northeast of the outpost.

“Gladiator One, this is Gladiator Four: I see the muzzle flashes from the enemy mortars. They are on top of the hill at our one O'clock, six kilometers from us, over.”

“I can't see anything there, Gladiator Four. Are you sure of your sighting?”

“Affirmative, Gladiator One!” Said patiently Ingrid. Many people had doubted the power of her eyesight in the past, only to be proven wrong again and again. In fact, her nickname of 'Lady Hawk' had come as much from her keen eyes as from her unnerving accuracy. Muang Phin then came back on the radio.

“Gladiator, who just spoke on the radio, over?”

“That was Gladiator Four, one of my wingmen.” Explained Francoeur. “I will explain later, Green Urchin. We will now attack the enemy mortars to your northeast, out to you. Gladiator call signs, follow me in echelon pairs for a napalm strike on that hill.”

Francoeur then entered a gentle dive and pointed his aircraft at the enemy-held hill while reducing speed, with Saulniers staying behind and to the right of him. Ingrid did the same with Teulier while taking the safeties off her tanks release and cannon trigger. Multiple streams of tracers suddenly came up at them as they were about to fly over a small hill to the South of the one they were targeting. Ingrid swore to herself, realizing at once that the Vietminh had been clever enough to hide heavy machine guns on that hill in order to create an anti-aircraft ambush. She started zigzagging at once to avoid the dense fire but the French pilots were much slower than her to react. With most of the enemy machine guns having concentrated on his aircraft, which was in the lead, Lieutenant Francoeur was hit nearly at once. A burning 12.7 mm tracer bullet then penetrated one of his napalm tanks, making it burst into flames. The fire in turn caught in his left wing fuel tank and his aircraft was soon turned into a flying torch. Francoeur never had the time to jump out before the left wing broke away, sending the BEARCAT in a spinning, terminal dive. The last Ingrid and the others heard from him was an

ultimate scream of terror and pain on the radio as the flames enveloped his cockpit. His plane then crashed in a big fireball.

“Sweet Jesus!” Exclaimed his wingman, Lieutenant Saulniers. He and Teulier then broke off their attack, forcing a fuming Ingrid into following them.

“Gladiator Two, get a grip on yourself! We still have a job to do! Take Gladiator Three with you and get those mortars! I will take care of those heavy machine guns.” Not waiting for an answer, Ingrid then pulled up in a zoom climb, going through a cloud before throttling down her engine and looping around into a vertical dive. She next opened her dive airbrakes, slowing down her dive as she went again through the clouds. Once out of the clouds, she altered her dive to point her nose at the hill where the heavy machine guns were. Still pointing down at an angle of eighty degrees, Ingrid sighted her four 20 mm cannons on the visible muzzle flashes from a group of three machine guns and pressed her trigger, squeezing a succession of short bursts with deadly accuracy. Stopping her cannon fire at the altitude of 1,200 meters, she aimed for a couple of seconds and then released her two napalm tanks. She started pulling out of her dive at once, retracting her dive brakes and opening her engine throttle at the same time. Recovering into level flight at an altitude of less than 150 meters and now being 800 meters to the South from the hill she had targeted, she looked behind her and was pleased to see that the two fireballs from her impacting napalm tanks now covered the southern half of the hill top, precisely where the machine guns had been. Turning sharply towards the hill housing the enemy mortars, she searched visually for Saulniers and Teulier and found them as they were approaching that hill from the East. The French pilots were being targeted by more heavy machine guns collocated with the enemy mortars but stayed the course this time despite the enemy fire. They released their napalm tanks and then turned sharply to the North to loop around and come back for a cannon pass. While Saulniers’ tanks hit the eastern slope near the top of the hill, spraying the ridge with burning napalm, Teulier’s tanks missed the hill clean, flying just over the ridge and impacting in the jungle at the foot of the hill. Ingrid was swearing quietly at that when the outpost’s air controller came back on the radio, his voice urgent.

“Gladiator, this is Green Urchin, we need help now on our North flank: the Vietminh are assaulting in mass waves from that side.”

“Gladiator Four on the way!” Shouted immediately Ingrid in her mask microphone. “Gladiator Two and Three, finish off those mortars, then join me over Green Urchin.”

Turning hard to the left to line up on the outpost, Ingrid refined her heading in order to fly close by the north side of the defensive perimeter, then dropped down to just above the top of the trees and accelerated to 600 kilometers per hour. Only a very experienced pilot with lightning reflexes could attempt what she was going to do, but she was such a pilot. With adrenaline flowing through her veins and her full attention concentrated on her flying and aiming, Ingrid came in on the opening where the outpost was while flying barely three meters above the tallest trees. The moment she cleared the last trees she dropped further down, with the lower tip of her propeller only a couple meters from the ground. Now flying level and barely higher than the heads of the hundreds of Vietminh soldiers rushing the northern side of the outpost's perimeter, she opened fire with her four 20 mm cannons. The shells, grazing the ground and then ricocheting off the dirt like flat stones on the surface of a pond or lake, tore through successive human bodies, creating instant mass butchery among the packed assault wave. The Vietminh colonel leading the assault, frozen with terror at the sight of the fighter aircraft barreling down straight at him, was beheaded by Ingrid's propeller blades. Some of his blood and brain matter splattered the face of a warrant officer of the French Foreign Legion manning a machine gun with three other French soldiers a mere twenty meters away. The shocked warrant officer also ducked instinctively as the BEARCAT zoomed by his gun crew. Sticking his head back over the edge of their trench, he stared with wide eyes at the fighter aircraft, which was now climbing and turning for a second pass.

"JESUS! THAT PILOT IS A MADMAN!"

"YEAH, BUT THE VIETS ARE SHITTING IN THEIR PANTS NOW!" Replied with a big grin the master-corporal firing the machine gun. "THEIR ASSAULT WAVE IS FROZEN IN PLACE!"

"THEN, CUT THEM DOWN WHERE THEY STAND!" Ordered the warrant officer. The jubilant French gunner obeyed with gusto, sweeping his machine gun from left to right and back and emptying his 150-round belt in one long burst. His loader was inserting a fresh belt when two more BEARCATs strafed the Vietminh. While flying a rather more orthodox attack pattern than the first BEARCAT, their cannon fire added to the already heavy losses of the Vietminh and made the survivors hesitate and waver, with some turning around and fleeing at a run. The wavering then turned into a mass retreat when the first BEARCAT repeated its ground-hugging strafing run, this time

zooming by from left to right. The French defenders of Muang Phin, their despair turning into triumph, then methodically shot down as many of the fleeing Vietminh as they could with slow, aimed rifle fire before their enemy could disappear back into the jungle. Less than a hundred of the original 900 attackers made it back to cover.

While the French defenders were cheering their victory, the Vietminh general commanding the division attacking Muang Phin stared with intense hatred from his hilltop command post at the three French aircraft now regrouping to fly back to their base. Because of them, and particularly of the flying devil that had performed the ground-hugging attacks, his best regiment was as good as wiped out. It would now take precious hours to organize a new attack. Thankfully, the French could not attack accurately from the air at night, something that would give him a chance to take the French position before the next morning. Turning around to look at his signalers, he started assessing the extent of his losses from this attack. His anger turned into cold rage when he was told that his eight 120 mm mortars and ten of his heavy machine guns, hauled with great effort along jungle trails by an army of bicycle riders, had been destroyed.

“IF ANY OF THESE FRENCH PILOTS FALL INTO MY HANDS, I WILL MAKE HIM HOPE FOR DEATH!” Vowed the general.

The Sun had set a full hour earlier when the three surviving BEARCATs landed back in Nha Trang, helped and guided by fires lit along the main runway. Once stopped on their parking apron and their engines cut off, a small army of mechanics ran to them to inspect, rearm and refuel them. Commandant Loriot, along with his adjutant, Captain Guillemin, was also on hand to greet the pilots as they jumped down from their aircraft. Recognizing Ingrid in the dark was easy with her colorful helmet, so he went to her first, saluting her and then shaking her hand.

“General, you did an incredible job over Muang Phin, you and our pilots.” Ingrid nodded slowly.

“Yes, but we lost a good man there. I am also afraid that your outpost is not out of trouble yet. I fully expect the Vietminh to try to take it in a night attack, probably around two O’clock in the morning, when they will feel safer from our air attacks. I would like to leave again for Muang Phin at midnight, after eating something and relaxing a bit, in order to fly protective air cover over it.”

“You are probably right about a night attack, General. Unfortunately, it will take at least a day for a relief column to get to Muang Phin. Also, those BEARCATs have little in terms of night flying equipment. Finding Muang Phin in the dark will be hard enough, but seeing and striking the enemy will be even harder.”

Ingrid sighed. While Lorient was technically right, his attitude reflected what seemed to be a generalized trend of fatalism and reluctance to show innovation among the French forces in Indochina.

“Does your garrison in Muang Phin have parachute flares or illuminating mortar bombs, Commandant Lorient?” She asked with a patient voice. Lorient nodded after a moment of reflection.

“They should have, as they are standard items in our units.”

“Then I would ask you to confirm with Muang Phin if they have some. If yes, then ask them to save them as much as possible for the time when we will need to give them air support. In the meantime, you will find me at the mess hall.”

Before leaving the apron with the two other pilots, who by now seemed to have fallen naturally under her leadership, Ingrid went to see the chief mechanic.

“Don’t worry about simple skin holes in the aircraft, Master Warrant, but make sure that there are no oil, fuel or hydraulic fluid leaks. Also, put fresh films in our gun cameras and label carefully the used ones before giving them to Lieutenant Massena. We will fly out again at midnight, with napalm drop tanks and centerline fuel tanks.”

“Don’t worry, General.” Assured the old NCO. “The planes will be ready in time.”

“Oh, one more thing: you can write off those fuel tanks in advance. I never do attack runs with external tanks full of explosive fumes.”

“But, General,” objected the chief mechanic, “that goes against the standing orders from the Air Force Chief of logistics in Saigon! Besides, we have only eight spare drop tanks in storage in the airfield.”

“Master Warrant, how many spare F8F BEARCAT fighter aircraft do you have here?” Replied Ingrid, getting tired of this administrative nonsense. “Believe me: replacing drop tanks should be a lot easier and less costly than replacing aircraft and pilots.”

On those last words, Ingrid turned around and started walking towards the airfield’s mess hall, followed by Saulniers and Teulier.

When the trio arrived at the mess hall, it was to find that the cooks had stopped serving supper and were in the process of storing away the leftovers in their cold room. Getting really pissed by now with the French way of doing things, Ingrid pulled out her pistol and, holding it by the muzzle, banged three times on the top of the service counter to attract the attention of the head cook, an obese warrant officer.

“Excuse me, Warrant, but weren’t you told that four pilots had gone to fly a combat mission?”

“Uh, no, miss.” Replied the head cook, who obviously knew nothing about American rank insignias. However, Ingrid could excuse him for that and spoke up in a neutral voice.

“Well, we just came back from a combat mission and I am starving. Could you please have something heated up for me and my two pilots?”

“Uh, you said that you were four on a mission.” Said the cook, who was seemingly slow on the uptake. “Is your other pilot coming to eat soon?”

“Lieutenant Francoeur is not coming back...ever!” Replied Ingrid, her voice suddenly very frosty. That was when the head cook finally understood and blushed with embarrassment.

“I’m sorry, miss. Please have a seat and I will have you served in fifteen minutes.”

“Thank you!” Replied curtly Ingrid before heading towards one of the tables in the corner reserved for officers. Five French transport pilots were sitting in that corner at the time, drinking wine quietly and smoking cigarettes. Disliking tobacco smoke, Ingrid chose the farthest table from them in order not to be bothered by the strong smell of French cigarettes while eating. The transport pilots probably took that as a sign of dislike towards them and shot sour looks at Ingrid and her two pilots. Ingrid didn’t react to that, wanting only to relax a bit before going on a difficult night mission. She thus took off her helmet and put it on the seat next to her, then took off her heavy ballistic air survival vest, draping it over the back rest of her chair. With her blood adrenaline level falling off abruptly, she was now starting to feel how tired she was. Rubbing her eyes, she then gave a cautious look at the young Marcel Teulier, who appeared still shaken by the death of Francoeur.

“Is this the first time that you lose a comrade during a mission, Lieutenant?” Teulier nodded somberly, his eyes not really looking at anything in particular. Ingrid left it at that: she knew from experience that such things needed time to go over them.

To the head cook's credit, he made up for his earlier slow wits by having full plates of hot food served less than twelve minutes later by a Vietnamese steward. Ingrid thanked him but also told him politely in Vietnamese that she didn't want the bottle of wine he was offering her, drawing surprised looks from the steward and the French pilots around her for her linguistic abilities.

"You speak Vietnamese, General?" Asked Robert Saulniers just before biting in his first piece of steak. Ingrid took the time to have her first bite as well before answering him, as she was truly famished.

"I do, along with Mandarin Chinese, Japanese and Tagalog, a dialect spoken in the Philippines, where I was stationed before."

"Wow! I wish that I could do that." Said Teulier with an admiring tone.

"You probably could, if you took the time and effort to learn, Lieutenant. With work and perseverance, one could do about anything."

One of the transport pilots, a commandant, sneered at that and spoke up in apparent disdain.

"Why bother learning Vietnamese? Let the Vietnamese learn French instead."

The other four transport pilots then toasted to that. The Vietnamese steward, who was still nearby, saw with some surprise real anger flash on the face of Ingrid. He himself was incensed by the arrogance of those French officers but had hidden his displeasure. To see a foreign officer, even if it was a woman, get angry over that was nearly unheard of. Ingrid's reaction then truly surprised him by its intensity. Shooting out of her chair and stomping to the table around which sat the transport pilots, she then slammed her fist on the table while glaring at the French who had just spoken.

"Listen, asshole! In case you haven't realized it already, you and your country are in the process of losing this war to those people you are so quick to sneer at! We Americans may yet have to save your bacon in Indochina, but we won't do it to simply help France keep its little piece of empire here. Today I had to kill hundreds of Vietminh soldiers in order to save a battalion of your troops, but that doesn't mean that I hated those Vietminh as persons, on the contrary. So, do everybody a favor and shut up!"

Ingrid then went back to her table, leaving the transport pilots stunned by her reaction. She tried to continue eating her supper but found that her anger had taken away her appetite. Putting down angrily her fork and knife, she then grabbed her helmet and

survival vest and walked out of the mess hall. The commandant who had angered her wrung his hand while making a face.

“Ouh la! What’s wrong with that yank?”

Both Saulniers and Teulier gave him a dark look but didn’t speak up, being two ranks lower than the commandant. They kept eating in silence instead and didn’t object when the Vietnamese steward came and took away Ingrid’s plate and utensils.

A light breeze was blowing outside, helping to calm a bit Ingrid’s rage as she stood outside the mess hall, kicking away the pebbles she found near her. A couple of minutes later, she heard someone approach her from behind. Suddenly on her guard and expecting one or more of the transport pilots to come taunt her, she pivoted around, her right hand near her holstered pistol. To her surprise, she found herself facing the Vietnamese steward, who was carrying her plate of food and her utensils, along with a glass of water and a napkin.

“Why did you bring my food to me?” She asked softly in Vietnamese, her right hand pulling away from her pistol. The steward’s voice was equally soft.

“Because you need to eat...and I would like to speak with you, General.”

The steward knew that he was taking a big risk by saying this: a French officer would have laughed at him and kicked him out of the airfield, or worse. This woman however felt very different from the French he was accustomed to serve and she proved it with her next words, spoken in a tired voice.

“Alright, let’s sit at that picnic table over there.”

The steward put down her plate, utensils and glass carefully in front of Ingrid before sitting opposite her at the table. Both eyed each other in the darkness, illuminated by a half moon, before the steward spoke in Vietnamese while keeping his voice low.

“You better eat before your food grows cold, General.”

Ingrid looked at her plate, then picked up her utensils and took a bite with little conviction.

“Why do you care about me, mister?”

“Because you seem to care about the Vietnamese people, General. My name is Minh.”

Ingrid nodded politely at that while eyeing cautiously the steward. She could bet that the man worked for the Vietminh.

“And my name is Ingrid, Ingrid Dows. Please call me simply Ingrid when in private, Minh.”

“Thank you, Ingrid. Your first name doesn’t sound very American.”

“I was born a German.”

“Ah! Many Germans seemed to be fighting for France in the last few years, and this after fighting a war with it. I find that most strange.”

“I am not fighting for France, Minh. Rather, I am trying to stop this war from growing even bigger, which would be disastrous for both my country and yours. Nothing would make me happier than to see an honorable peace be signed, followed by the withdrawal of France from Indochina and the establishment of a truly popular and democratic Vietnamese government. And don’t tell me that the Vietminh is popular and democratic, Minh: it is neither.”

“How do you explain the support it enjoys from so many Vietnamese then, Ingrid?”

“Vietnamese support it because, despite its faults, they still find it more bearable than being like slaves for the French and their colonial government.”

Ingrid then stared into the eyes of the steward, but there was only sadness in her own eyes.

“Minh, believe me when I say this, but I intimately know what it is like to be a Vietnamese. To see such a proud people be exploited and demeaned by racist morons like that commandant inside the mess hall truly angers me. To have to kill Vietnamese brings me no joy either but I am a soldier and this is war.”

“But this is not the United States’ war!” Replied Minh, raising a bit his voice and attracting a firm stare from Ingrid.

“Maybe not. Not yet anyway. Pray for Vietnam that it doesn’t become the United States’ war, as much as I pray as an American that it doesn’t.”

Taking a last bite, she then wiped her mouth with the napkin and got up before bowing in a very Vietnamese way to Minh.

“Thank you for bringing my food to me, Minh. I hope that we will be able to talk together again.”

Minh watched her take her fantastic-looking helmet and her aviator’s vest and then walk away towards her parked aircraft.

“What a strange woman.” He said softly after she was well out of ear shot. Whether his superior in the local Vietminh apparatus would think the same of Ingrid was

something he wasn't sure of. Looking at his watch, he saw that his work shift was nearly over. He would have to go see Nguyen right after work to brief him on what that American woman had told him: some of the things she had said could have a hugely significant strategic meaning for the Vietminh high leadership. One point where he definitely agreed with Ingrid was about the United States entering this war: it was something no one in the Vietminh would wish for.

01:41 (Indochina Time)

Friday, February 8, 1952 'C'

Area of Muang Phin, Laos

The Vietminh division commander swore quietly while looking up at the blinking navigational lights of the three French aircraft flying high in the night sky. The message from the French pilots was clear to all in and around Muang Phin, be they either Vietminh or French: they were there and ready to react to any attack on the outpost. Apart from being surprised at seeing French fighter aircraft being able to find their way so precisely in the dark, the general was fuming at the psychological coup the French pilots had just achieved. The darkness of the night had been for years one of the best allies of the Vietminh soldiers, protecting them from all air attacks save wide area strikes by the few heavy bombers the French had. Now, those three planes had just challenged that notion, basically daring him to launch a night attack and see what it would cost him. The general could feel the doubts and fears of the men around him as they also looked up skyward: the ferocity and lethality of yesterday's French air attack had seriously shaken them, necessitating a lot of cajoling, encouragement and even some threats from the political officers to motivate them again. Now, the French had just returned, barely twenty minutes before the planned start of the next, and hopefully last and victorious attack, as if the enemy pilots knew precisely his plans. The general's divisional political officer then joined him in the open trench on the ridgeline of the hill he was using to observe the French outpost.

"One could swear that the Devil himself is piloting those fighter aircraft." Remarked bitterly the political officer. "The men are starting to waiver again, Comrade General."

“We will still attack as planned in twenty minutes, Vinh. Canceling or delaying the attack just because of the arrival of these French planes would only spread fear and defeatism among our men.”

“But what do we do about those French planes then, Comrade General?” Asked cautiously the political officer, careful not to speak too loudly and let the soldiers around hear him. The divisional commander thought for a moment, then called his operations officer, using one of the field telephones placed in a small recess of the command trench.

“Comrade Lam, relocate immediately our remaining heavy machine guns to the edges of the jungle surrounding the enemy outpost. I want them to be ready to engage these three French fighter aircraft if they dive on our troops...Yes, they are to concentrate solely on the enemy planes.”

The general then put down the receiver and grabbed another field telephone receiver to call the commander of his assault troops.

“Colonel Huynh, I want you to change a bit your attack tactics. At the assigned hour, have your men creep forward as silently as they can to try to close in with the French positions before the French aircraft overhead can react and dive on you. Hold your mortar support fire until the French react to your advance. Hopefully, your troops will be among the French positions before these aircraft can realize what is going on. They will then be unable to attack without shooting up their own troops. Good luck, Colonel Huynh!”

The divisional commander then looked gravely at his political officer as he put down the telephone receiver.

“Well, things are now in the hands of our gunners and of our assault troops. The people’s will shall prevail!”

02:38 (Indochina Time)

French northern perimeter trenches

Outpost of Muang Phin

Corporal Jean Leboeuf’s head slowly bowed down, the legionnaire being overtaken by both nervous fatigue and lack of sleep. He however jerked back to consciousness at the last moment, too aware of the consequences if he allowed the Vietminh to sneak up to his trench. Trying to focus his tired eyes in the darkness, he

scanned once again the open field to his front, his MAS-49 semi-automatic rifle lying beside him on the parapet of his trench. He was breathing from his mouth while doing so, in order not to smell the awful stench from the hundreds of corpses lying in the fields where they had fallen. He suddenly stopped scanning, fixing instead on a point slightly to his right and maybe a hundred meters away: he could have sworn that he had seen a corpse move. That was actually a possibility, as the moans from many dying Vietminh had been heard constantly during the evening and night. Leboeuf then saw more slow movements from a number of other spots. Now frankly alarmed, he shook the soldier besides him, who was sleeping at the bottom of the trench, by the shoulder.

“Hey, Moreau, wake up! I think that the Viets are coming.”

That woke up in a hurry the young private, who got to his feet and grabbed his own MAS-49 while Leboeuf rang the command bunker of his company on the field telephone placed behind him on the trench’s parapet.

“Allo? This is Corporal Leboeuf, in the forward observation trench on the north perimeter. I see movement in the fields in front of me. I think that the Vietminh are trying to creep forward.”

“Stand your position, I am coming to see for myself.” Replied the voice of the company’s warrant officer. Warrant Vermillion effectively showed up less than three minutes later, jumping in the trench besides Leboeuf. Patting the corporal’s shoulder in encouragement, Vermillion, a veteran of the Second World War, used his binoculars to scan the open fields to their front. He soon swore quietly and grabbed the field telephone, ringing the company command bunker and speaking in an urgent voice.

“Lieutenant? This is Warrant Vermillion. The Vietminh are effectively trying to crawl up to our wire. You better put the whole position on alert and ready to fight. Can you have the mortars fire a couple of illuminating rounds?...Yes, we will be ready, sir.” Vermillion then jumped out of the trench and ran at a crouch, going to each individual trench and bunker along the northern side of the perimeter and alerting the soldiers of his company. He was still going around the position when he heard two of the garrison’s 60 mm light mortars fire once each. Sprinting to the nearest trench, he jumped in besides the two soldiers standing in it just before the mortar illuminating bombs lit up the sky, drifting under their parachutes. Vermillion was now able to see hundreds of Vietminh soldiers crawling in the open field towards the outpost, with the nearest ones less than fifty meters away from the wire perimeter. One silhouette then got up and screamed an order in Vietnamese. The man was nearly immediately shot down but

hundreds of Vietminh were now sprinting towards the wire while screaming wildly. Vermillion felt his blood freeze: he was probably looking at his death. His experience and reflexes then kicked in and he shouted at the top of his lungs.

“GIVE THEM HELL, MEN!”

He then sighted his MAT-49 submachine gun and started shooting short bursts at the incoming enemy soldiers.

The divisional commander watched anxiously the furious fight going on along the northern perimeter of the French outpost, unable because of the distance to figure out who was where exactly now. The only thing he knew for sure was that his men were now inside the wire perimeter. One of his junior staff officer then shouted in alarm.

“Comrade General, the French planes have shut off their navigational lights.”

“Then they must be about to dive on us. Warn our machine gunners to be ready for them.”

“Yes, sir!”

As the staff officer used a field radio to call the crews of the heavy machine guns, General Ngo nervously looked at the sky, trying to see where the French fighter aircraft were. With the parachute flares fired by the French garrison, the French pilots would be able to aim their weapons with fair accuracy. Ngo grudgingly acknowledged the soundness of the French tactics. The one factor that would help his troops now was their close proximity with the French soldiers.

Tracers and the sound of cannons firing came down from the sky less than a minute later, with the shells slamming through the Vietminh troops still running in the open. The heavy machine guns hiding in the jungle returned fire at once, trying to aim by using the lines of tracers to find the diving French aircraft. The French fighter was however still invisible in the night sky and the gunners missed it as it pulled out of its dive and zoomed over the Vietminh soldiers in the open. Ngo then had just the time to see two objects fall from the sky before two big fireballs exploded in the middle of the open field besides the French outpost, roasting alive maybe fifty Vietminh soldiers. A second fighter aircraft repeated that pattern ten seconds later but its napalm tanks missed the second wave of assaulting troops and crashed instead in the jungle, starting a temporary fire there. Two more parachute flares then lit up, replacing the two previous ones that were about to land. The third French aircraft fired its cannons shortly afterwards, cutting down more Vietminh soldiers. Heavy machine gun slugs chased it as it pulled up, its belly

illuminated by the parachute flares. Ngo could have sworn that the plane was hit but it didn't catch fire and flew away into the night sky. Its two napalm tanks were however dead on the mark, enveloping half of the second Vietminh assault wave with flaming liquid. Ngo swore loudly as his losses mounted steeply. The first assault wave, after breaking through the French wire, was seemingly encountering fierce, desperate resistance from the French soldiers in Muang Phin and was hesitating, with some of the Vietminh soldiers starting to retreat.

Ngo was on his field radio, shouting orders to his lead regiment commander to push on with the attack, when the French planes came back for their second attack run. This time, two of them attacked simultaneously, with one strafing the Vietminh troops near the outpost's wire perimeter while the other shot up the jungle area where the heavy machine guns were hiding. As the two aircraft flew away again, Ngo lost contact with his lead regiment commander, who stopped talking in mid-sentence. Embittered by this loss, Ngo was considering his diminishing options when the third fighter made its pass, coming in very low and hugging the ground. Ngo shouted his rage at it, as if his gunners could hear him.

"THAT'S THE FRENCH FLYING DEVIL! SHOOT IT DOWN!"

As if the surviving heavy machine gunners had heard him, they at once trained their weapons on the aircraft swooping past them, firing long bursts. While the cannon fire from the fighter aircraft wrecked havoc among the Vietminh troops of the first wave, the slugs from the Vietminh gunners unwillingly added to the carnage as they tried to hit the low flying aircraft. The French defenders, being mostly down in trenches or inside bunkers, were mostly unscathed by the crossfire but the Vietminh lead regiment suffered heavily, with men literally torn apart by either ricocheting 20 mm cannon shells or by 12.7 mm slugs. Ngo could only watch on, livid with rage, as his attack petered out. A shout from a nearby soldier did however give him one reason to be happy.

"THE FLYING DEVIL HAS BEEN HIT! IT'S ENGINE IS ON FIRE!"

Looking in the direction where the soldier was pointing, Ngo effectively saw a long tail of flames rising steeply in the sky. Mesmerized, he followed it with his eyes as it climbed vertically for a good 600 meters, then hesitated at the top of its ellipse and rolled on its belly before starting a terminal spinning dive. The French aircraft crashed a few seconds later in a ball of flames in the jungle near the hill used by Ngo, making him

smile with satisfaction: that would make one less very dangerous enemy to worry about. His satisfaction was however short-lived.

“THERE IS A PARACHUTE IN THE SKY!”

Ngo had a cruel smile when he saw that the parachute, a white shape in the night sky, was right above his hill: with luck, the pilot was going to fall right into his waiting hands.

“Captain Dinh, assemble a squad of soldiers and make sure that you capture that enemy pilot the moment he lands in the jungle. Take him alive as much as possible.”

“Yes sir!” Replied the junior officer, who then ran away to get his men.

Ngo paid only a passing attention at first to the parachutist, as he had to do something about his faltering attack on the French outpost. By now his decimated assault waves were in full retreat, pursued by merciless rifle and machine gun fire. French mortar fire added to the woes of his retreating men as they ran back across the open fields, still illuminated by mortar parachute flares. Ngo's own light mortars had to fire a smoke barrage in order to provide some cover to the retreating soldiers. Glancing upwards at that point, Ngo was stunned to see that the parachutist was now heading straight towards the French outpost at a godly speed, as if pushed by a very strong wind. The problem was that there was next to no wind to speak of right now. He then noticed the unusual shape of the parachute: it was rectangular instead of round.

“What is this sorcery?” He muttered to himself while staring at the parachute as it glided away and out of his grasp.

Ingrid's heart was beating furiously as she glided down towards the French outpost: she was hideously vulnerable to rifle fire right now and there was also still a lot of fighting going around inside the defensive perimeter. At least she was not going to end up like once in Korea, when she had landed outside of friendly positions and had to run under fire to the first American trenches. Using her steering lines, she altered somewhat her glide path in order to pass by the west side of the outpost, then veered again, this time directly towards the center of the French positions, where there was no visible fighting. A heavy slug then whizzed by, scaring her to no little degree and making her pull even more on her steering lines in order to gain more forward speed. That also made her drop faster, which was a good thing for her right now, as it meant that she would spend less time in the air, playing moving target. The ground suddenly appeared out of the darkness and she just had enough time to brace herself before landing hard

besides a sandbag bunker. The impact sent her face first in the dirt, leaving her dizzy for a few seconds. A pair of hands then grabbed her by the shoulder straps of her parachute and brutally forced her to her feet. Ingrid found herself facing a French soldier, who stared at her with unmitigated surprise.

“A girl? I don’t believe this. Strip her of her parachute and get her inside the bunker, quickly!”

“Wait, dammit! I can do it by myself. And tell your men to get their hands off me.”

“Oh, a feisty one at that!” Said the soldier, smiling in the dark. “Alright, let her go, guys.”

The moment that she was free, Ingrid unclipped quickly her parachute harness and shed it off, then followed the three soldiers down improvised stairs and inside the nearby bunker. That bunker actually turned out to be an underground command dugout, complete with a table, three chairs, a mobile map board and two large radio sets. A pair of kerosene lamps hooked to the wooden beams of the ceiling provided a fair illumination inside the small room. A French Army commandant was busy speaking in clipped phrases in a field telephone when Ingrid was escorted in, while two soldiers had headsets on and were manning the two radios. The officer finished his call before glancing quickly at Ingrid: he was obviously and understandably a very busy man right now. His hand, which was about to grab another field telephone, froze in midair as he stared in disbelief at Ingrid.

“No, this is impossible.”

“Yes, it is possible, Commandant.” Replied Ingrid in fluent French, her expression dead serious. “I am Major General Ingrid Dows, United States Air Force. I and other American officers are presently in Indochina in the capacity of military advisors. I was showing a few new tricks to your pilots when I was shot down.”

“You were the one cutting the grass with your propeller...General?”

“That was me, effectively. Since you must be very busy, I will go make myself useful outside.”

“Wait! No need for that, General: the Vietminh are in full retreat now. We only have some mopping up left to do.”

“Then, as I said, I will go make myself useful with my pistol. I hate being a dead weight.”

Her aplomb stunned so much the army officer that he didn't stop her or shouted at her as she turned around and left the dugout, pushing past the two soldiers and climbing the stairs. Once outside, she crouched behind a low sandbag wall in order to take a few seconds to restore her night vision, partially ruined by the light from the lamps in the dugout. While she was waiting for her eyes to get their night vision back, she took off her helmet, which was quite visible with its red, white and blue stripes. Next, she pulled out of a leg pocket a specially made kaki fabric cover with an elastic band around its base and fitted it over her helmet. She had learned from her experience in Korea, where she had to trek around in the night behind enemy lines with her helmet on. She should have thrown away her helmet then but she was too proud of it to ever get rid of it. The soldier who had faced her first on landing joined her, a submachine gun in his hands, as she was putting her helmet back on.

"General, Commandant Chartrand assigned me to escort you around. I'm Master Sergeant Claude Gifard."

Ingrid exchanged a handshake with him, then pulled out her Glock 21 pistol and switched on the holographic sight unit mounted on top of the slide.

"Well, Master-Sergeant Gifard, time to help clean the neighborhood. Since you know the place, you lead. I will cover your back."

"Are you sure that you want to do that kind of job, General? This is quite different from piloting an aircraft."

"Don't worry about me, Master Sergeant: this is my third war and also the second time I end up parachuting over a surrounded friendly position."

"Oh!" Said simply Gifard, not knowing what to reply to that. He then got up and ran at a crouch towards the north side perimeter lines, Ingrid close behind him.

There was still some firing around and inside the position as the pair moved cautiously in the dark. With her uncommon eyesight and the light from an half moon, Ingrid actually felt nearly at ease, apart from the tension of expecting to meet enemy soldiers at any time. She and Gifard were following a shallow communication trench zigzagging its way toward the north side of the perimeter when she saw a pair of heads pop up from inside the ruins of a burned down hut, less than fifteen meters away. She immediately grabbed Gifard's shoulder with her left hand, pushing him down.

"Get down!"

They both had barely the time to duck down in the trench before two submachine guns opened fire, kicking dirt around the parapet of their trench.

“PPSH burp guns!” Said Ingrid, still crouching down. “I heard that noise often enough around Korea. Give me a couple of seconds to change position.”

“What are you going to do, General?” Asked Gifard, alarmed. She smiled to him in the dark.

“Use my superior night vision, along with this pistol. Wait here!”

Gifard was tempted to grab her and remind her that she was just a pilot, and a girl at that, but she was after all a major general, while he was only a master sergeant. Ingrid had anyway moved away before he could react. He watched her disappear behind a bend in the trench, then heard a shot from a large caliber pistol. A burst from a PPSH followed two seconds later. Unable to stay still and do nothing, Gifard popped over the parapet and fired a burst of his own MAT-49 submachine gun towards the ruins. The top of a torso, with the head wearing the distinctive hat of the Vietminh, then popped back up to fire back at him. A single pistol shot then rang out and the Vietminh toppled over with its arms flailing around. Grabbing that opportunity, Gifard jumped out of the communication trench and ran to the ruins, firing short bursts as he went. He found two Vietminh lying inside the ruins, one very still and the other moaning with pain. Gifard finished the latter one with a short burst as Ingrid ran to join him. Gifard looked at her, then down at her pistol, as both crouched down to take cover behind the ruined walls of the hut.

“Hell, you are quite good with that thing, General.”

“I have been practicing shooting for ten years now.” She said with pride in her voice. “Shall we continue?”

“By all means, General!” Replied Gifard, grinning.

As they continued to advance cautiously towards the northern perimeter wire, they encountered plenty of evidence of how ferocious and bloody the fight had been. Apart from the hundreds of dead or dying Vietminh lying all over the place, nearly half of the French defenders in the forward positions were either dead or wounded. Some of the survivors were obviously in a state of shock and were wandering aimlessly around or were cowering at the bottom of their trench. Ingrid, both saddened and sickened by the extent of the carnage, could hardly find fault with those soldiers in view of what they had gone through. Gifard was not as forgiving, though, manhandling them roughly back to

their fighting positions and swearing at them, even slapping a couple of them to make them stop sobbing. Ingrid, looking away in embarrassment, saw small groups of French soldiers going around the position, shooting single shots from time to time or bending down to stab a moaning shape on the ground. She felt outrage when she understood what was going on.

“Master Sergeant Gifard, what the hell are these soldiers doing? Killing wounded Vietminh?”

Gifard looked at the nearest group, then gave Ingrid an indifferent look. When he spoke, it was as if he was discussing mundane matters in a restaurant.

“What else can we do with them, General? We have only one doctor and a nurse to take care of our own wounded and we are already short of medical supplies. It is either that or letting these men suffer needlessly. Please don’t think of us as monsters, General. We are simply doing what has to be done.”

“What about arranging a truce so that the Vietminh can pick up their wounded?”

“Tonight?” Replied Gifard in a skeptical tone. “They would only use that chance to enter our position and finish us off. Then you would see how merciful they are themselves, General.”

“In the morning, then. We could carry the wounded Vietminh just outside of the wire and let the enemy come two by two to carry them away. Such a truce would also give us a few hours of peace in which our soldiers could rest. Please, call Commandant Chartrand and at least present my suggestion to him, or let me speak to him. You can tell him as well that, if he needs a translator, I can speak Vietnamese.”

Gifard hesitated for a moment, then grabbed his American-made walkie-talkie and spoke in it, calling his commander and then discussing Ingrid’s idea with him. Gifard finally stopped talking in the radio and shouted around him.

“DON’T FINISH OFF THE WOUNDED VIETS! BRING THEM BEHIND THE NORTHWEST CORNER BUNKER AFTER DISARMING THEM!”

He repeated his call before looking back at Ingrid.

“Here you are, General. The commandant told me that, since it was your idea, you will be in charge of caring for those Viets. Our nurse will bring you the little medical supplies we can spare for them.”

“Thank you, Master Sergeant. I sincerely appreciate that. Could you show me where that northwest bunker is?”

“Sure! Follow me, General!”

It took them only a couple minute to arrive at the said bunker, a solid affair half dug-in and with a good meter of wood and dirt as overhead protection. Gifard inspected the area around the bunker and, finding no live Vietminh, went inside to speak quickly with the crew of the heavy machine gun using the bunker. He came back out as a solitary silhouette approached Ingrid in the darkness. That person turned out to be a young French woman wearing dirty fatigues and carrying a small pack. She presented herself to Ingrid with a smile and a handshake.

“Nice to see that I am not the only woman around anymore. I’m Lieutenant Madeleine Dutreuil, French Army Medical Corps.”

“Major General Ingrid Dows, United States Air Force. It’s a pleasure to meet you, especially at this time.”

“I bet, General! I brought the little we could spare, mostly field bandages. Are you qualified on first aid?”

“I am, Lieutenant. All American combat pilots have to be qualified in first aid, in case they have to parachute out.”

“Good!” Said Dutreuil while putting down on the ground her small pack. Two French soldiers came up at that moment, carrying a wounded Vietminh.

“Where do you want the Viet, miss?” Asked one of the soldiers, an anonymous silhouette in the night. Ingrid pointed at the rear wall of the bunker.

“Put him down near that wall, gently.”

Accompanied by Madeleine Dutreuil, Ingrid crouched besides the wounded enemy soldier as soon as he had been put down and used her flashlight, fitted with a red filter lens, to examine him quickly. The man was conscious but obviously in pain, even if he was keeping in his screams.

“Shoulder wound. I should be able to patch him up reasonably well.”

“Well, I will have to let you on your own now, General: I have plenty of wounded myself to take care of.”

“Well, good luck with your wounded then, Lieutenant.”

“The same for you, General.”

Dutreuil then left, leaving Ingrid alone with the wounded Vietminh. She opened the medical pack and took out a field dressing pad, then started opening the shirt of the wounded while speaking softly in Vietnamese to him.

“Don’t be afraid. I am going to bandage your wound. Then, in the morning and if all goes well, we will arrange for you and your other wounded comrades to be picked up by your people. What is your name?”

“Tien.” Said simply the Vietminh between clenched teeth.

“Well, Tien, with luck you will be able to see your family again. Beware, this may be painful.”

The Vietminh groaned when she moved him gently in order to clean his wound by pouring water on it and then put the bandage in place, but didn’t scream. He then spoke to her haltingly.

“Why? Why help me or my comrades?”

“Because I am not a monster and that I consider you and your comrades as human beings, even if you are my enemies.”

“Are you a nurse?”

“No, I am a fighter pilot.”

The man’s eyes then opened wide with surprise.

“You are the flying devil?”

Ingrid froze for a moment at those words while looking down at her patient.

“That is what you call me, ‘flying devil’? I suppose that it is an appropriate nickname after what I did here. Yes, I am your flying devil, but I am no devil at heart, believe me.”

The Vietminh didn’t reply to that, instead staring in silence at her as she finished bandaging his shoulder. By then, French soldiers were arriving with more wounded Vietminh. Before leaving Tien, Ingrid gently held his head up to let him drink some water from her canteen.

“Thank you!” Said weakly Tien, attracting a nod from Ingrid.

“You’re welcome. I am going to treat your comrades now. If you need something, just call me.”

“What is your name?”

“Ingrid. Hang on, Tien.”

The next few hours were busy indeed for Ingrid, with a total of 37 wounded Vietminh soldiers brought to her. Nearly all had been wounded by rifle or submachine gun fire, as the big projectiles from 12.7 mm heavy machine guns and from her aircraft’s 20 mm cannons had left little chance to their victims to survive the horrific damage they

made to human bodies. With the little medical supplies she had and her limited medical knowledge, she could not prevent the death of fifteen of her patients, despite her best efforts. By the time the Sun came up, Ingrid was both dead tired and discouraged, apart from being totally out of medical supplies. Tien was awake and watching her when she broke out in tears after covering the face of yet another wounded Vietminh, nearly a boy, that had died of his wounds besides Tien. Finally regaining control of herself but still mourning so much suffering and death, Ingrid recited softly an old Buddhist prayer for the dead while kneeling besides the dead teenager, surprising Tien. Commandant Chartrand, who was then approaching her with Master Sergeant Gifard, witnessed that and stopped cold a few paces behind Ingrid. He listened to her in silence, then walked to her as she got up after her prayer and stared at her with a mix of curiosity and suspicion.

“General, where did you learn that prayer? Is this really your first time in Indochina?”

“Studying a people is not limited to learning its language, Commandant.” She replied in a quiet voice while wiping the last tears from her face. “I am ready to go parlay with the Vietminh to discuss pickup of their wounded, if you are ready as well.” Chartrand didn’t comment on her evasive answer, but nodded at her last sentence and handed her a small, improvised white flag made of a pillow case attached to a stick.

“We are ready for that, General. Master Sergeant Gifard will escort you out of the wire, as I must stay inside the garrison and be ready to react to any possible treachery from the Vietminh.”

“Thank you, Commandant.”

Ingrid put back on her flying helmet before walking to the northern wire perimeter while brandishing high the white flag, Gifard at her side. On orders from Gifard, two soldiers put a large wooden plank over the rolls of concertina wire, so that he and Ingrid could cross outside of the defensive perimeter. Ingrid walked another fifty meters beyond the wire, then stopped in the middle of the open field, surrounded by countless dead Vietminh soldiers. She evaluated their number at over 1,200, at least for those she could see. Along with the few hundred other dead soldiers littering the French defensive positions, this had to represent extremely heavy casualties for the attacking Vietminh units. She was both sad and grim when two Vietminh walked out of the jungle, one of

them apparently an officer. Gifard held tighter to his submachine gun at that sight, prompting a quiet order from Ingrid.

“Relax, Master Sergeant. I doubt that the Vietminh will want to pull a dirty trick now, at least not before they know what we want. They may even hope right now that we want to surrender.”

That drew a snicker from Gifard.

“The Legion, surrender? Never!”

He and Ingrid then watched in silence as the two Vietminh approached them cautiously, finally stopping four paces in front of them. The officer looked relatively junior and had his pistol drawn but pointed at the ground, while the soldier escorting him held nervously to his PPSH 7.62 mm submachine gun, loaded with a 72-round drum magazine. Ingrid spoke first, obviously surprising the Vietminh officer with her excellent Vietnamese.

“We came forward to negotiate a temporary truce, so that you could pick up your wounded and your dead. We are ready to bring your wounded men left inside our perimeter to just outside the wire and to let your men approach by groups of four at a time to carry them away. We would need a quick answer to our offer, as we are out of medical supplies and cannot care much further for your wounded men.”

The junior officer, who had eyed Ingrid carefully after a superficial glance at Gifard, nodded once while holstering back slowly his pistol as a gesture of good faith.

“I will go inform my commander of your offer. You are not French, are you?”

“Who I am is not important. What is important is caring properly for your wounded. Once you have an answer from your commander, just show up at the edge of the jungle and I will come out of the wire again.”

Ingrid then turned around and walked back calmly to the wire, with Gifard covering her back. The Vietminh did the same, disappearing back in the jungle. Ingrid, staying near the perimeter wire and still in plain sight of the enemy, sat down near the forward most trench, planting her white flag in the ground besides her. She then looked up at Gifard.

“I am going to wait here for the Vietminh’s answer. Tell Commandant Chartrand that I offered them to let them approach the wire by groups of four to pick up their wounded.”

Gifard nodded silently, then walked away, letting her alone in the open. Very much conscious that she made for a perfect target right now, Ingrid was however ready to gamble with that risk in order to convince the Vietminh that she was honest with her offer of a truce. It still left her stomach knotted with anxiety as she waited, though. Taking off

her helmet and putting it on the ground, she took out a handkerchief and her water canteen and wetted her handkerchief. She then took a few seconds to clean her face and hands as best she could and combed back some order in her disheveled hair. Next, she took out from a pocket of her survival vest a cube of hard chocolate wrapped in silver paper and ate it, being quite famished by now. She was still sitting in the open and waiting when two French soldiers showed up twenty minutes later, touring the front trenches and distributing hot coffee from a thermos container and pieces of cheese. Ingrid gratefully accepted some coffee and cheese from them. The coffee helped her fight her fatigue, while the cheese stopped her stomach from growling for a while. Maybe fifty minutes after having talked to the junior Vietminh officer, Ingrid saw three Vietnamese appear at the edge of the jungle. Getting up and grabbing her white flag, Ingrid walked to the wire and crossed over the plank still in place, not waiting for Gifard to show up: she really wanted to conclude that truce as quickly as possible. She did pull out her pistol, however, holding it muzzle down as she walked towards the approaching group of Vietminh. They stopped three paces from each other and eyed each other in silence at first. This time two officers and one soldier made up the Vietminh delegation. The senior officer wore the rank insignias of a major general, making Ingrid bow politely to him. The general bowed back and examined her for a few seconds in silence before speaking in Vietnamese.

“I am told that you speak Vietnamese well. I can however speak French if you prefer.”

“Vietnamese will do fine, General. Do you accept our offer of a temporary truce in order to let you pick up your wounded and dead?”

“I accept your offer with gratitude, miss. By the way, what is your rank? I do not recognize your insignias.”

Ingrid didn't hide the truth then. In fact, she wanted that to act as a psychological shock on the Vietminh, now that she was facing a senior enemy officer.

“I am Major General Ingrid Dows, of the United States Air Force, Special Advisor to President Dewey.”

She saw with satisfaction dismay appear on the face of the general and of the other senior officer.

“The United States Air Force? But, your country is not at war with us.”

“No, but it has sent me and a few other officers to assist and advise the French to help stop this war. It may send more, a lot more, if this war keeps going on. That is

besides the point for now, anyway. To go back to your men, we will take out of the wire perimeter your wounded and dead and allow you to have them picked up, along with the dead littering this field, by four-man teams. I know how important it is for Vietnamese to be buried eventually in their ancestors' village. You may start sending your teams one at a time now, General."

Ngo eyed her intensely for a moment, having registered her warning of possible large scale involvement by the United States in the war, then nodded.

"I will have my men start the pickup, General. Hopefully I will see you again soon."

That made Ingrid smile with amusement.

"Not as your prisoner, though, General. I sincerely hope that it will be as your host in a peaceful setting, once this war is over."

"That would indeed be more agreeable than the present circumstances, General Dows." Replied Ngo, who was then saluted by Ingrid and saluted her back before turning around and walking back into the jungle, where his chief military doctor was waiting anxiously. Ngo nodded to him gravely.

"We have the go to start picking up our wounded and dead, Doctor Tran. Send in your stretcher bearers and medics by groups of four."

"Right away, General!" Replied the military doctor, who then looked back at the line of medics and stretcher bearers waiting behind him.

"Split up in groups of four and follow me!"

General Ngo watched the doctor and medics walk out of the jungle, hoping that the French's offer of a truce didn't hide some trap. He was not a little surprised to see that the American female pilot stayed outside of the wire perimeter to meet and greet the doctor and his men and escort them to near the passage in the wire that she had used. She was taking a lot of personal risks in order to run this truce, a lot more than he would have expected from a French officer. That could indicate either that she was naïve and unaware of the full risks, or that she really cared about the wounded Vietminh soldiers.

Ngo kept watching for the next half-hour, the time it took to pick up and evacuate safely all of his wounded men. Seeing one wounded soldier who seemed to be fully conscious and in relatively good shape, he had the two soldiers carrying him on a stretcher stop briefly, then spoke quietly but firmly to him.

"How did the French treat you and the other wounded, Lieutenant?"

The young officer, a bandage covering his right shoulder, hesitated for a moment before answering, apparently searching for the right words.

“The French actually started finishing off our wounded after our last attack, sir. I however heard and saw the American woman protest that and make the killings stop. The French then put her in charge of caring for us, which she did alone for the rest of the night. I believe that she truly did the best she could and showed genuine compassion for our men, even though she helped kill many of our men during those air attacks. Sir, if I may say so, that woman is most strange.”

“How so, Lieutenant?” Asked Ngo, genuinely curious.

“Sir, she prayed for the men who died despite of her care. She did so by reciting an old Vietnamese prayer to the dead. The way she talked with us during the night, I could have sworn that I was being cared for by one of our own people.”

Ngo digested those words for a couple of seconds, then nodded to the stretcher bearers.

“You may resume your trip. Thank you for the information, Lieutenant.”

As the file of loaded stretchers kept passing by them, Ngo’s political officer faced him, his expression severe.

“General, what that American did for our wounded may be admirable but it is irrelevant. She clearly threatened us with the entry of the United States in this war. Rear headquarters must be informed of this at once.”

“Agreed! Send a radio message back right away.”

As the political officer disappeared along the jungle trail, Ngo approached the edge of the vegetation and watched as his soldiers started picking up the men killed inside the wire perimeter, whose bodies were now being brought forward out of the wire by French soldiers. The American pilot was still there, supervising the operation and preventing any friction or misunderstanding. Looking around the open fields, littered with the bodies of his men, Ngo felt both immense sadness and near helplessness: his division had been basically gutted in the fighting of the last 24 hours and the French position seemed nearly as solid as before. The ironic part was that the same American pilot who had helped his wounded men also had played a big part in causing most of his casualties. War could be truly strange and full of contradictions at times.

15:04 (Indochina Time)

Outpost of Muang Phin, Laos

Ingrid, carrying a wounded French soldier on a stretcher with the help of one Legionnaire, hurried to the helicopter that had just landed inside the south part of the fortified compound. Other stretcher teams were also hurrying towards the UH-2 PELICAN of the French Army sporting large Red Cross symbols. Once beside the medium transport helicopter, she knelt and waited for the other teams in front of her to load their wounded aboard the machine. Thankfully, the Vietminh did not start shooting at the helicopter. They were probably refraining from firing at it and at the second UH-2 about to land in return for the favor the French had made to them by letting them pick up their wounded and dead in the morning. What Ingrid and the French garrison of the outpost couldn't know yet was that General Ngo had decided to break the siege and withdraw back inside Vietnam in view of his heavy losses. Half of the surviving Vietminh force had already started marching back east along the jungle trails, with Ngo staying behind to supervise the orderly withdrawal of his division.

Ingrid didn't notice the passenger in the troop compartment until it was her turn to lift her wounded aboard. She nearly let the stretcher drop from the surprise when she saw and recognized him.

"General Smith? What are you doing here?"

"Picking up my favorite pilot." Replied gruffly Major General Oliver Smith. "Load your wounded aboard, then climb in. That's not a suggestion, by the way."

Faced with such an order, Ingrid had no choice but to obey and climb aboard after loading in her wounded. Smith actually helped her by grabbing the collar of her survival vest and pulling her up. The helicopter then lifted up in a hurry as they were buckling their seat belts. Smith offered his right hand to Ingrid, who shook it firmly while Smith shouted over the noise of the rotor and engine of the helicopter.

"NICE TO SEE THAT YOU ARE STILL IN ONE PIECE, INGRID."

"NOT AS MUCH AS MYSELF, OLIVER! AM I IN DEEP DOO-DOO FOR FLYING COMBAT MISSIONS WITH THE FRENCH?"

"WHAT COMBAT MISSIONS?" Replied Smith, smiling maliciously. "YOU WERE SHOT DOWN WHILE ACCOMPANYING FRENCH PILOTS IN ORDER TO ADVISE THEM ON CLOSE AIR SUPPORT TACTICS. BY THE WAY, THE FRENCH ARE QUITE HAPPY WITH YOUR PERFORMANCE. I BELIEVE THAT THEY ARE NOW TAKING YOU SERIOUSLY. I HOPE THAT THIS GROUND STINT DIDN'T

SHAKE YOU UP TOO MUCH, AS I EXPECT YOU TO CONTINUE ON WITH YOUR INSPECTION TOUR.”

“I WILL JUST NEED A HOT MEAL, A SHOWER AND LOTS OF SLEEP. WHERE IS THIS HELO HEADED?”

“DA NANG! TRANSPORT PLANES WILL TAKE THE WOUNDED THERE AND FLY THEM TO SAIGON. A PLANE WILL BRING YOU BACK TO NHA TRANG, WHERE YOUR DRIVER IS STILL WAITING FOR YOU.”

They then kept mostly quiet for the rest of the flight over the jungle and mountains of the Laos-Vietnam border area, the rotor noise making any conversation quite difficult. An hour and a half later they landed in Da Nang, an old airfield with limited facilities situated by the side of a large bay on the coast. Ingrid examined very closely the airfield as they overflew it and then glided down to a landing: it was an airfield she had intended to carefully survey during her inspection tour because of the prominent role it had played as a major American air base in the Vietnam War of Nancy's own history. Helping first to unload the wounded, Ingrid and Smith then jumped on the ground, with Smith leading her to a waiting MS 500 CRIQUET light liaison plane. Stopping besides the small plane, he then faced her, his expression serious.

“Alright, Ingrid, brief me in detail on what happened since you arrived in Nha Trang.”

Ingrid complied with good grace, with Smith taking a few quick notes as she spoke. He showed particular interest in her two combat mission flown in support of Muang Phin, asking a few extra questions about them. He finally nodded, thoughtful.

“Decidedly, the more I see of this conflict, the more I am convinced that you are right about the French being incapable of winning alone. They certainly need a serious helping hand at a minimum, even if they are trying their honest best. I also just got a report via our embassy about the amount of support the Vietminh is getting from the Chinese. That support is actually even more important than we thought at first and is making quite a few people frown in Washington. It is looking as if the Chinese are trying for a repeat performance of the Korean War, but with a better hidden hand.”

“Does that mean that Washington is starting seriously to think about joining officially this war?”

“Maybe not officially, Ingrid.” Said Smith cautiously. “There are contingency plans being studied now in the Pentagon, though. I will keep you informed of the

developments on this. Well, time for you to go back to Nha Trang and resume your inspection tour. Again, well done, Ingrid!”

“Thank you, Oliver!” Replied Ingrid, saluting Smith before getting into the liaison plane. Five minutes later she was airborne and on her way south to Nha Trang.

14:03 (Indochina Time)

Tuesday, March 11, 1952 ‘C’

Tan Son Nhut Airfield, Saigon

Ingrid felt regret as the C-54 SKYMASTER rolled down the runway, then lifted off the ground. She had nearly felt at home in Vietnam, with its countryside, its culture and its people. The suffering from the war had however mitigated her joy at being reacquainted with Vietnam. Unfortunately, the future of her old country didn’t look rosier than when she and the rest of the MAATI team had arrived over a month ago. In fact, things looked like they were slowly but surely going downhill. The French simply didn’t have the military capacity to win this war, not with all the trouble they had to take care of in various spots of their colonial empire. The French were also reluctant to let go their grip on Indochina, something Ingrid found most shortsighted. Her own dealings with French officials had shown her that they were simply unable to face the reality in Indochina, partly out of a feeling of racial superiority over the locals, partly out of their unwillingness to lose their comfortable colonial lifestyle. Now, she was leaving Indochina, having accomplished little of true value and being unable to change things the way they should be. As the other members of the team were rejoicing at returning to the United States, Ingrid could only look sadly through the aircraft window as her old country faded in the distance.

CHAPTER 11 – SEGREGATION

09:42 (Jerusalem time)

Monday, May 7, 1951 'B'

Overseer's apartments

New Government Palace, Musrara District (near Damascus Gate)

Jerusalem, Holy Land of Palestine

Nancy hugged her big Herakles, now truly formidable physically at the age of sixteen, then Tera, who appeared diminutive compared to the boy despite her twenty years of age. Both wore their Time Patrol uniforms and had full kit bags with them as they were about to get in the time scooter piloted by Pierre Laplante 'B', the timeline counterpart of Nancy's dead father.

"Have fun down at Main Base and say hello to Mike for me, my dear children."

"We will, Mom." Said softly Herakles. "I will miss you until next weekend."

"With all the girls waiting for you down at Main Base?" Replied Nancy with a malicious smile. Herakles gave her a tender smile.

"But nobody like you, Mom. Be careful while I'm gone, please."

"I will, my big hero. You better get on the scooter now before your grandfather becomes impatient."

Pierre Laplante 'B', who appeared older than Nancy by about ten years but was actually twelve years younger than her, grimaced at those words.

"Nancy, you make me feel old when you say that. You are now, what, 52 years old?"

"In two months of my relative time." Corrected Nancy with a smile. "That should come in, oh, maybe three weeks of this time period at the rate I keep jumping timelines. Say hello to your Nancy on my part."

"Consider it done, Nancy." Replied Pierre, grinning at the mention of his own daughter, Nancy's young timeline counterpart, now eleven years old. He then waived at nine year-old Eli, standing besides Nancy with eleven year-old David and at Nancy's twins, now seven and a half year old. "See you in a week, Eli. Have fun with your friend David. See you too, Patrick and Suzanne."

Eli waved back and took Nancy's hand as his half brother and sister got on the scooter with their kit bags. The scooter then lifted off from the roof landing pad of the new governmental palace, completed a year ago, and disappeared in a flash of white light. Nancy sighed, already missing her two oldest children, and turned to face the three boys, one girl and one woman now alone with her on the landing pad.

"Well, time for me to leave as well if I want to be in time to take my plane in Paris."

"Why don't you just jump space-time directly to the United States, Mom?" Asked Eli. Nancy gave him a patient smile.

"Because I don't want to arrive there as the Overseer of Palestine, my dear son. I will need to work incognito in the United States if I want my observations to be unaffected by my presence."

"You are going to spy on the Americans?" Said innocently the boy, making her grin with amusement.

"I suppose one could call it that, Eli. I would however call it confirming something before passing judgment. There are bad things happening still in the United States and I need to see if the Americans have made any progress in cutting out those bad things. I will be gone for maybe a week but Miriam will stay with you and David in the meantime. Do you feel ready to help take care of Patrick and Suzanne with David?"

"I am, Mom." Said the blond boy with pride. His friend David, a beautiful boy with brown skin and curly black hair, also nodded his head.

"We will take good care of the twins, Nancy."

"I am sure you will, David. Your father would be proud of you."

Those words made a forlorn look appear on the boy's face, who looked at his mother.

"Will Yeshua look at me from above, Mom?"

"I'm certain that he will watch you with great pride, David." Answered Miriam, a lump in her throat: those years since the death of Yeshua on the cross had been lonely ones at time. Miriam knew that Yeshua, being an angel of The One, probably could see her and David at any time, but his physical presence was something she missed terribly.

"Well, then, if you will excuse me, I will go change for my trip." Said Nancy. She kissed the children and Miriam on the cheek, giving in addition a hug to Eli, Patrick and Suzanne before disappearing in a brief flash of light. Miriam, gathering the children besides her, looked briefly at the nearby Old City, which the new government palace dominated. She could easily see the spot where Yeshua had been executed on the

cross by the Romans on that sad day nineteen centuries in the past, or eleven years earlier in her own life. From that sad day had risen a religion that, while venerating the memory of Yeshua, had shown itself too intolerant to accept the truth about him. Miriam then gently led the children to the roof elevator that would get them down to the apartments of the Overseer.

14:32 (Washington Time) / 21:32 (Jerusalem Time)

Arrival Hall, La Guardia Airport

New York City, United States

The American Immigration Department agent glanced quickly at the small Semitic woman wearing a fine blue and gold Arabic robe, then took her passport and examined it. It was a Palestinian passport and described the owner as one Sarah Ur, born 24 years ago in Iraq but now a citizen of the Holy Land of Palestine. She was listed as being a reporter and had the requisite visa from the American embassy in Jerusalem. The agent looked again at the beautiful young woman, who wore a gold necklace and a pair of earrings. Her large spectacles marred a bit her beauty, though, and made her look older than her age.

“What is the reason of your visit to the United States, Miss Ur?”

To the agent’s relief, her English proved excellent.

“I came here to do an article about life in your southern states, mister. I am due to take a connecting flight to Birmingham, Alabama, in three hours.”

The agent nodded, then continued examining her passport. There was no space reserved in it to describe her religion, nor her race or skin color, something standard with the passports of the Holy Land of Palestine but which caused problems in categorizing the passport owner in the United States. Many Palestinian citizens had run into trouble because of that in the southern states, the local state authorities stamping them rather arbitrarily as either ‘white’ or ‘colored’. Being stamped in the latter category was a sure way for those unfortunate Palestinians to then get into endless trouble with the local law despite their best efforts. Those repeated incidents had finally forced the federal authorities to find a remedy in order to avoid what was becoming quickly a cause of diplomatic embarrassment. That remedy had been to add the mention ‘white’ with the visa delivered by the American embassy in Jerusalem. Even then, some of the more redneck southern policemen and officials kept ignoring that federal solution and went on

harassing the more dark-skinned Palestinians at every turn. The woman now standing at the immigration counter could easily be considered dark-skinned enough in Alabama to be branded as a 'colored person'. Thinking about it, the agent figured that maybe those incidents were what was motivating this Palestinian reporter to travel to Alabama to write an article. That could mean more bad publicity against the United States around the World. The agent had however no legitimate excuse to refuse entry to the Palestinian woman. He thus stamped her passport and gave her a blue customs ticket, which would get her a bit more detailed baggage search than usual but not the full treatment reserved for truly suspicious travelers. The woman thanked him, taking back her passport along with the ticket, then went to the baggage area with the other passengers of her Paris-New York flight.

She showed up at the customs inspection counters fifteen minutes later with two suitcases on top of her travel bag and purse. Giving the blue ticket to a customs agent, she then waited patiently as the man with graying hair searched her luggage. The agent soon took out a highly sophisticated and compact video camera and a still digital camera, along with a laptop computer and a portable radio/CD player unit.

"Miss, these are items imported from the future. Where did you get these?"

"In Palestine, mister." Replied calmly Sarah. "Such equipment, along with many other high technology items, are on open sale there, thanks to the free trade agreement between the Global Council and Palestine. I routinely use them for my work as a reporter."

"Those are very sought-after items here, miss." Cautioned the customs agent. "Be careful about thieves. I will have to fill an importation form for them. If you can't produce them on departure, you will then have to pay a sales duty on them."

"What if someone steals them?"

"Then you will have to get a copy of the relevant police report, miss."

Sarah stayed impassive as the agent made her fill the top portion of the importation form, then filled the rest and stamped it before giving a copy of the form to her. Repacking her things, she then headed out of the arrival area with her luggage and went to the departure gate to take her connecting flight to Birmingham, Alabama.

21:36 (Alabama Time)
Central bus station
Birmingham, Alabama

Having collected her suitcases from the luggage compartment of the bus from the airport, Sarah then walked inside the bus terminal and made her way to the ticket counters. She took a minute to look at a big wall board showing the arrival and departure times of various buses, finding out that the next bus to Montgomery would depart in less than one hour. As she took place in a short lineup in front of one of the ticket counters, a pudgy man in his fifties in front of her gave her a hostile look and pointed at another lineup, composed exclusively of African-Americans.

“Hey, get in the colored lineup! This counter is for whites only. Can’t you read?” Sarah glanced at the sign above the ticket counter, which said ‘Reserved for whites only’, then looked coldly at the man.

“By what right do you dare categorize me, mister? In Palestine, everybody is equal in the eyes of The One.”

“Listen, rag head!” Replied rudely the man. “You are in the States now and you better follow the rules, or else.”

“Or else what, mister? I have the right to be here and I won’t let an ignorant like you push me around.”

The man, scandalized by her attitude, then waved at a policeman standing in a corner of the ticket hall.

“Officer, could you get that woman to go in the colored lineup?”

The policeman, a big man with a paunch, immediately walked to Sarah while taking out his baton. Stopping in front of her, he waved his baton in her face.

“Miss, you are no white person. You will have to get into the other lineup.”

Looking pissed, Sarah took out her passport from her purse and opened it, showing the visa with the mention ‘white’ to the policeman.

“This is the visa delivered by your embassy in Jerusalem. I have the right to be in this lineup, or in any lineup in fact.”

The policeman examined the visa for a few seconds and frowned before looking at the man who had protested against her presence.

“Sir, she is right. I can’t legally force her to go into the colored lineup.”

“What? Fuck that damn Yankee visa! Look at her skin!” Protested the man, who forcibly grabbed Sarah’s left hand to show it to the policeman. Her reaction was immediate and lightning quick: twisting her hand around and freeing herself, she then slapped the man’s hand away and glared at him.

“Mister, you touch me again and I will slap you!”

“Hey, hey!” Said the policeman, interposing himself. “Let’s calm down here! The next one of you who causes trouble will end up in jail for disturbing the peace.”

“I came in peace, Officer.” Said calmly Sarah. “I don’t intend to start a fight unless attacked.”

The policeman nodded grudgingly, then looked severely at the pudgy man, who turned away while grumbling to himself. Satisfied, he then returned to his corner while putting his baton back in its retaining belt loop.

When Sarah’s turn came at the wicket, the ticket clerk listened with a wooden face as she asked for a one-way ticket to Montgomery and made her pay the fare before giving her the bus ticket. Sarah took it and, grabbing her two suitcases, went to the waiting lounge. Only when she sat down on a bench besides a Caucasian teenage girl did she realize that her bus ticket bore the mention ‘colored section’, written by hand. She quietly swore to herself but decided against going back to confront the clerk: she was tired from her long trip from Palestine and wanted to take this bus, which was the last one available until early morning. She did however hold the ticket still for a few seconds in front of her eyes, letting the miniature video camera hidden in the frame of her spectacles film the offensive words written on the ticket. This incident made her recall souvenirs from an international conference in late 1942, shortly after the end of the Second World War. That conference had given the go ahead for the creation of the United Nations but had also put her on a collision course with the United States and a few other states. The main reason for the Americans’ ire then had been her call for the future headquarters of the United Nations to be situated in Paris instead of in New York, where the Americans wished it to be. Her argument then, which was still valid in her mind, was that New York was unsuited to host African diplomats because of the official segregation laws in the United States. Most non-European countries, along with France and a few other European states, had sided with her arguments then. Since the United Nations charter she had pushed forward had no veto provision for superpower states, the United States had lost that vote despite the support of other states with segregation

laws, like South Africa and Rhodesia. That moment had been a happy one for her, as she had long dreamed of a truly egalitarian United Nations that would care for all on Earth and not only for the interests of the rich and powerful. The latest row between her and the United States, concerning the admission of Communist China in the United Nations at the expense of the Nationalist Chinese government in Taiwan, had gained her the cooperation of a state representing a quarter of the World's population, which in turn had given her enough influence to help prevent the worst of the excesses from Communist Chinese leaders. A direct result of that had been the avoidance of war in Indochina and Korea, something that had amply justified her policies up to now. She just wished that the United States could acknowledge that, though.

Ten minutes before departure time, Sarah grabbed her luggage and went out to the platform from which the bus to Montgomery would depart. The bus was already there, with its luggage compartments open and with passengers lining up to get inside. Putting first her luggage in a storage compartment, Sarah then joined the lineup, which was made in majority of African-Americans. The bus driver gave her a hard look after eyeing her ticket and punching it.

"Take a rear section seat, miss. The first ten rows are reserved for white people."

Sarah returned his look, contempt in her eyes.

"The One created all human spirits equal, mister. You are insulting him with this segregation nonsense."

"I don't give a rat's ass about what you think or about your one, whoever he is." Replied roughly the driver. "You either go in the back section or you take another bus, miss."

The man pronounced the last word as if in derision, obviously insinuating that a less flattering term would have been appropriate for Sarah. Real anger then showed in her eyes.

"You don't know who is The One? Do you know anything about the rest of the world, mister?"

"You want to play smart, miss? Then get out of the line! We have laws in Alabama and you will respect them."

"You will start yourself to respect the law, mister!" Spat Sarah before taking out her passport and showing the visa inside to the driver. "Your government issued this

visa and you better respect its authority unless you want me to create a diplomatic incident over this, on top of attracting a federal lawsuit against your bus company.”

The mention of a lawsuit made the driver back off: causing a potentially costly lawsuit against his employer could easily jeopardize his job. Brusquely giving her back her ticket, he then ignored her and addressed the next passenger in the line.

“Next!”

Getting in the bus after a last hard look at the driver, Sarah found that the section reserved for white persons was nearly empty, while the section for colored people was close to full, with many more people still due to board the bus. Still steaming, Sarah took place in a still empty back row, taking a window-side seat. Opening her travel bag and extracting her laptop computer, she then powered up her machine and started typing down her first impressions of her trip to the United States. Allied with the video footage she had already taken discreetly with her hidden micro-camera, it was not going to make for a flattering report on the United States.

00:58 (Alabama Time)

Tuesday, May 8, 1951 ‘B’

Southern Comfort Hotel

Washington Street, Montgomery

Alabama

Joshua Brown had been asleep for maybe half an hour when the door buzzer of his hotel’s entrance woke him up. Putting on his pajama top, he then walked out of his small room by the reception desk and went to the door, swearing quietly to himself: it was probably one of his tenants coming back late to his small, rickety hotel in downtown Montgomery. He suddenly hesitated and stopped: maybe it could also be a few redneck white men coming to pay a rough visit to him or one of his young Negro customers. Cautiously, he got close to one of the front windows of the hotel and peeped towards the entrance. What he saw made him open his eyes and mouth wide with surprise: a young foreign woman was waiting patiently in front of the door, two suitcases at her feet. Hurrying to the door and making sure first that his top was well buttoned, he then unlocked and opened the door. On closer examination, the woman appeared Arabic and in fact wore an Arabic robe. She was also as beautiful as one of those princesses out of an Arabian fairy tale.

“Please come in, miss! Are you here for a room?”

“Yes! Do you have one available?” She said in a soft voice and in perfect English while grabbing her suitcases. She also had a travel bag and a purse.

“I do have rooms available, miss.” Replied Joshua, still wondering what a woman like her was doing at his hotel, which was supposed to house Negro customers only according to the city segregation laws. The Arab woman entered the small lobby of the hotel, letting Joshua close and lock the door before speaking again. She was small and graceful, as one would have expected from an Arabic princess, and her voice was melodious.

“Then I will take one for a week. I am ready to pay in advance for it.”

“Uh, I don’t want to be impolite, miss, but why did you choose my hotel? I normally get only Negro migrant workers who can’t lodge anywhere else in Montgomery because of the city segregation laws.”

“That is precisely why I chose your hotel, mister...”

“Brown, Joshua Brown.” Replied Joshua, getting over his surprise and shaking hands with her. She smiled to him and gave her name.

“I am Sarah Ur, from the Holy Land of Palestine. I am a reporter and came to Alabama to do an investigative report on the living condition of the African-Americans in the southern states of this country.”

“Then, you chose well, Miss Ur. You do realize that the subject of your report may not be very popular with the local authorities, I hope?”

She then gave him a pinched expression.

“I already experienced the local welcome, Mister Brown. As for being intimidated, good luck to these rednecks. Shall I pay for my room now?”

“Uh, sure! Please come to the reception desk.”

Joshua hurried behind the desk and grabbed the key of his best available room, one of the few ones with a private bathroom. Most of the young Negro workers he got as customers could not afford a room with bathroom and used instead a communal bathroom. Giving the room key to the woman, he then presented his opened registry book.

“If you could please fill and sign the registry book, miss. It will be 24 dollars and fifty cents for one week.”

Sarah took a wallet from her purse and paid him before writing her name and signing the registry book. Then she followed Joshua, who graciously took her suitcases, up the

stairs to her room on the second floor. Once he let her in her room, she looked around quickly and nodded.

“This will be more than satisfactory for me, Mister Brown. Thank you for your help.”

“It was my pleasure, miss.” Said Joshua, surprised at how easy she was to accommodate: his hotel was anything but luxurious or even particularly comfortable. “I serve coffee and a few basic items for breakfast in the lounge downstairs from six to nine in the morning. There is also a small restaurant for Negroes on the same block as the hotel, to your left when going out.”

“Then you can expect me for breakfast, Mister Brown. Good night!”

“Good night, miss!”

Joshua then left her room, closing the door behind him. He still was wondering about the fact of having such an exotic young woman as a guest as he walked back downstairs. His young Negro tenants were most probably going to love this.

05:58 (Alabama Time)

Southern Comfort Hotel

Joshua, still sleepy and busy preparing the frugal breakfast he made available to his guests, was not a little surprised to see that Sarah Ur beat the other customers down to the lounge. He was also surprised but pleased as well by her dress: she wore a very modern-looking gray female suit consisting of adjusted trousers, light jacket and golden silk blouse. A set of nice but discreet jewels and careful makeup enhanced her already striking exotic beauty. Putting down besides a chair of the lounge a rigid black nylon bag, she smiled warmly to him, her eyes sparkling with energy.

“Good morning, Mister Brown! How are you this morning?”

“Uh, not as awake as you, I’m afraid, Miss Ur. I will be with you in a minute.”

She nodded and then went to pour herself a cup of coffee from the percolator machine sitting on a corner table before sitting at one of the two small tables of the lounge. Keeping her nylon bag at her feet, she grabbed one of the copies of the local newspaper, the ‘MONTGOMERY ADVERTISER’, that was on one end of the service table and started reading it while sipping on her coffee. Joshua, bringing a plate of hard-boiled eggs and fresh bread to the service table, couldn’t help admire her profile as she passed by her. Her fine nose and huge brown eyes came with most sensuous lips and

silky black hair that fell down to her shoulder blades. Her skin appeared very smooth and was light brown, like that of a mulatto. Joshua couldn't know it but she had been acknowledged justly as one of the most, if not the most beautiful young woman of the Sumerian city of Ur, three and a half millenniums ago. Only her large spectacles tended to mar a bit her fascinating beauty. As Joshua went back into his small kitchen by the service desk to get pots of jam and peanut butter, two of his customers came down from their room for breakfast. The two young men, Tom and Sam Foster, were actually brothers and shared the same room in order to save on their meager pay as construction laborers. They stopped in unison at the entrance of the lounge when they saw Sarah, sitting at a table and reading a newspaper. She in turn smiled warmly to them and showed them two of the empty chairs around her table.

"Good morning, gentlemen. Will you have breakfast with me?"

"Uh, with pleasure, miss." Replied Tom Foster, not believing his luck, before going to her table and taking one of the chairs offered. Sam also sat down facing Sarah, having problems not staring with admiration at her. She then extended her right hand.

"I'm Sarah Ur, from Jerusalem. I'm a reporter doing an article on life in the southern United States."

"My name is Tom Foster." Said the older brother while shaking her hand. "This is my brother Sam. When did you arrive, miss?"

"Late last night. Are you here in this hotel for a while still?"

"Hopefully yes, miss, but it will depend on how long jobs stay available. Right now, we have work assured for another month or so at a building construction project."

"Then we will have time for an interview one evening soon, Mister Foster?"

"Tonight would be fine with me, miss." Replied quickly Tom, smiling. "And you, how long are you planning to stay?"

"About a week, time to see how things really are for African-Americans in Montgomery."

"African-Americans?" Said Sam, confused. "Is that how Negroes are called in Jerusalem?"

"Yes!" Replied Sarah, now looking serious. "It is certainly more respectful a term than the few I already heard used to call black people in the United States."

"Did anybody call you names, miss?" Asked Tom hesitantly. Sarah nodded once.

“It seems that most people around Alabama consider me a colored person, Tom. In a way, it helped my report, as I was better able to appreciate the problems African-Americans face in living in the South.”

“Hopefully you won’t experience the other kind of abuse we have to put up with, miss.”

“And what kind would that be, Tom?”

“Physical!” Replied the young man in a bitter tone. “Black girls are even more at risk...in a way.”

Sarah, her face hardening, put down her cup and stared at Tom.

“And how often does that happen?”

Tom looked away as he answered in a low voice.

“Too often, miss, especially on Saturday nights. You could be targeted yourself as well if you are not careful.”

“Don’t worry about me, Tom: I know how to defend myself.”

Tom gave her a doubtful look at that declaration.

“Even against a 200-pound man who wouldn’t think twice about killing a Negro?”

“Especially against such a man. Well, enough about that. Let’s not cut your appetite for breakfast.”

“Uh, right. We should hurry anyway so that we won’t be late for work.”

The two young men then got up and went to the service table to make themselves toasts splashed with jam and to pour cups of coffee. They then returned to the table and started eating quickly. Sarah prepared herself a peanut butter sandwich and joined them back as three more customers, all black men, came down to the lounge. After presenting herself to them, Sarah returned to reading her newspaper while eating her sandwich.

Sam Foster was finished eating breakfast and was about to get up from the table when he saw Sarah take out a notepad and a pen and note down something from the newspaper. She however quickly closed the paper when he tried to see what she was noting down.

“Please, Sam, do you mind?”

“Sorry, miss. I was just curious.” Said Sam in a contrite voice. He then left the table and went up to his room, soon joined by his brother. Both came back down a few minutes later and waved goodbye to Sarah before leaving the hotel. Maybe a dozen

more, mostly young, black men came down to have breakfast in the next half hour and then left the hotel for work. Sarah was left alone with Joshua Brown in the hotel well before seven O'clock, at which time she also left the hotel with her nylon bag slung from one shoulder. Walking slowly on the sidewalk and observing carefully her surroundings as she went, she first stopped at a gas service station, where she bought a detailed city map of Montgomery, along with a larger map of the surrounding county. She next visited a newspaper stand and bought a copy of each of the local and regional newspapers. Then she returned to her hotel in order to be able to read quietly her newspapers. When she entered the lounge, she found a black woman in her forties busy sweeping the floor. The woman gave her a motherly smile and offered her right hand, which Sarah shook.

"Hello, miss! My name is Thelma. I'm the maid and cleaning lady."

"And I'm Sarah Ur, from the Holy Land of Palestine. I'm a reporter." Said Sarah, smiling back.

"Palestine? Isn't that where Nancy Laplante lives?"

"That's the place!"

Thelma sighed at the mention of Jerusalem.

"I wish that I could visit Jerusalem one day. I heard so many fantastic things about it. Is it as nice as the people say?"

"Oh yes!" Replied proudly Sarah. "For one thing, everybody is equal in Jerusalem and in the rest of Palestine."

Thelma rolled her eyes upward at those words.

"Just for that the trip would be worth it for me, miss."

Sarah nodded a bit sadly: to have decent people forced to endure constantly the kind of harassment and abuse they had to put up with here was truly a shameful thing.

"Things will change eventually, Thelma." She said quietly before sitting at a table and starting to read her collection of newspapers as the maid continued her cleaning work. After maybe forty minutes of reading, she took out and plugged in her laptop computer, then worked on her first article for half an hour. Once her work was saved, she packed away her equipment and left the hotel again, still lugging her black nylon bag.

Her next stop was a large brick church on Dexter Avenue, barely one block away. Her short walk was however long enough to attract a contemptuous remark from a Caucasian woman smoking with another woman outside of a clothing store.

“Well, look it here: a fashionable nigger slut!” Said the pudgy woman in her late thirties, making her companion laugh while she eyed Sarah from head to toe.

“Maybe she made lots of money by prostituting herself, Maggie.”

Sarah stopped in front of the two white women and eyed them coldly.

“I am a Palestinian reporter and I earn my money by providing news from around the world to my readers. You could use some reading to further your education: you would be less ignorant then.”

The one named Maggie had a flash of anger appear on her face, then advanced on Sarah with her right fist raised.

“You slut! I’ll teach you...”

Sarah easily intercepted her punch with one hand, then twisted her arm while holding the woman’s fist in a powerful grip, making the woman yelp in pain. Sarah eyed her and the other with contempt.

“Maybe you shouldn’t be so sure of your superiority on others. You don’t measure up to much, in my opinion.”

She then pushed away the woman while releasing her grip, then turned around and walked away calmly. Maggie, holding her right hand, shouted at her.

“You bitch! You’ll pay for this, I swear!”

As Sarah kept walking and ignoring her, Maggie looked at her friend.

“What did she say she was?”

“A Palestinian.”

“Where’s that?”

“Hell, I don’t know! Do I look like an encyclopedia to you?”

Sarah stopped in front of the Baptist church at 454 Dexter Avenue and eyed it quickly: it was quite big and was made of reddish-brown brick, with a high white bell tower over the front entrance and steps. A few trees surrounded it, making it look even more peaceful a place. Going up the steps two by two, she then pushed open the large double door and entered the church, closing the doors behind her. With her resolute steps echoing around the large nave, she walked to the door of the church’s office, to

the back and left of the altar, and knocked on the door. A tall graying black man in denim coveralls soon opened the door, looking with surprise at her.

“May I do something for you, miss?”

“I am actually here to do something for you, Reverend Johns. My name is Sarah Ur, from Jerusalem. Could we speak in private?”

“Uh, of course, miss. Please come in and have a seat.”

Entering Johns’ office, Sarah then took place in a chair to the front and left of the preacher’s desk and waited for Johns to be sitting behind the desk before speaking again.

“I am a Palestinian freelance reporter doing an investigative report on the living conditions of African-Americans in the southern states of the United States. I also am a field representative of the D’Orleans Social Trust, a charity organization founded in 1851 in Paris to help the underprivileged and the ones in need. You may have heard about some of our past work.”

Vernon Johns broke into a smile and pointed an index at her.

“Weren’t you the ones who funded a refuge for abused women in Detroit about two years ago?”

“That was us, effectively.” Said Sarah, smiling warmly. “To return to the present situation, the D’Orleans Social Trust wants to help the African-Americans of Montgomery and of the rest of Alabama. Since your social work on behalf of desegregation in Montgomery is well known, the trust has decided to go through you to help the local black people. I am thus ready to give you a donation of 10,000 dollars in the name of the D’Orleans Social Trust. More will come in the near future.”

Johns’ eyes widened in surprise and disbelief.

“Ten thousand dollars? That’s quite a sum, miss.”

“Not for our foundation, Reverend.” Said Sarah before taking out of a jacket’s pocket a checking book and a pen. She then wrote a number on a check and signed it, ripping it off the checking book and handing it to Johns, who examined it: it was a personalized check from the Chase Manhattan Bank printed with the logo and addresses of the various world offices of the D’Orleans Social Trust. The sum on it was ten thousand dollars. Johns looked with gratitude at Sarah.

“This will help our people greatly, miss. I don’t know how I could thank you and your foundation properly.”

“You may do that by using this money wisely and by continuing with your present work, Reverend Johns.”

Johns nodded once, then eyed her carefully.

“Sarah...that is a Jewish name, I believe. Further, Sarah of Ur was the name of the wife of the patriarch Abraham, according to the Old Testament, right?”

Sarah had a mysterious smile then.

“I am effectively Jewish but the name of Abraham’s wife was Sarai of Ur before she changed her name to Sarah. However, the D’Orleans Social Trust helps everybody in need, irrespective of race, religion or sex. Another way I intend to help the local black people is by enrolling the services of a local lawyer whom I will pay to take on free of charge the defense of black people unjustly accused because of discrimination or racial harassment. Once I have arranged for the services of such a lawyer, I will have him contact you. I also intend to bankroll a black family doctor, so that he could provide free medical care to the poor.”

“Miss Ur, you are truly a godsend.” Said Johns, attracting a grin on her face.

“Reverend, let’s just say that someone high above has heard your pleas for help. You may however help me in turn in my job here.”

“I would be most pleased to help, miss.” Replied Johns, smiling and bending forward a bit while putting his forearms on his desk. “What could I do for you?”

“You could tell me everything you know about the local Ku Klux Klan, Reverend.” She replied, dead serious.

15:18 (Alabama Time)

Pharmacy, Monroe Street

Downtown Montgomery

James Wallace frowned when he saw Doctor Eli Gooding enter his store, accompanied by a stunningly beautiful young mulatto woman. It was not that he was a racist but Gooding already had a sizeable negative credit balance at his pharmacy and was widely known to have limited financial means. Helping the poor Negroes of Montgomery was fine with the pharmacist but he still had a business to run. The first words from Eli Gooding however surprised him as the black doctor came to the service counter with a big smile.

“Good afternoon, Mister Wallace! Could you tell me how much I owe you?”

Having a hard time believing his ears, James Wallace nonetheless fished his account book from under the counter.

“Uh, did you hit a gold mine or something like that lately, Doctor Gooding?”

Gooding grinned in response and presented the young woman standing by his side.

“This is the gold mine I struck, Mister Wallace. May I present you Miss Sarah Ur, from Palestine?”

Wallace, fascinated by her stunning beauty, quickly shook hands with the woman, who was dressed in a very fashionable modern female suit.

“Pleased to meet you, Miss Ur. And may I ask how you came to bankroll Doctor Gooding?”

“You may, Mister Wallace.” She answered in a melodious voice. “I am a field representative of the D’Orleans Social Trust, a charitable foundation based in France. I also am a reporter on assignment for the Jerusalem Times.”

“Oh, I see.” Said Wallace, his interest truly awakened now. He then looked through his account book and fingered the latest total owed by Gooding.

“Your debit total now stands at 144 dollars and 56 cents, Doctor Gooding.”

To the hidden pleasure of Wallace, who had all but written off that debt until now, Sarah took out of her purse a thick wad of money and counted out 145 dollars on the counter.

“Don’t bother with the small change, Mister Wallace: we are here to buy a lot of medical supplies. This is only so that we start with a clean slate.”

“Name what you need and I will do my best to accommodate you.” Replied the delighted pharmacist while picking up the money and then writing down the payment in order to put Gooding’s debit to zero. Sarah then smiled to Eli Gooding.

“Think large and don’t worry about the final bill, Doctor. Also, think long term: don’t stop at only one or two bottles per type of medication.”

“What is your credit limit exactly, Miss Ur?” Said Gooding, still unable to believe his luck. She gave him a warm smile and swept her arms around her.

“You may buy the whole store if you want, Doctor. Go for broke!”

“Hell, I think I will!”

With Wallace getting one of his two assistants to help him take out of his backroom storage the medical and pharmaceutical supplies, Gooding then proceeded in carefully running down a list of his needs, ordering supplies literally by the box. Wallace soon had to tell his second assistant to help load the boxes in Gooding’s old Ford station wagon, while his sales clerk got busy adding up the bill, with Sarah Ur paying cash as the boxes

were ferried outside and into Gooding's car. After a busy twenty minutes, the final bill rang to a staggering 3,879 dollars, while Wallace's backroom storage ended up all but empty. The pharmacist was ecstatic as he contemplated the sales bill and grinned to both Gooding and Ur.

"Hell, I wish I had business days like this more often! Your foundation is most generous, Miss Ur."

"Helping the poor and the downtrodden is our business, Mister Wallace. Thank you for your supplies and have a good day."

"I just had a very good one, thanks to you, miss." Replied Wallace, grinning. He then followed the woman and Gooding with his eyes as they walked out of his pharmacy.

"Damn, that girl is so cute!" He said in a low voice to his younger male assistant, who was also looking at Sarah.

"She sure is, Mister Wallace. I hope for her that she will be careful while going around town, though."

James Wallace nodded his head slowly, bitterness showing on his face: many city policemen were known to routinely abuse their powers in order to force young Negro women into sex. Unfortunately, the word of a black woman counted for little against that of a white policeman. As a liberal-minded, married man, that state of affair truly infuriated Wallace. He unfortunately could do very little about it.

Politely refusing Gooding's offer to give her a ride to her hotel in his car, now nearly full of medical supplies boxes, Sarah readjusted the strap of her black nylon carrying bag and started walking eastward down Monroe Street, waving to Gooding as the family doctor drove away. She felt good about the results of her day's work, but much was left to be done. Sarah was about to turn south on McDonough Street when a police car slowed down to a walking pace alongside her. The policeman in the front passenger seat stuck his head out and shouted at her.

"Hey, girl, need a ride?"

Sarah gave him a cold, unsympathetic look while still walking.

"No, thanks. I will walk."

"And where are you walking to on such a nice day?" Insisted the policeman, an overweight man in his thirties with 'redneck' written all over him.

"That, mister, is my business."

The man's smile then disappeared, replaced by a warning look.

“Watch your mouth, girl, or we will bring you to the police station for identification. You are dressed too smartly for a Negro girl.”

Sarah stopped then, forcing the driver of the police car to stop as well.

“I am a Palestinian reporter and I am conducting perfectly legal business, mister. If you had plans with me, forget them unless you want to be sued for wrongful arrest!” She then resumed her walk, turning the street corner and leaving the policeman stunned temporarily by her boldness. The policeman then looked at his driver, anger visible on his face.

“Who the hell does she think that she is? Catch up with her and cut her off, John!”

“With pleasure!” Replied with a mean smile John Biggelow, who then sped up and turned on McDonough Street before driving partly on the sidewalk and screeching to a halt. Both he and Jim Rourke then got out, taking out their batons as they went towards the young woman. Sarah, now stopped and tense, eyed them approach while debating about her courses of action. She didn’t want to use her powers so soon but she was not ready in turn to let herself be abused either. Jim Rourke stopped barely one pace away in front of her, brandishing his baton in her face.

“Show me your papers, slut!”

Without a word, Sarah took her passport out of an internal pocket of her jacket and handed it to the big policeman dominating her by a head. Rourke carefully examined the passport, then looked at her while holding on to it.

“This is the States here, not Palestine. When we ask a question, you answer us! Understood?”

“The only thing I understand is that you are abusing your powers, Officer. If you have any legal charges against me, then state them now or let me in peace.”

A few passersby, both white and black, gasped at her audacity, while Rourke nearly spat in her face and raised his voice to a near shout.

“You want to be charged? Fine! John, cuff her! We are booking her for suspected prostitution.”

Sarah felt instant anger at those words, as she knew what would be next. At a minimum, the policemen at the police station would be too happy to subject her to a strip search, with no other women present, of course. At the worst, she would probably be gang-raped at night in a cell. Her hand flying up at a lightning speed, she grabbed back her passport and then took one step back while pocketing quickly her passport.

“You make a pure mockery of the law, mister. Leave me alone or you will get your just reward.”

“It is you who will get a good lesson today, slut!” Replied Rourke, enraged, before rising his baton to strike her. Quickly stepping forward and lunging under his swing, Sarah punched him hard in the stomach, making the man collapse to his knees from the pain. Biggelow then rushed with his baton, only to be kicked in the chest hard enough to be projected backward, his feet coming off the sidewalk. He bounced on his police car and slid down on his bum, his breath taken away. Sarah then knocked out Rourke with an elbow to his temple, followed by the same to Biggelow. With the two policemen now down on the sidewalk, Sarah turned around to face the crowd of stunned bystanders, composed equally of blacks and whites.

“If this is what the law has sunken to in this city, then I pity you. You better start asking yourselves what God thinks of this sorry state, before he decides to have this place cleaned up.”

She then walked away towards her hotel. While the blacks present quickly dispersed, rightly fearing blind retaliation by other policemen, a few of the whites lingered on, unsure how to react to what was essentially a totally unheard of incident in the history of Montgomery. A white woman in her forties then shouted at the men around her.

“Well, are you going to let this nigger slut make the law around our city? Run after her or call the police, damn it!”

“I’ll call the police.” Said a man after a short hesitation, then running inside a nearby shop. The woman looked with indignation at the other men left around, still unmoving.

“That’s all you are going to do?”

A younger man, nearly a teenager, eyed her without sympathy.

“Miss, those cops wanted to arrest that girl only in order to be able to abuse and maybe rape her in prison. I heard and saw the whole exchange. That the girl is colored doesn’t give those cops a right to abuse her without reason.”

“You fucking nigger-lover!” Spat the woman, attracting an angry glare from the young white man.

“It is old farts like you who give a bad name to all of us! Didn’t you hear that the girl is Palestinian? Do you really want the Overseer of Palestine, Nancy Laplante, to descend on Montgomery and call the wrath of God on us? If she can heal thousands of people in seconds, imagine what she could do here to the ones she considers evil.”

“That Laplante is nothing but a witch!”

“A witch who saved us from years of war? Take off your blinders and start thinking straight, madam! Right now, I would applaud if Nancy Laplante showed up here and dispensed some true justice around.”

The young man then stomped away, leaving the woman livid. More than a few other whites however seemed to agree with the young man and also walked away without giving assistance to the unconscious policemen. Furious and seeing that nobody would act further, the woman also left the scene. By the time a police car came with sirens blaring, nobody was left around the two knocked down policemen, except for the man who had called the police station. The four policemen that jumped out of the patrol car looked at the scene with disbelief before rushing to check on their colleagues. The senior policeman, Sergeant Charles Hawkins, took the sole witness present to near the patrol car and took out his notepad and pen as one of his men called in an ambulance.

“What the hell happened here, mister?”

The civilian took a minute to describe what he had seen, attracting an incredulous look from Hawkins.

“You mean to say that a young woman about five foot tall took out cold two six foot plus policemen, by herself?”

“That’s it, Officer. It didn’t even look to be a challenge for her.”

“And you say that she is a foreigner?”

“I understand that she is from Palestine, Officer. She was very beautiful, with light brown skin and black hair. She said something about attracting the wrath of God on Montgomery after she knocked out your two policemen.”

“Describe her to me in detail, please.”

The civilian did so, after which Hawkins took his name and address so that he could be called on as a witness. By then, Jim Rourke was regaining consciousness. Hawkins crouched besides him and looked sternly at him.

“What happened here? How did you let a young woman beat you so easily?”

“She moved like lightning, Sergeant.” Protested weakly Rourke, still holding his stomach. “She was also incredibly strong.”

“We’ll see about that. Why did you want to arrest her?”

“We thought she was a prostitute: she had those fancy, expensive clothes and was new in town.”

“Are you sure that you simply didn’t want to have fun with her in a cell, Rourke?” Asked Hawkins, skeptical. He had no particular sympathy for Negroes but this business of harassing Negro girls diverted much time from fighting real crime, apart from discrediting the police force in the eyes of many respectable white citizens, starting with the local preachers. The wives of his policemen didn’t appreciate that abuse of Negro girls much either. Adultery, especially with Negro girls, was still adultery for them. Rourke, knowing that his supervisor was against such practices, did his best to deny it.

“Of course not, Sarge! That girl looked suspicious, that’s all.”

“Yeah, if you say so. We will talk about this again once you are checked out by a doctor. Could you identify that girl later on?”

“Sure can, Sarge! Her name is Sarah Ur and she is a rag head from Palestine. I was able to see her passport before she attacked us.”

The police sergeant frowned at that last sentence: either Rourke was lying about being attacked first or that girl was both confident and very dangerous.

“Did she state her business in Montgomery?”

“She pretended to be a reporter, but I knew better than believe that crap.”

Hawkins gave a hard stare at Rourke that unsettled the patrolman.

“Could you tell me why the hell a Palestinian woman would come all the way to Montgomery just to practice prostitution, Rourke? Was she dressed provocatively?”

“Uh, not really, Sarge.” Answered Rourke hesitantly, obviously tripping on himself for an explanation now. “She wore a gray suit made of a jacket and trousers.”

“Rourke, you are one piece of stupid shit!” Finally exploded Hawkins. “First of, your story doesn’t make any sense, unless your only goal was to have fun with her. Second, a civilian who witnessed the incident just told me that you rushed at her with your baton high before she went on the offensive. Right now, I simply can’t see what justification you had to try arresting her.”

“Damn it, Sarge!” Replied Rourke angrily. “Why are you trying to make it easy for a Negro?”

“Because she is not a Negro, you idiot!” Shouted back Hawkins, now realizing fully what really happened. “She is from Palestine, where a certain Nancy Laplante rules and performs miracles nearly daily. You really want Laplante to show up here and screw with us big time because you and Biggelow could only think with your dicks? Be sure that your stupidity will be noted in my report.”

Hawkins then got up and looked at the policemen that had come with him.

“Keith, take Biggelow’s patrol car and return it to the police station. Harris, you stay with Biggelow and Rourke until the ambulance arrives and then return to the station. Fuller, Crozer, you come with me.”

Getting back with the two policemen in the patrol car that had brought them, Hawkins then had George Fuller drive to the nearest hotel for Negroes that he knew. Hawkins reasoned that, as a foreigner, that Sarah Ur had to use an hotel instead of a private residence and that, since she had brown skin, probably would not have been accepted in any hotels reserved for white people. Fortunately, hotels for Negroes were few in Montgomery, with only two of them in the downtown area. His first stop was at the Southern Comfort Hotel, barely one block away on Washington Street. Hawkins looked critically at his driver before going out of the car: he knew George Fuller as a man who hated Negroes and who was probably the wrong man to go in the hotel with him right now. On the other hand, Mack Crozer was an honest young man who took his job seriously and who could think straight.

“You stay with the car, Fuller. Crozer, you come with me inside.”

Entering the tiny hotel with his young patrolman, Hawkins went to the service desk, where the Negro receptionist now watched cautiously as he and Crozer approached him. Hawkins spoke firmly but in a neutral tone to the receptionist as he lay against the desk.

“Do you have a young foreign woman by the name of Sarah Ur here?”

“Yes sir.” Answered the receptionist in a subdued voice. “She came back to the hotel a few minutes ago. She is in her room now.”

Hawkins nodded with satisfaction, then took out his notepad and pen.

“When did she arrive at your hotel initially?”

“At a bit past midnight this early morning, sir. She was arriving straight from Palestine.”

“How was she dressed then?”

The receptionist seemed confused by his question but answered nonetheless.

“She wore an Arabic robe with gold embroidering, sir.”

“And what is your name?”

“Joshua Brown, sir. I am the owner of this hotel.”

“What can you tell me about Miss Ur’s activities, Joshua?”

“She is a reporter, sir. She got up at six this morning, had breakfast, then went out for a while before coming back with a few local newspapers. She read those papers, then went out again. I didn’t see her again until she came back a few minutes ago.”

Hawkins thought over that information for a moment. The girl’s activity pattern, like her clothes, was certainly not like one would expect from a prostitute. Rourke’s story sounded more and more like bullshit to him. He looked back at the receptionist.

“Did she have a camera with her?”

“I’m not sure, sir. She did carry a black bag at the time and I saw her take out a small machine from it this morning and work with it.”

“What kind of machine?” Asked Hawkins, suddenly interested.

“I believe that it is one of those computers that are imported from the future, sir.”

Hawkins then looked at Crozer.

“Doesn’t sound to me like a prostitute at work, Mack.”

“No, Sarge!” Said the young patrolman. “You think that Rourke lied about her?”

“Think? Hell, I am now pretty sure of it. That asshole will need a good tongue-lashing later on.”

He then looked back at the receptionist.

“What room is Miss Ur in?”

“Room 211, sir.”

“Thank you! Mack, let’s go upstairs.”

Going up the stairs at a near run with Mack Crozer in his back, Hawkins quickly found Room 211 and stopped in front of it. He looked sternly at Crozer as the patrolman started to take out his service revolver.

“No need for that, Mack. We are not dealing with some foreign terrorist here.”

He then knocked on the door three times. A female voice came through the door a couple of seconds later.

“Who is it?”

“Police! Open up, miss!”

There was a short silence, then Hawkins heard the noise of footsteps approaching and of the door bolt being pulled before the door opened wide. He then found himself facing one of the most beautiful young women he had ever seen. She looked firmly at him, apparently not scared one bit. She certainly looked like a gutsy girl, thought Hawkins before nodding his head politely.

“Miss, are you Sarah Ur?”

"I am! I suppose that this visit is connected with the incident of sexual harassment involving your two patrolmen earlier on near the corner of Monroe and McDonough Streets?"

"Miss, let me decide how to characterize that incident. Do you recognize that you hit two city police officers a few minutes ago?"

"I did, but I acted in self-defense, after being called a slut in public and being unjustly accused of prostitution before being attacked by them."

"That may be so, miss, but I will have nonetheless to bring you to the police station for questioning."

Her stare then hardened, like her voice.

"Sergeant, I have to warn you that I will not let myself be strip-searched or abused by men, even if they are policemen. Also, be sure that I intend to complain to my government about this whole affair."

"Miss, I assure you that you will not be mistreated. I however have to handcuff you for the trip to the station."

To his surprise and relief, she then presented her two hands to him.

"Be my guest, Sergeant, but keep my warning in mind."

"I will!" Said Hawkins, meaning it. "Mack, cuff her...gently."

The young patrolman obeyed and put handcuffs around her wrists, being careful not to tighten them too much. Hawkins then had her escorted downstairs after collecting her purse with her permission. The receptionist looked with dismay at the trio when they came down to the lobby.

"But...what is she accused of, sir? Miss Ur is only a reporter from Palestine."

"She hit two policemen." Answered coldly Hawkins. "Don't worry: she will get due lawful process."

"Don't worry about me, Joshua." Said softly Sarah. "The sergeant seems to be a decent policeman. I will manage."

"Good luck, Miss Ur." Replied the receptionist, his voice strangled with worry, as she was led out of the hotel.

Hawkins traveled with Sarah on the rear bench seat of the patrol car during the ride to the police station. No words were exchanged until they arrived and entered the station, going first to the reception desk. The duty policeman at the desk, patrolman Harvey Woods, had a mean smile when he saw the handcuffed Sarah.

"You caught the slut real fast, Sarge."

"Watch your mouth, Harvey!" Said sternly Hawkins. "I brought Miss Ur in for questioning, not to book her."

"But, she beat up Biggelow and Rourke, Sarge!" Protested Woods, surprised and incensed.

"Maybe they deserved the beating." Said Hawkins before pointing a door down the back of the reception room to Sarah.

"Let's go to that interview room."

While they crossed the reception room, Hawkins briefly stopped besides the desk of the telephone receptionist, a woman in her thirties.

"Mary, could you come with me for a second? I need someone to search this woman."

"Sure, Charlie!" Replied Mary Etheridge, relieved to see that this was not going to turn into another dirty fun session for some policemen. She got up and asked a secretary to take over her station for a minute, then followed Hawkins, Crozer and the brown girl inside the interview room. Hawkins first had Crozer remove the handcuffs from Sarah, then asked the girl to empty her pockets on the small table of the interview room. Next, he left briefly the room with Crozer to let Mary search the young woman for any hidden weapon. Mary opened the door a moment later.

"She is clean, Charlie. May I go back to my switchboard now?"

"You can. Thanks for your assistance, Mary. Mack, you stay outside and guard the door."

Closing the door behind him, Hawkins then invited Sarah to sit down at the table, then sat opposite her and grabbed her purse, opening it and emptying it on the table. He then took his notepad and started noting carefully the girl's possessions. While she had no weapons with her, the amount of cash money and the checking books in her possession shocked him.

"Miss, could you explain how come you have over 21,000 dollars in cash with you, along with personalized checks from a charity foundation?"

"That's easy enough, Sergeant." She said with a neutral expression. "Apart from being here to make a report for the Jerusalem Times, I also am acting as a field representative of the D'Orleans Social Trust. I am distributing charity money to help the poor of Montgomery. As you can plainly see, I am no prostitute, despite what your policemen claimed."

“That may be so, miss,” replied Hawkins, “but you still hit them. I cannot by myself decide to close the book on that incident and let you free. Chief Ingalls will decide on that.”

“And what happens in the meantime?” Asked Sarah calmly. Hawkins couldn’t help admire her assurance then.

“I will have to keep you at the station, in temporary custody but without fingerprinting or photographing.”

“What about my cash money? It is liable to disappear if left in some evidence locker.”

Hawkins had to think over that for a while. She was quite right to be worried, as her cash represented a very large sum. As much as it pained him as a conscientious policeman, he had no illusions about the honesty of some of his colleagues. Gathering Sarah’s belongings and cash and putting them inside her purse, he then handed the purse to her and got up from his chair.

“I will let you hang on to your things for the moment, miss. However, if Chief Ingalls decides to book you, you will have to hand over your purse as evidence.”

“Then, know this and inform your chief of police as well, Sergeant: I already contacted my embassy in Washington and lodged a complaint before you arrived at my hotel. Any blatant abuse against me will be looked upon severely by the Overseer of Palestine.”

“Why would your ruler be so concerned about a lone citizen, miss?” Said Hawkins, skeptical. Sarah stared gravely into his eyes.

“Because she cares about every single one of her citizens, Sergeant. Furthermore, the subject of racial segregation in the United States is a very sensitive one for her, as you should know.”

Hawkins nodded once, feeling apprehension now. Everybody knew how powerful that woman was and how much she hated racism. This could indeed turn still into a very ugly incident.

“I will pass the word, miss. Please follow me.”

Going out of the interview room, Hawkins then escorted Sarah to the cell block, where he had the policeman on guard duty open an empty cell.

“Please step in, miss.”

She obeyed without fuss and sat on the cell’s bed. The guard hesitated while looking at her purse.

“We are not taking away her things, Sarge?”

“Not now, Connors. She is not charged with any offense yet. Just leave her alone and serve her supper at six, until the chief can decide on whether to charge her or not.”

“Understood, Sarge.” Said Connors, who then closed and locked the door of the cell. He and Hawkins then left the cell block, leaving Sarah alone with five prisoners locked up in nearby cells. Two of them were obviously prostitutes, one white and one black, another one was a drunk snoring loudly in his cell and the two others were black men with bruises on their faces. Sarah’s cell faced that of the two prostitutes, who looked back with curiosity at her through the bars of their cell.

“So,” said the white prostitute, a rather plain woman in her late twenties and with a generous chest, “what are you here for, dear?”

“Resisting sexual harassment. My name is Sarah.”

The two prostitutes giggled at her answer. The white one then spoke again.

“And my name is Betty. Those pigs can often be just that, pigs. They think that their badges allows them to do as they wish.”

“That sergeant seemed decent enough to me, Betty.”

The white prostitute nodded her head soberly.

“Charlie Hawkins is indeed a decent man. In fact, he is about the only exception to the rule in a barrel full of bad apples. The guard, Jerry Connors, is also decent enough.”

“What about the police chief?” Asked Sarah, drawing a look of disgust from both prostitutes.

“Ingalls is a pure bastard!” Was Betty’s firm answer. “He once forced me to perform an act on him before he would let me go. He and Judge Carter make quite a pair. If your fate is really to be decided by Chief Ingalls, then you better expect lots of trouble.”

“Especially if he treats you like a Negro.” Added the black prostitute. “Ingalls, apart from being the police chief, also happens to be the local leader of the Ku Klux Klan. Ask those two unfortunate men if you don’t believe me.”

Sarah looked briefly at the two young men prostrated in their cell and nursing their wounds, then looked back at the black prostitute, who couldn’t be more than twenty and was truly pretty.

“What is your name, friend?”

“Cynthia. Say, isn’t Sarah a Jewish name?”

“It is. I am a reporter from Jerusalem, in Palestine.”

The eyes of the prostitutes lit up with interest at those words.

“Could you tell us about Palestine?” Asked Cynthia, hopeful. “We heard so many fantastic tales about it. Is it true that their ruler can perform miracles?”

“It is, girls.” Said proudly Sarah. “The Overseer, Nancy Laplante, has the power of healing via the touch of her hands, plus many other powers.”

She then changed the subject of conversation. “And you, girls? How long do you expect to be here?”

“It could be a while.” Said glumly Cynthia. “If I don’t come up with the money for the fine Judge Carter will probably lay on me, I could end up in jail for a few months, or years.”

“The same here.” Said Betty. “However, my fine will probably be much less than for Cynthia: Carter is much more tough on Negro criminals than on white ones. What did you do exactly, Sarah? Say no to a horny cop?”

“That and knock him and his partner out when they attacked me.”

Her calm answer froze the two prostitutes with stupor.

“You beat up two cops?” Exclaimed Cynthia, horrified. “Ingalls is going to kill you for that!”

“I don’t think so, Cynthia.” Answered Sarah calmly. “If he has any brains, he will let me go quietly.”

“Ingalls has no brains!” Retorted Betty, apparently very serious. “He is the police chief only because he is a mean bastard and keeps Negroes in line. Count yourself lucky if you get out of here with only a beating and a gang-rape.”

“You really believe that, Betty?” Asked Sarah, eyeing her gravely. The prostitute nodded once.

“Take it from an old hand, Sarah. I have seen things during my various times in the slammer that would have made you shiver. Unfortunately, the word of a prostitute doesn’t count for much against that of a cop in Montgomery. The word of a negro counts for even less.”

“It sounds like this city is in dire need of the justice of The One.” Said Sarah calmly, drawing a skeptical look from Cynthia.

“If you mean the justice of God, then God has forgotten the negroes in Alabama and in the other southern states. Here, the only justice you will get is that of Ingalls, Carter and the KKK.”

“The One never forgets anyone.” Was Sarah’s resolute reply. “Count my words.”

An embarrassed silence then fell between them, broken fifteen minutes later with the noise of a key unlocking the steel door of the cell block. The guard then entered the block, followed by the two policemen who had been beaten by Sarah and by a big, pudgy man dressed in a cheap suit. The man in the suit eyed with hatred Sarah, then glanced at the guard.

“Leave us alone and close the door behind you but don’t lock it, Connors.” The guard hesitated, looking with worry at Sarah, then left as ordered without a word. Sarah got up slowly from the bed, while the two prostitutes and the two black men looked on with apprehension. As for the drunk, he simply kept snoring away. The man in the suit stared hard at Sarah for a moment, making a show of unmasking the revolver at his belt, then spoke with a deep southern drawl.

“So, you think that being a reporter and a foreigner would allow you to beat two of my men with impunity, hey? Well, you will now learn that a foreign nigger is still a nigger here in Montgomery and is treated accordingly.” Instead of cowering in a corner, as Betty and Cynthia expected, Sarah stood calmly in the middle of her cell and stared back at the man.

“May I have your name before The One passes judgment on you, mister?” The man laughed hard at her words, then gave her a cruel smile.

“If you are talking about what you call God back in Jerusalem, then forget his help, bitch! As for my name, I am Nathan Ingalls, Chief of Police of Montgomery, and I can do whatever I want with dirty niggers like you. Rourke, Biggelow, get in there and teach her a proper lesson.”

As a grinning Rourke unlocked Sarah’s cell door, Ingalls drew out his revolver and pointed it at her between the bars of her cell.

“You as much as try to hit back my men and I shoot you dead for assaulting a policeman, nigger girl.”

“NO! DON’T!” Suddenly shouted Betty, running to the bars of her cell. “YOU HURT HER AND I WILL TESTIFY AGAINST YOU, I SWEAR!”

“And who will believe a washed out prostitute like you.” Replied Ingalls with contempt while looking at her. “You can’t even give a proper blowjob anymore. Besides, if you don’t shut up, you will learn what happens to nigger lovers around here.”

“The One will believe her.” Said Sarah with contained anger. She then raised both arms high and looked up. “LET JUSTICE BE DONE!”

She then turned nearly instantly into an eye-searing blue ball of light that exploded outwards with the resounding clap of thunder. A wave of blue light surged outwards at hypersonic speed, going through walls without causing apparent damage and bathing everything and everyone in its light for many seconds as it expanded out. It then faded away, letting the stunned persons in the cell block look with blinking eyes at Sarah, who had returned to normal. Ingalls, near panic, raised his revolver to aim at her head.

“You fucking nigger witch! I’ll...”

He then saw his right hand: it was ebony black. His mouth opening in horror, he looked at his other hand, then frantically pulled up one of his trousers legs: his whole body was now apparently of the deepest black similar to that of the blackest negroes around Montgomery. He screamed with absolute horror while scratching at his skin, as if hoping it would turn to its normal pink again. Biggelow and Rourke, also completely black, screamed in unison with him, while more screams could be heard from around the police station through the steel door of the cell block. Betty looked at all this with disbelief, surprised to find that her own skin had not changed color except for maybe a very faint touch of extra brown in her skin pigmentation. As for the four negroes in the cell block, they were the same as before as far as she could see. Ingalls, now mad with despair, leveled his revolver again through the bars of Sarah’s cell.

“YOU WITCH! YOU WILL PAY FOR THIS!”

He then emptied frantically his revolver at her, with the loud detonations echoing around the cell block and waking up the drunk with a startle. Biggelow and Rourke imitated him, tears of despair in their eyes. To the stunned surprise of all, Sarah faced calmly the barrage of bullets, apparently unarmed by it. As the three men frantically started reloading their revolvers, Jerry Connors and Charles Hawkins burst in the cell block, guns drawn. Both looked with disbelief at the scene, with Hawkins sighing with relief at seeing that Sarah was apparently unharmed. Ingalls then looked with mad eyes at Hawkins.

“SHOOT HER! SHOOT HER, DAMMIT! SHE TURNED US INTO NIGGERS!”

Only then did he realize that both Hawkins and Connors wore nothing more than the equivalent of a very light suntan. His jaw tightened with rage then and he closed the cylinder of his revolver, two fresh bullets in it.

“YOU FUCKING TRAITOR! YOU ARE IN LEAGUE WITH HER!”

Hawkins barely had time to shoot first before Ingalls could shoot him, hitting him squarely in the heart and projecting him backwards. Hawkins and Connors then had to shoot repeatedly at Biggelow and Rourke, who had also raised their revolvers at them. The two surviving policemen then stood with smoking revolvers over the three bodies, shaken by what had just happened, before looking at Sarah, still standing calmly in the middle of her cell.

“What happened?” Asked Hawkins with a weak voice, feeling close to becoming insane. Sarah answered him softly.

“Justice was done. That’s what happened, Sergeant Hawkins. All the racists in the World will now look like the ones they despised so much. The darker their heart was, the darker their skin will be.”

“But, how...”

“Through the powers of The One. I am one of his messengers, Sergeant. Injustice and bigotry has been allowed for too long in Alabama and in other similar places and I came to deal with it.”

A gunshot then rang from somewhere inside the police station, prompting Hawkins and Connors into running out of the cell block. Betty shouted at them.

“HEY! WHAT ABOUT US! LET US OUT!”

The two men didn’t listen to her, though, and left her looking at the three dead policemen on the floor of the hallway. Sarah, her purse slung from one shoulder, approached the bars of her cell and pointed an arm out between two bars, towards the right hand of Jim Rourke. The key ring in the dead man’s hand then flew off by itself, landing into Sarah’s waiting hand. Sarah unlocked her cell door as Betty knelt in her cell, imitated by Cynthia and the two black young men.

“You...you must be an angel.”

“Not yet, Betty. I am however one of the Chosen of The One.”

Sarah finished unlocking her cell door, then opened it and went to unlock the cells of the other five prisoners. Gathering them around her, she looked softly at each of them in turn.

“Much blood will be spilled today, but it will be evil blood spilled from within. Things will however be chaotic for a while, so you better go back to your homes and stay locked inside for a while.”

“But our personal effects, keys and cash are still locked up.” Replied Betty. “We will need them to go home.”

“Then show me where the lockup room is.”

Betty nodded and cautiously walked out of the cell block and into the hallway leading to the reception room of the police station. Seeing nobody, she turned left towards the reception room, finding Mary Etheridge and the police station’s secretary cowering there in a corner. The policeman that had been on duty at the reception desk was dead, having apparently shot himself in the head. His skin was now black, while that of the secretary was medium brown. Mary’s skin was unchanged. Sarah went to the two women and crouched besides them, speaking softly to Mary.

“You have nothing to fear, Mary. Let me help you up.”

“What...what happened?” Asked a shaking Mary while getting up with her help.

“All the racists in the World were just marked by The One. They will now see that race is only skin-deep.”

“What do you mean, marked?” Asked the secretary besides Mary, frantic, while scratching her left forearm. Sarah gave her a cold stare.

“It means that your skin is now as dark as your heart, miss. You, like too many others in the United States, kept treating African-Americans like inferiors, denying them their full rights as American citizens. In doing that, you also went against the will of The One, who created all the human spirits equal.”

“BUT I CAN’T STAY LIKE THIS!” Shouted the now hysterical secretary, bordering on tears. Sarah could however feel no sympathy for her plight and showed none.

“You will stay like this as long as you won’t be sincerely ready to accept all the other human beings around you as your equals in everything, miss. In the meantime, you will live through what your previous victims had to go through.”

“NOO! NOOO!” Screamed the secretary in a shrill voice before running out of the reception room. Sarah was about to say something to calm Mary when the telephone switchboard on Mary’s desk buzzed loudly, announcing an incoming call. Seeing that Mary was still too shaken up to do her job right now, Sarah went to the switchboard and put on its headset before taking the call.

“Montgomery police station.”

The voice at the other end of the line was that of a woman stricken with panic.

“Send a police car, quick! My husband just shot himself.”

“Please calm down, madam. What is your name and address?”

“I’m Susan Blaine and I live at 482 South Ripley Street. Can you send a car quickly?”

Sarah wrote down quickly the information on the large notepad on the desk. She felt bad for the woman living through such an awful moment but a lot more of the same was happening right now around Montgomery. It was unfortunately the only, albeit painful way left to make the lesson from The One stick.

“Is your husband still alive, madam?”

The woman then broke completely, unable to answer Sarah for long seconds. Meanwhile, lights started lighting up on the switchboard. The woman finally answered in a desperate, near shout.

“No he’s not! His head is half blown off!”

“Madam, I am getting a lot of calls right now. The policemen here are already swamped trying to help the living. Your call has however been noted down and help will come as soon as possible. Cover your husband’s body with a sheet in the meantime and lock your doors for your own safety.”

Sarah then switched to another incoming line, getting basically the same kind of desperate story. She was noting down the details of her third call when Mary touched her arm and spoke weakly.

“I will take it from here, miss. That’s my job after all.”

“You’re a brave woman, Mary.”

Mary’s response was to stare accusingly at Sarah.

“You caused all this, right? How could you be so calm now?”

Sarah stared back without hostility at the receptionist: Mary was visibly not a racist but she was still losing friends and other people she knew around town and had reasons to be upset.

“I was only the messenger, Mary. The One grew tired and decided to act. This will be a painful lesson but it is a needed lesson nonetheless. By the way, I doubt that more than a handful of policemen will be available now, so don’t promise help too fast and concentrate on helping the people still alive and in need of urgent help.”

“And what will you do in the meantime? Celebrate your victory over the bigots of Montgomery?”

Sarah looked at her gravely for a second.

“Mary, I am not that kind of person, believe me. Besides, what happened here happened in the whole World, not only in Montgomery. To answer you, I will patrol the streets tonight to prevent crazed gunmen from hurting innocent people.”

Sarah then turned and faced the five ex-prisoners, who were giving her sober stares.

“Let’s get your things now. Then, I will escort you home before real hell breaks loose.”

19:42 (Washington Time)

The White House

Washington, D.C.

“So, is it that damn Nancy Laplante at work again?” Shot President Harry Truman at the sullen director of the FBI, who had just entered the Oval Office with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Omar Bradley. The President was relieved to see that both men looked normal except for Edgar Hoover, who sported what looked like a deep suntan. The FBI director looked grim as he answered Truman.

“We don’t think so, Mister President. The first news from our FBI office in Birmingham, Alabama, is that a young Palestinian woman who is clearly not Laplante is involved in this. That woman, who is presently in Montgomery, was the source of the burst of blue light that covered the World.”

“The World?” Said Truman, stunned. General Bradley nodded once, somber.

“Yes, Mister President. We now have reports from our various bases around the World on this blue wave of light. From the various sightings, we now know that the wave traveled around the whole World in less than one hour. An Air Force pilot flying over Maxwell Air Force Base at the time of the burst also was able to determine that the burst originated from downtown Montgomery. Reports from our bases also confirm that a number of our white servicemen and women were affected by the wave and saw their skins darken to various degrees. Some of them, who had turned black or nearly black, committed suicide. The locals around our bases were also affected but apparently to a lesser degree. It seems that the more racist a person was, the darker their skin turned.”

“That must be a plot from Laplante.” Spat Truman, slamming his fist on his desk. “She has been pestering us for years to get rid of segregation in the States. That Palestinian woman in Montgomery must be in league with her.”

“Probably so, Mister President.” Agreed Hoover. “However, that also shows that Nancy Laplante is not the only Chosen alive now. I would also caution against moving against Laplante: this is clearly an act of God, sir.”

“That act of God already cost me two members of my staff who committed suicide, Director Hoover!” Replied Truman. “God knows how many more Americans died because of this.”

“Lots, Mister President.” Said grimly Hoover. “Our FBI offices through the southern states report widespread chaos and countless suicides. The local police forces and governments were particularly hard hit: it seems that they harbored some of the most hardcore racists in the country and thus were affected most by the blue wave. Right now, I would put the death toll around the States at about a minimum of two millions, all from suicides.”

“Dear God! And you still say that we shouldn’t consider this an act of war on the part of Palestine, Director Hoover?”

John Edgar Hoover was silent for a second, trying to find the best words for something impossible to describe fully.

“Mister President, this was an act of God, pure and simple. Are we going to declare war on God, or The One, as Nancy Laplante calls him?”

That deflated Truman in one mighty hurry. Bowing his head, he shook it while speaking in a subdued tone.

“No, we can’t do that.”

General Bradley then used that interlude to offer a suggestion.

“Mister President, I believe that restoring order in the country is our top priority now. With the decimation of the police forces in the southern states and the number of distraught people there, we are liable to see wide scale riots and looting soon. The army should be called in and martial law proclaimed.”

“Martial law...in the United States?” Said Truman, discouraged. Hoover nodded his head then.

“It is a painful measure to take, Mister President, but I believe that General Bradley is right. We cannot allow anarchy to reign in our country.”

“Alright, gentlemen.” Said Truman weakly. “I will arrange for a nationwide presidential address on the radio for nine O’clock this evening to announce the imposition of martial law in the United States. The armed forces will deploy in the states of South Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas and restore order there, with the assistance of the FBI. Also, federal authority will overrule state authority in matters of law and order until further notice. General Bradley, this will be a big job, so use all of the armed services as needed and don’t hesitate to use negro troops as well, even if some Southerners won’t like that.”

“Yes, Mister President!”

With a nod from Truman, Bradley and Hoover then turned around and left the President alone in the Oval Office. Getting up tiredly from his chair, Truman went out of his office, intent on seeing his wife for a few minutes to search for her moral support and counsel. He met one of his stewards on his way, a negro man who had worked in the White House for over ten years now. Stopping close to him, Truman spoke in a low voice, not wanting anybody else to hear them.

“Tom, tell me frankly: what do the negroes think of what just happened in the South?”

“That God finally gave us justice, Mister President.” Replied without hesitation the servant. “I am sorry to see deaths come out of this but this is the happiest day of my life, Mister President. Maybe my children will now be able to use a public swimming pool without being thrown out immediately for supposedly dirtying the water. God spoke and we should listen, Mister President.”

Truman patted gently the man’s shoulder.

“We will, Tom, we will.”

08:26 (Alabama Time)

Wednesday, May 9, 1951 ‘B’

Southern Comfort Hotel

Montgomery, Alabama

Joshua Brown nervously snapped his head around when someone knocked on the main door of the hotel: the last night had been a tense one indeed, with sounds of gunshots and screams around the city. Then, maybe one hour ago, a military truck had slowly gone down the street, with an officer using a megaphone to inform the citizens of

Montgomery that martial law had been proclaimed and that a night curfew would be imposed from nine at night to six in the morning. Grabbing the double-barreled shotgun he kept under his service counter, Joshua cautiously approached the main door, careful not to face it directly. He could see three men and a woman, all of them white, through the door's glass window.

"Who is it?"

"FBI! Open up!"

Made extra cautious by the night's events, Joshua stuck his face in the door's window but didn't unlock it yet.

"Could you show me your badge, mister?"

The man nearest the door, a big one with wide shoulders and short red hair, patiently produced a badge holder and pressed it against the window, so that Joshua could look at it. Now reassured, Joshua unlocked the door and opened it wide, careful to keep his shotgun pointing down in a non-threatening way. The big redhead eyed his shotgun critically before looking down at Joshua, who was a good fifteen centimeters shorter than him.

"Do you have a young Palestinian woman by the name of Sarah Ur in this hotel, mister?"

Joshua scratched his head in wonderment: for a simple reporter, the young Palestinian sure attracted the attention of many since her arrival.

"Miss Ur is in fact one of my tenants, sir. You are in luck: she is having breakfast right now in the lounge. It is the first door to your left. Is she in trouble?"

The big special agent hesitated for a second before answering.

"Probably not, mister. Thank you. And, please, could you put away that shotgun?"

"Oh, sure!" Said Joshua, smiling, before hurrying back behind the service counter and hiding his shotgun in its original place. Seeing that, the big agent led his three colleagues in the nearby lounge, where they found three negro men and a young Semitic woman with long black hair sitting around a table and having coffee and toasts. The FBI agents immediately concentrated their attention on the woman: she was extremely beautiful, wore an embroidered Arabic robe and had a small purse slung from a thin strap passing across her chest. Her robe was made of holographic silk, which was imported from the future and was in high demand everywhere now. The fabric shone from royal blue to purple and had silver embroidering. The robe and her physical

beauty combined to make the girl truly fascinating. The senior agent whispered from the corner of his mouth to the nearest male agent.

“She sure looks like a princess straight out of the Arabian nights.”

“Or like an angel from heaven.” Replied the other agent. The four agents then cautiously approached the table, watched by the girl and the negro men. They stopped two paces away, with the senior agent flashing his badge again.

“Miss Ur, I am FBI Special Agent Daniel O’Connell and these are Special Agents Daley, Aylmer and Donovan. We would like to ask you a few questions.”

“I will answer them with pleasure, lady and gentlemen.” She replied in a clear, melodious voice before looking at the men sitting around her. “I won’t be long, guys.” She then grabbed her cup and plate and moved to another, empty table and invited the agents to sit with her. The agents took her invitation and sat facing her in a semi-circle as she eyed them with seriousness.

“I believe that you want to see me about the events of yesterday, Mister O’Connell.”

“That is correct, miss. Witnesses at the city police station told us that you produced the wave of blue light that swept around the World and turned numerous people black. Is that correct?”

“It is.” She said calmly, taking the agents by surprise by her candidness. “The police chief and two of his men wanted to attack and rape me in my cell after I was brought in for questioning. That was after I was harassed sexually in the street by the two patrolmen who were with Chief Ingalls and I had to defend myself. At that point, The One had exhausted his patience and decided to teach a lesson to all the racists in the World.”

O’Connell, who had been scribbling notes, eyed her sharply.

“The One? You are saying that God and not you produced that wave of light?”

“Mister O’Connell,” said Sarah patiently, “I and The One were truly one at the time. My body was a conduit for him during the energy surge and my mind was in complete communion with him then.”

The four agents stared silently at Sarah for a moment, digesting her words. As for the three African-American men eating at the nearby table, they were now staring wide-eyed at Sarah with their mouths open. O’Connell finally managed to get over his shock.

“Miss Ur, are you aware of the effects of that wave of blue light?”

“I am, mister. The deaths that followed were regrettable but were the result of bigoted minds refusing to accept the judgment of The One. The only effect of the wave was to turn their skin as dark as their souls. The truly good people in Montgomery were not affected in any way, except when those bigots marked by The One tried to get revenge by attacking innocent people. I was able to stop many of these crazed bigots but not all, unfortunately.”

“What do you mean, stopped them, miss?” Asked O’Connell, his attention refocused. “How did you do that?”

“Simple, mister: after the wave went through the city, I walked through the streets and killed the ones I found shooting at innocents. I also killed a few black men who had used the temporary breakdown of order to attack and rape white women.”

The four FBI agents swallowed hard at the casual way Sarah pronounced those words. Now furiously tempted to draw his revolver at her, O’Connell looked sharply at the young and beautiful woman facing him and sipping at her cup of coffee.

“What kind of weapon did you use, miss? Do you have a gun permit?” Sarah’s answer was to show her right hand palm up and to make a crackling ball of blue energy appear in it. The four agents jumped backward out of their chairs in unison at that sight, drawing a smile from her while the ball disappeared from her hand.

“I am a weapon if need be, Mister O’Connell. Understand that I am a Chosen of The One, with all the powers that it entails.”

“A...a Chosen, like the Overseer of Palestine, Nancy Laplante?”

“That’s correct, mister. There is more than one Chosen in Palestine.”

She suddenly closed her eyes and appeared to listen to some silent message, then opened her eyes again to look gravely at the agents.

“I am afraid that I am needed in South Africa now: the racists there are planning mass massacres as a revenge for being turned black. If you will excuse me, gentlemen.”

She then disappeared into thin air, leaving the four agents and the three black men staring at where she had been sitting. Darlene Donovan, the female agent, passed a trembling hand on her now sweating face.

“Dear God! The powers of that woman are scaring me shitless! What do we do now, Dan?”

“We report back to Washington by telephone. Then, we help straighten the mess around this city. The four surviving city cops and three deputy sheriffs left will certainly need all the help they can get to restore order.”

“Don’t forget to tell Washington that it can expect a bloodbath among white racists in South Africa soon, Dan.” Said Richard Daley, an ex-lawyer turned agent. O’Connell nodded his head, a faint smile on his face.

“That I will do too. I once visited South Africa while covering an international case. I can’t say that I will be sorry for that bunch of bigoted snobs.”

CHAPTER 12 – RECORD SETTING

22:31 (California Time)

Friday, May 2, 1952 'C'

Prototypes hangar, North Base

Muroc Air Force Base

California, USA

“Excited about your incoming flight, General Dows?”

Ingrid, dressed in a bulky pressurized flight suit and with the faceplate of her helmet still opened, smiled at General Hoyt Vandenberg’s question and gave the Chief of Staff of the Air Force a sparkling look.

“You bet, sir! You are sure that we can’t make the results official after this?”

“Not if we want to preserve secrecy. I would have loved to be able to pull out my tongue at the Soviets and the British, not to say at the Navy as well, but even saying that the XF-83 exists, or that any of our present prototypes save for the A-3 exist, would ruin all our past efforts at keeping your programs secret. Be assured though that any noteworthy result will be kept in the Air Force books. We also have a NACA¹² official with Top Secret clearance present that will be able to vouch for our flight data once we will be ready to publicize your performance. So, how do you intend to proceed?”

“We will fly straight west to sea at first and take some distance, in order to stay away from the air traffic control radars of the Los Angeles area, then will turn around for our speed run. We should be at our maximum speed by the time we overfly Muroc again, sir.”

“And what speed do you expect to attain, General Dows?” Asked Brigadier General Albert Boyd, the base commander of Muroc, who had been the temporary head of the test program while Ingrid was in Indochina. Ingrid shrugged her shoulders then and answered truthfully.

“Your guess is as good as mine, General Boyd. Up to now, the XF-83 has been pushed up to Mach 2.6 with moderate ramjet thrust, in order to verify the efficiency of the

¹² NACA : National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics. The predecessor of the NASA.

internal cooling system for the cockpit, canopy and electronics bays, but we still had a lot of reserve ramjet power left to try. We also still know little about the exact workings of ramjet engines at high supersonic speeds, so this flight will be a true pioneering one. I am however pretty sure that we will approach or attain Mach 3 but, after that, I can't say."

"Mach 3!" Said Vandenberg in a dreamy tone. "Just getting there would be fantastic, apart from making you easily the fastest pilot ever. When I think that we first broke through the speed of sound barely five years ago and that we still don't have a single supersonic combat aircraft in service. Your new planes you are developing here will truly revolutionize the Air Force. I make you a promise, though: if this test flight goes well and if the TF-58R engine fulfill its promises, then I will get Under Secretary Kenney to ask Congress to fund the acquisition of a pre-series batch, to equip an operational test squadron."

Ingrid's heart jumped at those words, as she saw herself about to fulfill one of her dreams. She then gave Vandenberg a devilish smile.

"Then, would you allow me to choose which unit gets that honor, sir?"

"Depends how well you do tonight, General Dows." Replied Vandenberg, equally malicious. "Which unit did you have in mind?"

"Our most combat experienced and decorated fighter-bomber squadron in the Air Force, sir: the 170th Fighter Squadron, 'The Witches', presently stationed in the Philippines and flying F-86 SABRE fighters. They are still considered rightly as the elite of the Air Force."

Vandenberg smiled, having somewhat expected that answer.

"Some would say that you are being sexist with that choice, but you are right about the 170th Fighter Squadron being a truly elite combat unit. Their war record would certainly have put them anyway in the top list for becoming the operational test unit for the F-83. Give me Mach 3 and you will have a deal, General Dows."

"Thank you, General. You can't know how much that means to me. Well, I better get into my plane if I am to break records tonight. I will see you on my return, General...or in pilot heaven if something goes wrong."

"Good luck, General Dows." Replied Vandenberg, now serious. He knew very well how dangerous her job was and the kind of risks she was going to take tonight by flying into totally unknown territory in terms of flight dynamics. He, Boyd and the other officers and engineers around him then backed away to let the technicians finish hooking

the XF-83 to a towing vehicle. The prototype fighter-bomber, with Ingrid and Captain James Ridley sitting in the cockpit, was soon pulled out of the hangar and onto the tarmac, where the two big combination turbofan-ramjet engines were lit up. As the XF-83 started rolling towards the runway, Brigadier General Boyd pointed a group of waiting staff cars nearby to General Vandenberg.

"If you will follow me, General, we will now go to the control tower, where we will be able to follow our prototype on radar. Our telemetry team is already established there in the control room under the watch tower."

"Very well, General Boyd."

As they started walking towards the staff cars, Vandenberg gave a longing look at the prototype XB-50 supersonic bomber sitting inside the hangar with two other prototypes: he would have given one of his eyes to fly it. On the other hand, he could always push rank and 'request' that Dows let him fly the XB-50 before he had to return to Washington.

The trip to the control tower was short and they were able to step inside the control room barely four minutes later. Vandenberg however elected to go up at first in the watch tower with Boyd, to visually watch the XF-83 take off. With the tarmac lights of the North Base off in order to prevent photography from a distance, only the blue jet exhausts of the XF-83's engines were visible to Vandenberg, approaching one end of the main runway. He watched in silence with Boyd as the prototype started its takeoff run, raising its nose and starting its climb after an impressively short roll, softly whispering to himself as the plane flew away.

"May God be with you, General Dows."

23:19 (California Time)

Over the Pacific Ocean, 400 kilometers west of Point Conception

"Time to turn around, Ingrid." Announced James Ridley on the intercom. "We are at the right spot and at the altitude of 60,000 feet and should have more than enough room to accelerate to our maximum speed before hitting back the coast."

"Hitting is the right word, James. Our sonic boom should wake a few people up once we start overflying land again."

"Well, we certainly have the list of complaints by telephone in Muroc to prove that." Said philosophically the flight engineer. He then checked the green luminescent scope of their radar. The XF-83 had finally received barely two weeks ago its intended air intercept radar system and the difference in performances compared to the older model radar they had used to date was dramatic. A fully solid-state digital radar, their new set had an air detection range of over 170 kilometers. That radar was in turn supplemented by another radar dedicated to ground mapping and surveillance, something that added greatly to the combat potential of the XF-83.

"The sky is clear for at least sixty miles around us, Ingrid, and we are far above everybody else flying right now."

"What? No Navy test aircraft around trying to catch us?" Replied Ingrid, making James chuckle.

"A Navy aircraft, this high and this fast? Dream on! I can't help feeling sympathy for those poor Navy pukers calling themselves test pilots in China Lake: they must be a truly depressed lot these days, stuck with piloting all those flying wheelbarrows."

Ingrid laughed at that as she was performing a wide turn at subsonic speed in order to line up on the heading back to Muroc.

"I tell you what, James: once we will have overflown Muroc and our top speed has been recorded on the ground, we will do a wide turn to port in order to decelerate and come back to land."

James chuckled again: such a turn would make them fly over the China Lake Naval Air Station while they would still be supersonic.

"Then I suggest that we go down at the same time to test the efficiency of our airbrakes at low altitude before landing in Muroc, Ingrid."

"A brilliant suggestion, James. I am now lined up on Muroc. Ready to record our flight and engine parameters?"

"Affirmative! Our recorders are on and all our flight telemetry sensors are functioning. Go for gold, Ingrid!"

"Then, here we go!" Said Ingrid while starting to push her engine throttles forward gradually. She first pushed her turbofans to maximum dry power, easily breaking through the sound barrier and accelerating steadily towards Mach 2. She then lit up the ramjet sections of her engines and was immediately pushed back in her seat at once under the force of the acceleration. She attained Mach 2 while her ramjet settings were still at only ten percent of maximum power. All the while, James Ridley was

carefully noting down manually their speed, engine power setting and fuel consumption rate, even though instrument packages did the same electronically. If something went wrong and they had to eject, then they would at least have those written notes left to study. He was also monitoring the position settings of their forward canard surfaces, which could move slightly forward or aft on internal rails in order to keep the aircraft trimmed for level flight despite the changes to the center of lift of their wings caused by their passage through the transonic flight domain, as well as monitoring the positioning of the movable sections of their engines air inlets. They soon went past their previously attained top speed of Mach 2.6, with their ramjet power settings still at only thirty percent of maximum power. By now, Ingrid was certain that she was going to easily break through Mach 3. While that would already be an amazing achievement for a 1952-era plane, she was intent on seeing tonight what this beast was really capable of. Still augmenting slowly and gradually the thrust of her engines, in order to let James note down all the relevant primary flight data, she noticed something strange as they were speeding through Mach 2.7.

"Hey! I have not advanced the throttles further in the last few seconds and we are still accelerating, albeit slowly."

Ridley checked his instruments again and frowned.

"You're right, Ingrid. Our fuel flow rate is unchanged, so our engines are not running away out of control, but we are indeed still accelerating. What the hell is happening?"

Something that she once had read in an article Nancy had shown her back in 1941 then came back to Ingrid's mind, hitting her like a hammer on the head.

"Ramjet boost effect! The efficiency of ramjet engines is supposed to increase gradually with speed once past transonic speeds, since their thrust increases with the volume of air flow. The faster the speed, the more air flows through our ramjet engines and the bigger is the thrust. We are getting in a sense a kind of closed loop boost cycle. This could actually help us a lot. Pay special attention to our fuel consumption rate versus our speed from now on, James."

"Got it!"

Now truly hoping for some outstanding results, Ingrid increased power to her engines even more slowly and gradually, trying to get a sense of how significant that ramjet boost effect was. James Ridley soon swore in surprise on the intercom.

"Well, fuck me! Ingrid, we are now burning less fuel per mile covered as we go faster. Our top speed could well become actually our most economical speed when flying supersonic. This could have huge repercussions on the combat range of the F-83, positive repercussions. The same is probably true for the XB-50, which is equipped with the same type of engines."

"Well, I'll be! That is what I call one pleasant surprise. We are now at Mach 2.8 and I am at only fifty percent of maximum ramjet power. I am now pushing up our internal cooling system. The cockpit is getting noticeably warm... Mach 2.9!...Mach 3! Hell, girls of 'The Witches', do I ever have a nice gift for you now!"

"Hot damn!" Nearly shouted James. "We made Mach 3!"

"Hold on to your pants, mister: I am still only at sixty percent power setting... Mach 3.1!... Mach 3.2!... Mach 3.3! I am now at eighty percent power setting."

"That ramjet boost effect of yours is getting even more noticeable, Ingrid. Hell, those ramjet engines sure are full of nice surprises tonight. We are now fifty miles short of the coast."

"Plenty of space left to accelerate further." Replied Ingrid, pushing forward a bit further her ramjet throttles. "Mach 3.4!... Mach 3.5!... Mach 3.6! Shit, we could well get all the way to Mach 4 at this rate!... Mach 3.7!... Mach 3.8 and ninety percent power setting!"

"Passing the coast now, Ingrid. We are presently covering over 47 miles per minute... Gee! This ramjet boost effect factor is really increasing in importance with speed now."

"Pushing to one hundred percent power now!"

Less than a minute later, as their speed seemed to stabilize at full power after creeping up slowly, James shouted triumphantly on the intercom.

"MACH 3.95! WE ARE NOW AT A MAXIMUM SPEED OF 2,940 MILES PER HOUR!"

"EAT YOUR HEART OUT, NAVY!" Shouted Ingrid, overjoyed. She then glanced at her navigation map display and saw that she was going to overfly Muroc in less than two minutes.

"Come on, baby! Keep it up for a few more minutes."

In the radar control room of the North Base's control tower, General Vandenberg, Brigadier General Boyd and the NACA official were watching anxiously the radar

scopes, following with their eyes the small dot moving impossibly fast across the screens. A radar technician then announced the speed of the XF-83, just calculated by him with the help of a slide rule.

“Top speed is 2,950 miles per hour, or Mach 3.96 at an altitude of 60,000 feet, sir.”

“Mach 3.96! Hot damn!” Shouted Albert Boyd, ecstatic. Hoyt Vandenberg, no less happy, grinned from ear to ear.

“What an incredible plane this XF-83 is. We will leave the Soviets and British in our dust.”

On his part, the NACA official took his own measurement on the radar scope and calculated himself the speed in order to be able in the future to make official the result of this flight test.

“I confirm a speed of Mach 3.96, General Vandenberg. If I wouldn't have been here, I would probably not believe it.”

“Well, promise made, promise due!” Said Vandenberg to Boyd. “The Witches will become the Operational Test Unit for the F-83.”

“It couldn't happen to a better fighter unit, General. Uh, while on that subject, why not use the whole of the 99th Composite Wing as the operational test unit for all of our prototypes, General? The 99th Wing is our sole composite wing right now and all of its aircrews are highly decorated combat veterans. Operationally testing our prototypes with the 99th Wing would let us evaluate them jointly, with each aircraft type supporting each other, the way they are meant to serve in combat, and would put them in a single location, something that would tremendously facilitate our operational evaluations.”

Vandenberg thought that over for a moment before nodding his head.

“Your suggestion makes a lot of sense, General Boyd. I think that I will act on it. I however will have to send our first B-50s to a Strategic Air Command unit: the 99th Wing doesn't have heavy bombers, nor is it a unit tasked with strategic nuclear strike. Talking of the B-50, I will have a little favor to ask to General Dows once she is back on the ground: I would like to fly the XB-50 tomorrow, before my departure for Washington.” That made Boyd smile with amusement.

“Sir, I am sure that General Dows is smart enough to understand that a wish from the Chief of Staff of the Air Force is really an order.”

“Well, she is known to be hard-headed sometimes.” Replied Vandenberg with a smirk, making Boyd laugh.

"True! I believe however that setting up the whole 99th Wing as our initial operational test unit should be enough to assuage any objections she would have about you flying one of her precious prototypes."

"Talking of Dows," said Vandenberg while bending down to look at a radar screen, "where is she now?"

"She is still at a speed of Mach 3.7 and making a very wide turn to port in order to come back towards Muroc while decelerating, sir." Answered the radar technician. "However, at that speed, she will have to keep her turn wide, unless she wants to be crushed by G forces."

"I can imagine. Gentlemen, I believe that Champagne is definitely called for after this...and it's on me."

That declaration was greeted with big smiles around him.

They kept watching the course of the XF-83 on radar as it completed its very wide turn towards Muroc. Boyd grinned when he saw that Ingrid had just overflown China Lake Naval Air Station from an altitude of only 2,000 meters, and this while still going at the merry speed of Mach 2.8.

"Oops! I think that I may get soon a call from Rear Admiral Westmoore, in China Lake."

"And why would the Navy call you at this hour, General Boyd?" Asked Vandenberg, who was not familiar with the local topography as seen on radar scopes. Boyd then explained to him what Ingrid had just done, attracting a devilish grin on Vandenberg's face.

"Well, if that Rear Admiral Westmoore calls, let me talk to him."

"With pleasure, sir!"

As predicted by Boyd, the telephone in the control room started ringing nine minutes later, as Ingrid had reduced her speed below the speed of sound and was on approach to land. The Air Force duty officer in charge of the control room picked up the receiver then.

"Muroc North Base air control room, Captain Boswell speaking... One moment, sir."

Repressing his own grin, the young captain covered the receiver's microphone with one hand and looked at Boyd.

“Sir, I have Rear Admiral Westmoore on the line, asking for you. He sounds quite pissed off, sir.”

Vandenberg walked to the duty officer at once and took the receiver from him, speaking in a casual tone on the telephone.

“This is General Hoyt Vandenberg. Brigadier General Boyd is not available right now. What may the Air Force do for you tonight, Admiral Westmoore?”

Taken aback at first by the identity of the one answering his call, the Navy station commander quickly regained his combativeness.

“What the Air Force may do for me tonight, General? It could start by paying for all the broken windows I will now have to replace at NAS China Lake, sir. Did you have a prototype out flying tonight, General?”

“Yes, we had. What about it?”

“What about it, General?” Replied Westmoore, sounding furious. “It flew supersonic over my base, that’s what, General!”

From casual, Vandenberg’s tone then became distinctly colder.

“Rear Admiral Westmoore, if I remember well, Vice Admiral Hickman, the head of the Navy’s Bureau of Aircraft, told me recently that the Air Force would never be the first to have a plane able to fly faster than Mach 2. Thus, according to your own superior, an Air Force plane could not be responsible for what happened to your base tonight. I am truly sorry but I can’t help you. Good night, Admiral!”

The occupants of the radar control room all burst out laughing the moment that Vandenberg put back the receiver on its hook.

08:52 (Manila Time)

Wednesday, May 28, 1952 ‘C’

Headquarters building of the 99th Composite Wing (THE FIFINELLAS)

Clark Air Force Base, Luzon

The Philippines

Brigadier General Teresa James, Commander of the 99th Composite Wing, hurried to the telephone in the anteroom of her office, having been alerted by her personal clerk that she had received a call from the Pentagon while she was temporarily out of her office.

“Brigadier General James speaking!”

Teresa felt her heart jump when she recognized the female voice at the other end of the line.

“Hello, Teresa! How is life these days at the 99th Wing?”

“Still decent, Ingrid. We are presently having one of our usual tropical rainstorms pouring down, so flying is kind of out for us today. And you, how are you doing with your enigmatic secret prototypes?”

“Extremely well, thank you. In fact, I am calling because of the progress we are making with them. You should be getting an official, encrypted message from the office of General Vandenberg by tomorrow, giving more details about what I am about to tell you. In short, most of our prototypes are now ready to go to the operational unit testing stage of their development and pre-series aircraft have just been officially ordered by the Air Force. The Fifinellas have been designated to act as an operational test unit.”

“For which type?” Asked anxiously Teresa, feeling blood rush to her head from the sudden emotion. Ingrid paused before answering, managing her effect.

“For a total of eleven types and sub-types, Teresa. Your whole wing is going to be turned into an operational test unit, with all of your fixed wing squadrons and one of your helicopter squadrons to be reequipped with pre-series models of my prototypes. I will need the pilots and ground support crews of your wing to show up in about two months in Muroc, to start converting on their new aircraft. In the meantime, I will organize a mass visit for your girls to Muroc, so that you can see what to expect.”

Teresa’s clerk, standing two paces from her, nearly jumped to the ceiling when her commander let out a piercing scream of pure joy.

CHAPTER 13 – RESCUE AT SEA

10:16 (Washington Time)

Thursday, June 5, 1952 'C'

Office of Senator Margaret Chase-Smith

Capitol Hill, Washington, D.C.

USA

"...The Navy can't be trusted in this story, Madam Senator: it lied to me and to my husband from the start and is refusing to tell us the truth about what happened to our son. Jack had written to us many times in the last weeks about the lack of confidence he and his fellow naval aviators had in their planes. Now that he has been shot down over Korea and was then captured by the Chinese, we are living through hell, while the Navy is insisting that their planes are more than adequate. Congress must do something to shake up those damn admirals who put our son at risk by making him fly such lemons. If this goes on, we will lose a lot more than the fourteen aviators that we already lost."

"Madam Anders, I understand your frustration and grief, truly. Know that I and other members of the Congress are already questioning the Navy concerning those incidents over Korea and..."

"Incidents?! My son is paraded in front of cameras by the Communists, along with five other American aviators, and you call these simply incidents? This is nothing less than an affront to the United States, Madam Chase-Smith! What is our government doing to finally put these damn Communists back in their place? We should tell the Chinese that we will drop atomic bombs on them if they don't return our pilots."

"Madam Anders, the Soviets also have the atomic bomb now. Nuclear strikes on Communist China could trigger a Soviet response against the United States. We thus have to forget that option for the moment."

"And what other options are being considered by the government, Madam Senator? The Navy doesn't seem to have any, apart from pretending that it has the situation in hand. Who will save my son? Who will teach a lesson to those Chinese? When will we replace the collection of flying junk used by the Navy by planes worthy of

the name? I called you with the hope that you could do something concrete for my son, Madam Senator, but I see now that nobody in Washington is ready to take any meaningful action instead of making useless speeches.”

Margaret Chase-Smith’s caller then brutally put down her handset, leaving Margaret with an empty line. Depressed and bitter, the Maine senator slowly put down her own handset and thought over that call for a long moment. Things around Korea had been getting worse for months now, since the Soviets had tested their first atomic bombs. Since then, the Chinese and the Soviets had become a lot more aggressive with the United States, knowing that they could not be threatened anymore with unilateral nuclear strikes. The Chinese and the Soviets were however much less arrogant towards Great Britain, which possessed a vast arsenal of nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles that the United States could only envy right now.

Margaret was pulled out of her thoughts by three gentle knocks on her door. Raising her head, she saw her secretary, who had half opened her office door.

“Yes, Bertha?”

“Senators Millikin and Cabot Lodge are here to see you, madam.”

“Tell them to come in, Bertha.” Said at once Margaret while rising from her chair to greet her visitors. Eugene Millikin was the president of the Conference of Republican Senators and was a man of great influence in Washington, while Henry Cabot Lodge Junior was a moderate Republican that Margaret appreciated for his open mind. Millikin, a man nearing sixty and with a balding head, entered first, followed closely by Cabot Lodge, who was a good ten years younger and was quite handsome. Margaret shook hands with Millikin first, smiling to him.

“Eugene, to what do I owe your visit and that of Henry?”

Millikin pointed to her a newspaper sitting on Margaret’s desk and on which appeared the picture of an American pilot with his hands up and surrounded by Chinese soldiers.

“The aerial clashes over and around Korea. The excuses and claims of the Navy are not fooling many people anymore in Washington and it is time to put an end to this sad farce. You served on the Naval Affairs Committee during World War Two and I need your experience about dealing with Navy bureaucracy. I would like to make you co-president of a sub-committee that would investigate the reasons of the debacle suffered by our naval aviators against the Chinese Migs. Henry would be co-president with you, if you accept the position.”

Margaret nodded her head, interested at once.

"I accept with pleasure, Eugene. I just got a call from the mother of one of our pilots that were captured. She told me that her son had sent her many letters in which he said that he and his comrade pilots had lost confidence in their planes. The poor woman was desperate about the possible fate of her son at the hands of the Chinese."

"I can understand her too well, Margaret." Said gravely Cabot Lodge. "The Chinese don't care about the Geneva Conventions regulating the treatment of prisoners of war. I am afraid that she will never see her son again, short of a miracle."

The three senators then stayed silent for a moment, digesting how difficult the situation was. Margaret finally looked up at Millikin with a resolute expression.

"What will be the limitations on the mandate of our sub-committee, Eugene?"

"Actually, you will have very few limitations, Margaret. Do what is necessary, including forcing admirals to testify under threat of Congress censure, but find why the Navy is now stuck with planes inferior to the Chinese Migs. If you can find as well a quick solution to reinvigorate our naval carrier wings, then the better. If some admirals are at fault in this, call me and I will have their stars yanked by the Senate. You and Henry can choose up to five more members for your sub-committee, but I believe that you should keep your group to the strict minimum. You will probably have to travel often over wide distances and I would like to see results fast, so I arranged for you the exclusive use of an Air Force transport aircraft. You will also have access to a substantial travel budget. Will that do, Margaret?"

"Absolutely, Eugene. I will try to form our sub-committee before tonight. With some luck, we should be on the road no later than tomorrow morning."

"Excellent! Don't hesitate to pass these admirals through the wringer if they refuse to cooperate. The public is asking for blood about this affair."

"We will get answers, Eugene." Promised firmly Margaret.

15:39 (Washington Time)

Saturday, June 7, 1952 'C'

United States Air Force Lockheed C-60A LODESTAR

On approach to the Patuxent River Naval Air Station

Maryland

Margaret finished reading the document that the Navy had given her in Washington and raised her head to look at Henry Cabot Lodge Junior, Edward Martin and James Howard McGrath, who were traveling with her and four members of the Secret Service in their twin-engine, propeller-driven C-60A transport aircraft.

"According to this information, the Mig-15 would be much faster than all the fighters that the Navy is operating or developing. Is that a critical factor in air combat?"

"Definitely!" Answered Henry Cabot Lodge Junior. "Remember the slaughter that the German jet fighters were causing in our bomber fleet in 1944, with our propeller-driven fighters nearly powerless to stop them. The quality of our pilots can compensate partly for that speed handicap, but the Mig-15 always has the option of breaking off combat at will or to dive through our bomber formations and shoot up one of our planes before fleeing. The problem is made more serious by the fact that the Mig-15 pilots that attacked our planes over or near Korea are often in reality Soviet pilots, like during the Korean War. Those Soviets are obviously veterans that are much better trained than the average Chinese or North Korean pilot, something that tends to cancel at least partly the superior quality of our own pilots."

"But, we had to fight those Mig-15 before in Korea, in 1948. Why didn't the Navy take account of those lessons to develop its own jet fighters?"

"I believe that we will have to ask that question to the people in Patuxent River, Margaret." Answered Cabot Lodge with a pinched smile.

Their transport aircraft landed less than four minutes later on one of the runways of the Navy Flight Test Center in Patuxent River. Margaret, who was looking through the window of her seat, was able to see a row of jet fighters of various designs parked in front of a group of hangars. She however could not see any activity near those aircraft, something that made her wonder aloud.

"I know that we are a Saturday afternoon, but the Navy should be working double time to catch up on our technological lag, don't you think?"

"It is effectively strange, not to say alarming, Margaret." Replied Edward Martin, an ex-soldier who had attained the rank of major general during the Second World War. "I hope that the commander of the test center will have a good explanation for this."

The commander in question showed up in a jeep that stopped besides their aircraft as soon as it rolled to a stop in front of a hanger, with a Navy bus following the jeep closely. The Navy officer saluted Margaret as soon as she stepped on the tarmac.

"Welcome to Patuxent River, lady and gentlemen of the Senate. I am Captain Thomas Williamson, Commander of the Navy Flight Test Center."

"Margaret Chase-Smith, co-president of the Senate Investigation Sub-Committee on Naval Aviation. These are my colleagues, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge Junior, who is co-president as well, and Senators Edward Martin and James Howard McGrath. We also are accompanied by four agents of the Secret Service."

Williamson shook hands with the four senators but only glanced at the four Secret Service agents before facing Margaret again.

"If you may take place in this bus, my men will take care of unloading your luggage."

"Do you have quarters ready as well for our two pilots, Captain?"

Williamson had a quick look at the two women in flight suits that were now coming out of the C-60A. Margaret saw for an instant what she believed to be a mean smile appear on the face of the Navy officer before he answered her.

"We will find appropriate places for them tonight, Madam Senator."

Suddenly suspicious, Margaret stared at Williamson and spoke loudly enough for the two female pilots to hear her.

"Captain, these pilots were loaned to me by the Air Force for the duration of our investigation. I expect that they be treated decently and with respect. If I hear any complaint on that subject, then be assured that the Pentagon will hear about it."

Williamson stiffened, while his smile disappeared at once.

"They will be treated according to their ranks, Madam Senator."

"Thank you, Captain. Me and my colleagues would like to discuss with you and your test pilots once our luggage are dropped at our quarters, if that is convenient with you."

"Uh, unfortunately my pilots have gone out on leave for the weekend, Madam Senator. They will return to base only Sunday night."

"But, the Navy offices at the Pentagon were advised yesterday that we would visit your base today. How could you send away your pilots in that case?"

"I'm sorry, Madam Senator, but I was advised of your visit only late this morning."

Edward Martin, who was smelling a rat, stepped forward and stared severely at Williamson.

“And your pilots that are single and living on base, are they gone as well?”

“I believe so, Mister Senator. They have been working quite hard lately and needed some time off. I am however ready to answer your questions.”

Martin understood at once what kind of game the Navy was playing here. With Williamson alone to answer their questions, the information given to his sub-committee could be tightly controlled, avoiding the possibility that a pilot could make confidences that would make the Navy look bad. Martin could not however squarely call Williamson a liar, not yet at the least.

“Very well, Captain Williamson. We will speak once we have settled in.”

“In that case, if you will take place in the bus, we will be on the way.” Said Williamson, a forced smile on his face.

19:22 (Washington Time)

Prototype hangar of the Navy Flight Test Center

“And this is the prototype of our most advanced fighter aircraft, the Vought XF7U CUTLASS. It has already attained a maximum speed of 612 miles per hour.”

Margaret, following closely behind Williamson with her three colleagues, had to recognize that the prototype had a futuristic look to it, with its swept wings, its two vertical rudders and its two jet engines in the aft part of the fuselage. There was however a discordant note in the picture presented by Williamson.

“That makes it still near fifty miles per hour slower than the Mig-15, no? Do you think that you will be able to improve on the maximum speed of your aircraft, Captain?”

“The flight trials of the CUTLASS started only three months ago, Madam Senator. We are still exploring its flight envelope, but I expect that the CUTLASS will get close to the speed of sound by the time it is operational.”

“Have you had problems with that model to date?” Asked Henry Cabot Lodge. Henry saw Williamson hesitate slightly before answering.

“The first prototype of the CUTLASS was unfortunately destroyed a month ago in an accident that killed the pilot. Our engineers have traced the problem to the engines, which were then modified. Since then, the trials have been going in a satisfactory manner.”

"And when do you expect to introduce the CUTLASS into Navy service, Captain?"

"In about a year, at the speed things are going, Mister Senator. I will now show you the inside of the cockpit."

After another fifteen minutes spent showing in detail the prototype and bragging about its performances, Williamson escorted the senators back to the two cars that the Secret Service agents had rented after their arrival. The group then exchanged handshakes before splitting, Williamson leaving aboard his jeep. The four senators looked at each other while standing next to the first rental car.

"What do you think, guys?" Asked Margaret, not really convinced by Williamson's presentation. Henry Cabot Lodge shook slowly his head in answer.

"Frankly, I am not impressed at all. The first plane we saw with Williamson, the F6U PIRATE, was in his own words a severe disappointment. Its performances were also nothing short of anemic. The F9F PANTHER and the F2H BANSHEE, two models implicated in the air combats over Korea, both have maximum speeds of less than 600 miles per hour and proved inferior in combat to the Mig-15. These two types are unfortunately our only naval jet fighters presently in service. As for the F7U CUTLASS, it has a futuristic look to it, but its top speed is still inferior to that of the Mig-15 and it is not in service yet. God knows what the Soviets will produce until then. Our naval air arm should develop right away new fighters with much better performances than this, but seem to limit itself to slow advances. At the rhythm things are going, the Soviets may dig an even wider technological gap in the next few years...unless we force changes to the way the Navy is doing business."

"But what kind of changes?" Asked McGrath. "We are neither engineers nor pilots. I agree that we need to push the Navy, but how? New fighter aircraft don't grow on trees and take years to develop."

"That's the worst part in this story, in my opinion." Added Edward Martin. "The Navy has wasted nearly seven crucial years on aircraft programs that were at best mediocre. This attempt at hiding things by making the test pilots disappear for the weekend only demonstrate to me that the Navy is conscious of having followed the wrong path. If we could at least talk to a few of the Navy test pilots: I would love to hear their opinion about this famous CUTLASS."

Margaret suddenly smiled and looked at one of the Secret Service agents standing nearby.

“Mister Bowens, where do you think that we could find tonight a bunch of young Navy test pilots who would have been told by their superiors to disappear from their base for the weekend?”

The square-shouldered redhead agent grinned at her question.

“I believe that I know the kind of place where they could be presently, Madam Senator.”

20:17 (Washington Time)

PEEPING TOM Bar, four kilometers from NAS Patuxent River

“YEAH, GO FOR IT, TRACY! TAKE IT OFF!”

Encouraged by the enthusiastic shouts of the men sitting at tables around the elevated stage on which she was dancing, the young stripper slowly took off her bra, revealing small patches covering her nipples and attracting more shouts. The three pilots in summer navy uniform sharing a table in one corner of the lounge raised their beer bottles as a salute to the pretty blonde, then taking a good swig from their bottles. One of the young pilots was about to signal to one of the dancers sitting at the bar to come to his table when a mature woman with graying hair approached him with a smile.

“Good evening, gentlemen. You must be test pilots from Patuxent River, if I can judge from your alluring physique.”

“You’re right on target, my dear madam! We are the real thing, not like those Air Force wimps.”

“Could I sit with you for a moment?”

The pilot gave her a critical look and made a smirk.

“I don’t want to insult you, madam, but you are not exactly my type.”

The stranger smiled at that and took a chair, sitting at their table before the three pilots could protest. She then spoke in a low voice, in order not to be heard by other customers of the club.

“I suppose that I am effectively not your type, Lieutenant. However, I need to talk to you and to your two friends...in confidence. I am Senator Margaret Chase-Smith and I came to Patuxent River to conduct an inquiry. I know that your superiors probably

forbade you from talking with anyone about your work, but national security is at play here.”

Now alert, the pilots noticed that four tough-looking men in dark suits and three men with gray hair and wearing high quality suits had just sat at the two nearest tables and were looking at them with cold stares. The navy lieutenant who had spoken to Margaret raised one hand.

“Madam, we have received orders and...”

“...And I am giving you an order in the name of the United States Congress to answer my questions. Many of your Navy comrades have been killed or captured recently over Korea and we are trying to find the reasons why our Navy planes are outclassed by the Mig-15. Do not worry about your careers: this interview will stay strictly confidential and your names will not be noted down.”

“Madam, if you are here to try to dirty the Navy’s name, then I will not play your game.” Declared one of the pilots while rising from his chair. Margaret grabbed his hand at once and stared into his eyes.

“Lieutenant, I could charge you right now with obstruction of Congress, but I would prefer to get voluntary answers. This implies a lot more than just the reputation of the Navy, or rather that of a few senior officers and admirals that are attempting to hide their lack of judgment in this affair. We simply want to prevent the unnecessary deaths of more naval pilots because of inferior planes.”

The older pilot, a lieutenant commander, then signaled to his comrade to sit down.

“Sit down, Chris.”

He then looked critically at Margaret.

“Can you prove who you are, madam?”

Margaret nodded once and took out of her purse her Congress security pass, showing it to the pilot.

“My colleagues are Senators Henry Cabot Lodge, Edward Martin and James Howard McGrath, while those four gentlemen to your left are Secret Service agents assigned to escort us during our investigation. So, gentlemen, what is the real worth of the Vought XF7U CUTLASS?”

Even though she was not expecting praises for the CUTLASS, the bitterness in the test pilot’s voice surprised her.

“That plane has no guts, Madam Senator. Its Westinghouse engines produces less heat than the toasters made by the same company and it takes us forever to take off

and climb to altitude in a CUTLASS. Worst, its reactors are not dependable and tend to flame out during rain storms. We already have had three serious accidents, plus one fatal accident since we started the flight trials of the CUTLASS.”

“But, Captain Williamson didn’t tell us about those flameouts. He said that the CUTLASS would be able to approach the speed of sound and that it already attained the speed of 612 miles per hour.”

“Let me laugh, madam! Yes, the CUTLASS clocked at 612 miles per hour...in a dive. Past 600 miles per hour, the plane becomes unstable and its flight characteristics at low speeds are horrible. This plane will cost the lives of many good pilots and I certainly wouldn’t want to face a Mig-15 in a CUTLASS. I could say a lot more if you like.”

“I am all ears.” Said Margaret, very serious, while feeling a furious urge to go strangle a certain Captain Williamson.

09:44 (Washington Time)

Sunday, June 8, 1952 ‘C’

Patuxent River Naval Air Station

Margaret, like her three male colleagues, was still furious as their plane took off from Patuxent River. They had not confronted Captain Williamson when he showed up on the tarmac to bid them goodbye, not wanting him to learn that his pilots had talked to the group last night. However, Williamson’s fake smile had secretly irritated the four senators. Edward Martin turned around and kneeled on his seat to look at Margaret and Henry.

“We will probably get the same kind of welcome at China Lake. Is the trip really worth it?”

“I would tend to answer no to that.” Replied Henry, thoughtful. “However, we could not in all conscience return to Washington and pretend to present a really complete report after visiting only one base. The naval air station at China Lake specializes in the development of new air weapons. Maybe we will see there something revolutionary that would allow the Navy to gain back air superiority over Korea.”

“You know with whom we should talk to get an idea of what the future has to offer us? Major General Ingrid Dows!”

Henry smiled then, visibly liking the idea.

“Yes! This girl proved to us in Korea that she knew a lot about the future, thanks to her adoptive mother. She is also our best fighter pilot and is acknowledged to be a true tactical and strategic genius. Even better, she actually fought with Mig-15s in Korea and managed to shoot down a few of them.”

“But where would we find her now?” Asked McGrath. “She has not been seen in Washington for over three years now.”

“And what position did she hold then in Washington, James?” Asked Margaret, also warming up to Martin’s idea.

“She was in charge of developing new aircraft for the Air Force. You must have heard about the questions asked in the Congress concerning hundreds of millions of dollars spent by the Air Force on secret contracts. She was also a special counselor for both President Martin and President Dewey, but her views about Indochina made her very unpopular with the State Department. John Foster Dulles probably arranged for her to be exiled to some forgotten, shitty hole to get back at her. Too bad: that girl had the potential to truly propel the Air Force towards the future.”

Margaret was thoughtful for a moment before rising from her seat.

“Could you let me pass, Henry? I am going to see if I can find where Dows is these days.”

Going to the small cockpit of the C-60A, Margaret bent down between the seats of the pilot and the copilot, smiling to them.

“Hi girls! Maybe you could help me with a question we had back in the cabin. Would you know by chance where I could find Major General Ingrid Dows these days?” The two female aviators smiled widely at her question, with the pilot answering Margaret.

“Of course, Madam Senator! General Dows is a living legend among the women of the Air Force. She is presently at the Air Force Flight Test Center in Muroc, California. I heard in confidence that she is developing there some truly fantastic aircraft. However, the access to Muroc Air Force Base is forbidden to those who are not part of its personnel.”

“And where is exactly Muroc?”

“Only a few minutes of flight away from China Lake, Madam Senator.”

Margaret digested that information before giving a directive to the pilot.

“Change our destination to Muroc, Captain. Once we land at our next transit point for the night, I will contact Muroc and try to convince General Dows to let us land there.”

The two female aviators looked at each other with sparkling eyes as Margaret returned into the passenger cabin.

“Yeah! It will be really nice to be able to visit Muroc and see Ingrid’s mysterious prototypes.”

The C-60A continued on its merry course, flying at a cruising speed of 310 kilometers per hour while crossing the United States, heading for the West Coast. Limited by its range and by the need for its crew to rest, the light transport landed after nearly nine hours of flight at the Kirtland Air Force Base, near Albuquerque in the state of New Mexico. The two pilots and their passengers then rented rooms at a small local hotel, but not before Margaret placed a call to Muroc via the operations center of Kirtland Air Force Base. After some hesitation and a quick call on another line, the duty officer in Muroc authorized Margaret to land in the afternoon in Muroc, specifying that her plane would have to land in the southern part of the base. Satisfied, Margaret then informed her colleagues and the two aviatrix of this. The pilot nodded her head and pointed at Muroc on a wall map of the operations center.

“Muroc Air Force Base is actually divided into three parts: the southern base, the main base and the northern base. The last one is reserved for the secret prototypes and nobody can normally visit it. The flight tests were previously done from the southern base, but the facilities there were deemed too limited and the flight test center moved to the northern base over a year ago. Since then, a restricted flying area has been published, covering the northern base.”

“And how many hours will our flight take tomorrow, Captain?” Asked Edward Martin, making the pilot study the map for a moment.

“About three and a half hours, Mister Senator. We should arrive in Muroc at around one O’clock in the afternoon. I will go submit a flight plan correction and will warn Muroc of our approximate time of arrival. Lynda, order ten box lunches for tomorrow morning, so that we could eat in flight tomorrow.’

‘Excellent!’ Said Edward Martin, quite satisfied. “Maybe we will finally see some planes worthy of the name in Muroc.”

13:18 (California Time)

Monday, June 9, 1952 'C'

South Base, Muroc Air Force Base

California

Margaret Chase Smith was a bit disappointed as her plane landed at the southern base of Muroc. She had hoped to survey the northern base from the air as they approached Muroc and its two large dried salt lakes, but a kind of heat fog had distorted the view towards the northern base. She would learn later that this heat fog was a permanent phenomenon and that it made the northern base, isolated from the rest of Muroc and linked by a single road that was tightly guarded, ideal for testing secret prototypes. Margaret sighed with relief when her plane stopped in front of a hangar and she could undo her safety belt. Air travel across the United States was still the exclusive domain of propeller-driven aircraft and took a minimum of two days from coast to coast, enough to drain the average passenger. A last look through the window of her seat showed her three big staff cars waiting in front of the hangar, with a small group of persons waiting besides them. A tall female officer that she recognized as the famous Ingrid Dows was part of that group. Following behind Henry Cabot Lodge, Margaret left the plane, emerging in the hot California Summer sun. The Air Force officers waiting on the tarmac, which included Dows, a male brigadier general and a colonel, saluted crisply as the four senators and their Secret Service agents stepped on the tarmac. Being the highest ranking officer present despite her incredibly young age, Ingrid Dows stepped forward to shake hands with the four senators.

"Welcome to Muroc Air Force Base, lady and gentlemen of the Senate. I am Major General Ingrid Dows, Director of the Aircraft Development Division of the Air Force. With me are Brigadier General Albert Boyd, Commander of Muroc Air Force Base, and Colonel Alfred Ascani, Commandant of the Flight Test Center. While I am the highest ranking and will accompany you, I will let Colonel Ascani guide you, since he controls the testing of the prototypes here."

"Thank you, General." Replied Henry Cabot Lodge while shaking her hand. "You may remember me and Senator Edward Martin from our visit to your fortified position near Pusan during the Korean War. With us are Senator Margaret Chase-Smith, co-president with me of our Senate investigative sub-committee, and Senator James Howard McGrath. We are investigating the state of the combat aircraft the Navy

is developing and visited Patuxent River two days ago. We were on our way to visit China Lake but we heard about your flight test center and decided to come and compare the prototypes developed by the Air Force to what the Navy showed us.”

“I am certain that our planes squash anything that the Navy has right now, Senator Lodge.” Replied with a big smile Colonel Ascani, a balding officer that appeared to be still in top physical shape despite his age. “Have you had lunch yet?”

“We ate in our plane, Colonel, but thank you for asking.”

“In that case, we will go right away to our flight test center. Rooms have been reserved for you, your Secret Service agents and your two pilots in the single officers’ quarters, where you will be driven after your visit. I promise you complete and free access to our prototypes, on the condition that you keep the information that you will get strictly confidential. Our programs are still classified Top Secret and cannot be divulged yet to the public.”

“We will keep our investigation report classified and will limit it to the leaders of the Senate and to your superiors in Washington, Colonel.” Assured Henry. “Could our four Secret Service agents and our two pilots accompany us during our visit? They endured quite a long flight with us.”

Ingrid jumped in then.

“I believe that we can trust them completely, Colonel.”

Ascani agreed readily with her, nodding and smiling to the four Secret Service agents and the two aviatrix.

“I am sure they will prove discreet. I suspect that your two pilots could particularly like this visit. Well, let’s load up!”

Margaret ended up taking place with one Secret Service agent in the first staff car, in which Ingrid Dows sat, while the others split up between the two other staff cars. They stayed mostly silent during the trip, except when Ingrid spoke with an Air Force policeman controlling identities at a guarded gate blocking the road leading to the northern base. The small convoy finally rolled to a stop in front of a big hangar that had its doors closed. Dows’ driver, a young Air Force sergeant, opened Margaret’s door, who stepped out and stared at the three big transport aircraft sitting in front of a nearby hangar.

“My God! Those planes look fantastic! What can you tell me about them, General?”

"I will actually let Colonel Ascani do the talking, Madam Senator. Let's join up with the rest of your group."

Margaret did not object to that and walked towards her three colleagues, who were already assembled around Boyd and Ascani. The latter started speaking as soon as she had stopped besides Henry Cabot Lodge.

"Lady and gentlemen of the Senate, what you see over there are the prototypes of three new transport aircraft: the Douglas XC-152, the Boeing XC-200 and the Convair XC-100. The XC-152 is a heavy tactical transport aircraft, designed to transport heavy military loads and vehicles over long distances and able to use rough landing strips. The Boeing XC-200 is designed for the mass transportation of troops over intercontinental distances, while the XC-100 will serve as a short and medium haul mixed cargo and passenger transport. They also can be easily produced in commercial airliner variants that will be proposed to our civilian airlines. That will allow us to cut the prices of those planes through economy of scale production, something that will benefit greatly the Air Force...and the American taxpayer."

"And what will be the top speed of those transport aircraft, Colonel?" Asked James Howard McGrath. "We just took two days to cross the United States in our propeller-driven plane and I am hoping that American travelers could soon make a similar flight in much less time."

Ascani smiled and nodded his head once.

"American travelers will effectively be able soon to make faster, more comfortable and also more economical flights, Senator McGrath. All three of those aircraft have proven cruising speeds of 635 miles per hour or more at high altitude, which will allow them to cross the United States in a single flight of less than four hours."

"But, that's faster than the Navy fighters we saw in Patuxent River." Exclaimed McGrath, stunned. Ascani's smile widened at that.

"Exact, Senator! The passengers that will travel in our C-200 and C-100 will do so in a level of comfort unprecedented up to now, thanks to their wide fuselages, which are pressurized, by the way. Large luggage and cargo compartments are situated under the cabin in the case of the C-200, which will have a capacity of 408 seats. The C-152 will be able to transport over intercontinental distances over sixty tons of cargo or vehicles, or 120 paratroopers. As for the C-100, it has a forward cabin for 72 passengers, plus a cargo cabin with a tail cargo door and a capacity of over 35,000 pounds of palletized cargo."

At that point, Ingrid approached and whispered in Ascani's ear, making him smile with amusement. The colonel then looked at the senators with a malicious look.

"The prototype of the Convair XC-100 was due to make its first public test flight across the United States tomorrow. What would you say to returning to Washington aboard our XC-100 once your investigation trip has concluded?"

The four senators agreed to that at once with enthusiasm. Satisfied, Ascani pointed the XC-152, parked nearest to their group.

"If you have no objections to that, we will now visit the inside of our transport prototypes. If you may follow me, please."

The next hour proved very interesting to the group of visitors. The Secret Service agents reacted at one moment to a remark made by Ascani while they were visiting the inside of the XC-200, with the senior agent, Robert Altman, asking a question.

"Did you just say that a V.I.P. variant of this plane will be produced for the President of the United States, Colonel?"

"I did, mister. With its very long range, which will be up to 6,900 miles with a normal payload of 55 tons, and its cruising speed of 635 miles per hour, the VC-200 will be ideal for the overseas trips of the President. The VC-200 will be specially equipped for his needs, with a presidential office and private suite, including a bedroom and private bathroom. The plane will also contain a special compartment for encrypted communications gear. There will be as well plenty of seats for his staff members, for Secret Service agents and for invited guests and journalists. Ideally, we will produce at least two or more copies of the VC-200, so that at least one plane is always available for the President."

Altman looked again around him, examining with a new perspective the huge passenger cabin of the XC-200, with its rows of ten abreast reclining seats separated by two aisles.

"All this is fantastic! Who had the idea of producing a variant for the President, Colonel?"

"Major General Dows initiated and directed closely all the prototypes that we are testing now, and more prototypes are on the way, Senator." Replied calmly Ascani, making all heads turn at once towards Ingrid. "She based her projects on the knowledge from the future that we received from Nancy Laplante, the Canadian from the

year 2012 who died in 1941. Her knowledge allowed us to save years in basic research and to avoid many technological pitfalls in the development of our planes.”

“And that knowledge from the future, did the Navy have access to it as well, General Dows?” Asked Henry Cabot Lodge, making Ingrid nod.

“All federal departments have had access to that information since December of 1940, Senator Lodge. However, until 1948, it was rarely used to its full advantage. As for the Navy, I offered it to participate jointly in my projects, but it refused.”

“When and to whom did you present that offer, General?” Asked Margaret, incensed at once.

“In September of 1948, to Vice Admiral Sallada, the then head of the naval air arm.”

“Thank you, General Dows.” Said Margaret while noting that in her notepad, like the other senators. They then continued their tour of the XC-200. After another ten minutes, the group left the four-engine jet airliner, using the belly retractable access ramp integrated to the plane to go down to the tarmac. Anxious to see more, Margaret followed closely besides Ascani as he led the group towards the nearby hangar.

“What other prototypes do you have here presently, Colonel? Do you have fighter prototypes in Muroc?”

“We presently have two fighter prototypes: the North American XF-10 and the Lockheed XF-83. Our other prototypes tested here are the XB-50 heavy bomber, the Republic A-3 attack aircraft, which is now entering full production, the Curtiss XA-5 vertical takeoff attack aircraft and two models of transport and liaison aircraft, the XC-20 and the XC-10. General Dows also directed other programs concerning new jet engines and air-launched missiles for our new planes. Since you are especially concerned by the performances of Navy fighters, we will go see the XF-10 and the XF-83.”

Using a door guarded by two armed Air Force policemen, the group entered a hangar in which four aircraft sat, with dozens of technicians and mechanics busy around them. Ascani let a moment for his visitors to regain their wits as they stared open-mouthed at the prototypes.

“But, this makes the prototypes we saw in Patuxent River look like a museum collection!” Exclaimed James Howard McGrath. “How have those planes performed up to date, Colonel?”

"Magnificently, Senator McGrath. I have been testing planes for more than ten years now and I never saw programs progress the way our actual prototypes do. A lot of that is due to the fact that General Dows made sure first that new jet engines that are more dependable and more performing than the ones we had before be developed according to specifications and designs coming from her, as she did with all our prototypes. Thanks to those new, better engines, we were able to build prototypes according to reliable parameters, something that saved a lot of time and money. To be honest with the Navy, its problems mostly came from the fact that the engines for their prototypes, all produced by Westinghouse, didn't fulfill their promises. If you take the North American XF-10, over there to your left, it has already attained and even exceeded its planned maximum speed, with a proven top speed of 1,500 miles per hour, or just over Mach 2."

"But, that's over double the speed reached by the Navy's F7U CUTLASS!" Said Henry Cabot Lodge, stunned. Ascani nodded his head, then started walking towards the XF-10 while continuing to speak.

"If you will follow me, we will now examine more closely the XF-10. Apart from the XF-10, we also have in this hangar two Republic A-3 attack aircraft, one Curtiss XA-5 attack aircraft and one McDonnell XC-20 liaison aircraft. The XA-5 and XC-20 were received from their builders only two months ago, so their testing is much less advanced than the other two."

The group spent about twenty minutes around the XF-10 before going to examine the two A-3s, the XA-5 and the XC-20. The former was not the fastest of the prototypes, but its bomb carrying capacity compared to its fairly modest size impressed the senators. The XA-5 however positively fired up Margaret Chase-Smith when she understood how useful to both the Navy and Marine Corps the vertical-capable attack aircraft could prove to be.

"So, this plane could take off and land vertically from unprepared fields or sections of highway close to frontlines, while carrying a sizeable load of bombs? This would make it ideal for aircraft carrier service."

"Indeed, Madam Senator." Replied Ascani. "General Dows actually based its general concept on that of a future British aircraft, the Hawker Siddeley HARRIER, which proved to be a very effective naval strike aircraft as well as a close support aircraft. With its TF-58 turbofan with rotating exhaust nozzles, it can take off or land vertically at a

mass of over 22,000 pounds. It is however much more practical tactically to have it take off first on a short run with a good payload, then land back vertically once its bombs and most of its fuel are expended. Its top speed is 720 miles per hour, better than anything the Navy has right now.”

Margaret nodded soberly at that. The more things she saw here, the more furious she was getting at the Navy Air Arm leaders. Ascani next brought them to the XC-20, a prototype fast liaison aircraft to be also produced as a civilian business jet and which had a truly impressive range of 6,600 miles at subsonic cruise speeds, apart from being supersonic, with a top speed of Mach 1.6. Then going out of the hangar and walking to the next hangar, also well guarded, Ascani showed to his visitors an aircraft of respectable size.

“Ladies and gentlemen, you have here the Bell XC-10 vertical takeoff transport aircraft.”

“Did you say ‘vertical takeoff’, Colonel?” Asked Henry Cabot Lodge, not believing his ears. “How did you manage such a prowess for such a big aircraft?”

“It actually is quite simple, Senator Lodge. The XC-10 has two wide diameter turbofans, each providing a maximum dry thrust of nearly 54,000 pound-force, or 24.5 metric tons. Those turbofan engines are mounted on pivots under the wing, and can point upward to the vertical. They also use vectoring nozzles, to control the plane in hovering mode. This allows the XC-10 to take off vertically at a weight of up to 41 metric tons.”

“That would make it ideal for service on an aircraft carrier, no?” Said Margaret, as she eyed the prototype. Two big engine pods were mounted under its wings, projecting significantly forward, and the fuselage was quite stubby. Ingrid then spoke, replying to Margaret’s last remark.

“I fully agree with you, Senator Chase Smith. The XC-10 was designed from the start to be easy to adapt to many roles and missions. I fully intend to propose it to the Navy as soon as the XC-10 will have completed the first phase of its flight trials. This plane could, in my opinion, fill many roles aboard an aircraft carrier, including the transport of cargo and personnel between ship and shore, maritime patrol, anti-submarine warfare and sea search and rescue. I am particularly proud of this plane: it has the potential to save many lives.”

“And its primary role in the Air Force will be the rescue of our pilots shot down behind enemy lines.” Added Ascani. “Just that mission will be enough to justify the XC-

10 program. With some luck, the Coast Guard could also adopt it, on top of the Navy and the Marine Corps. We will now go examine it from close.”

“And what else do you have after that for us, Colonel?” Asked Edward Martin.

“The Northrop XB-50, our future heavy intercontinental bomber, as well as the Lockheed XF-83 fighter-bomber. I actually kept the XF-83 as the ‘*pièce de résistance*’ of this tour: its proven performances are nothing short of spectacular. General Dows, who pays a particular importance to the XF-83, is the primary test pilot for it.”

“You are a qualified test pilot, General Dows?” Asked Cabot Lodge, surprised. Ingrid nodded her head, a slight smile on her lips.

“I managed to convince then Colonel Boyd to put me in his last batch of test pilot trainees. It was hard work, but it was well worth it.”

“And she fully earned her diploma.” Added Albert Boyd, visibly amused. “Well, let’s visit our XC-10 in detail.”

Margaret, still impressed by her visit of the XC-10, an aircraft of prime interest for the Navy in her opinion, followed Ascani and the rest of the group half a hour later to yet another hangar, also guarded by Air Force policemen. She nearly fell on her bum on seeing the two incredible aircraft sitting inside, while the two aviatrix accompanying them audibly sucked air in. One of the planes was huge but had refined, gracious curves and a pair of huge double delta wings. A total of four jet engines was visible in two pods positioned under the wings. The other aircraft, much smaller but still of an imposing size, gave the impression of a flying predator ready to soar. Ascani then started again to speak.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I present you the stars of our program of new planes for the Air Force: the Northrop XB-50 supersonic bomber and the Lockheed XF-83 supersonic fighter-bomber. I will now repeat my previous warning about the information I am about to give you, as everything that you will hear or see about them is strictly Top Secret. All the test flights of those two aircraft were conducted at night and they were never seen in public.”

Margaret Chase Smith felt anger replacing for a moment her wonderment as she detailed visually the two planes. That the Navy had refused to participate in such an incredible aircraft development program was an utter case of stupidity in her mind. Too many lives had been lost to her taste, not speaking either of all the money and time wasted, because of those stupid inter-service rivalries inside the American armed forces.

She did her best to calm down as Colonel Ascani led the group to a position just under the nose of the XB-50, so that his visitors could correctly judge its size.

“The Northrop XB-50 will have as its main mission strategic nuclear strikes, but it will also be perfectly capable of dropping conventional bombs and air-to-ground missiles. It is now in its sixth month of flight testing and has attained what we believe to be its top practical speed, with the XB-50 clocked at Mach 3.2, or 2,384 miles per hour. As for its range, it will be well over 10,000 miles, but we are still conducting fuel consumption trials. In fact, the XB-50 prototype will fly tonight on such a fuel consumption trial.”

This time there were no exclamations from the visitors, as they were too stunned to speak at the time. Such performances were simply too incredible for this era, when jet aircraft were still in their mere infancy and when all commercial air travel was still being done in propeller-driven aircraft. In turn, this reignited the anger inside Margaret about the opportunities missed by the Navy because of simple crass chauvinism. She however kept quiet as she followed the rest of the group in a tour of the XB-50, including a visit inside its futuristic cockpit, replete with radar screens and liquid crystal display screens. Her excitement, already high after seeing in detail the XB-50, grew further as they approached next the Lockheed XF-83. This time, however, Ascani let Ingrid Dows do the talking about it. Ingrid took obvious pride to do so as she faced her visitors.

“Let me present you the other star in Muroc, ladies and gentlemen. In terms of absolute performances, the Lockheed XF-83 EAGLE is literally king of the sky. In terms of pure piloting, it is surprisingly easy to handle and is extremely agile for its size, thanks to its 2D vectoring jet nozzles and canard surfaces. In fact, it could win in my opinion a dogfight against a F-86 SABRE or a Mig-15. What really distinguished it from every other combat aircraft are however its top speed, its range, its operational ceiling and its huge weapons carrying capacity.”

“Is it as fast as the XB-50, General?” Asked Edward Martin. Ingrid paused while looking at him, managing her effect.

“Senator Martin, I am presently the unofficial World speed and altitude holder, with a top speed of 2,950 miles per hour, or Mach 3.96, attained a month ago, and a top altitude of 96,000 feet. Since then, the XF-83 has also proved to be capable of speeds of up to 1,190 miles per hour at low altitude, close to the ground, and of having a ferry range of up to 4,400 miles. As a result of our flight test results, pre-series production of the F-83 has been authorized, like in the case of the A-3, B-50, F-10, C-152, C-200, C-

100 and C-10. Be ready to see rather big acquisition funding requests show up soon in the Congress, lady and gentlemen of the Senate.”

After a moment taken to regain his wits, Henry Cabot Lodge looked at Ingrid as if she was a witch.

“But, how could you realize all this, General? Your planes are completely out of the present norm.”

“Senator, understand that none of the prototypes you have seen today in Muroc would have been possible without the technical knowledge from the future contained in the files provided to us by Nancy Laplante in 1940. That advanced knowledge has allowed us to jump over many decades in terms of aeronautical research and development and prevented us from exploring quite a few technological dead-ends, saving us more time and money. The Navy’s biggest mistake was to ignore these ATHENA files, which condemned it to follow the original technological route, with all its pitfalls and groping in the dark. It got stuck further by selecting the Westinghouse Company as its main jet engine provider. In Nancy Laplante’s history, Westinghouse was dropped as a producer of jet engines after about fifteen years, having produced nothing but a long line of lemons. With the ATHENA files in hand, I was able to select the ideal solutions for the planes needed by the Air Force and to closely guide and counsel the conception engineers of the various companies to which I offered development contracts. I was unfortunately unable to stop the disaster that the Republic F-84 THUNDERJET is, as it entered service before I took my present position as Director of Aircraft Development for the Air Force. However, production and acquisition of the F-84 has been terminated recently on orders from General Vandenberg and Under-Secretary Kenney, once the XF-83 and the A-3 proved their mettle. The one aspect where we still have a lot of progress to do is in the electronic sector. Despite all the information held in the ATHENA files, our computer and electronic technology is still decades behind what was known in 2012, even though we probably crush the Soviets in that domain, while we may be holding a slight edge over the British.”

“Could your XF-83 be adapted for service aboard aircraft carriers, General?”
Asked Henry Cabot Lodge, making Ingrid shake her head.

“Not at this time, Senator. The XF-83 is too big and too heavy for our present aircraft carriers, which would need more powerful catapults, stronger arresting wire systems and bigger aircraft elevators before they could accommodate the XF-83. However, the F-10 fighter, A-3 and A-5 attack aircraft and C-10 VTOL multi-mission

transport aircraft will be relatively easy to adapt to carrier use...if the Navy does its part and accepts to adopt them. The Navy could actually have had a decent fighter already by adopting a carrier variant of the F-86 SABRE, which is already in widespread Air Force service and is the rough equal of the Mig-15. Don't have any illusions however about what the Soviets may be doing. I fully expect them to be already working on something even better than the Mig-15, so it is not the time for us to grow complacent."

The four senators present exchanged knowing looks as Ingrid finished speaking.

"Margaret, I suddenly have this urge to go strangle a few admiral at the Pentagon." Said Henry Cabot Lodge.

"You can add a certain Captain Williamson to that list, Henry." Replied dryly Margaret Chase-Smith.

19:42 (California Time)

Senior single officers' quarters

Muroc Air Force Base

Margaret Chase-Smith was surprised when she entered the quarters assigned to Ingrid Dows. Instead of the large and comfortable suite that she had expected for a major general, Ingrid occupied the equivalent of a small apartment furnished with well used pieces of furniture that were obviously from standard Air Force inventory. The only luxuries visible were a pair of large presentation cases made of glass and polished wood that were evidently personal add-ons and that contained a collection of ancient blade weapons.

"Uh, I frankly expected much better for the accommodations of a general officer. Is that the best that this base can offer to a major general, General Dows?"

Ingrid, who had just removed her uniform's vest, smiled at Margaret's question.

"No, and you can call me simply Ingrid in private, Madam Senator. I am rather Spartan in my daily needs and this is more than adequate for me. If you will sit down in this sofa, we could then talk more at ease. Would you like something to drink?"

"I would have a small bourbon on ice, if you have some, Ingrid. And please call me Margaret."

"One bourbon on ice, coming up!" Said Ingrid while going to a small refrigerator in her little kitchen corner. While she was preparing her drink, Margaret went to admire the old weapons in the presentation cases.

"You have quite a variety of replica weapons in terms of time periods and origins, Ingrid. That short sword, is it made of bronze?"

"It is!" Answered Ingrid from her kitchenette. "It is a reproduction of a Greek short sword from the 5th Century B.C., similar to the swords used by the Spartan warriors of King Leonidas at the battle of Thermopylae, fought against the Persians."

What Ingrid did not say was that the sword in the presentation case had actually been picked up by Nancy at the Thermopylae, after the battle in which Megaron, the Spartan hoplite that her spirit had inhabited, had been killed. She brought the glass of bourbon to Margaret, who noticed that she had not poured a glass for herself.

"You are not drinking anything, Ingrid?"

"I have to fly tomorrow, thus I am abstaining from drinking alcohol at least 24 hours in advance."

"You are decidedly dedicated to your work, Ingrid."

Ingrid nodded her head soberly while sitting down in an easy chair facing Margaret's sofa.

"Flying is my life, Margaret. I count myself lucky to be where I am now, especially if you look at all the obstacles in the way of women who want to practice non-traditional occupations."

"Do you expect to marry one day and have children?" Asked softly Margaret. Ingrid was pensive for a moment before answering her.

"Not at this time. Air Force regulations forbid its female members from becoming pregnant or to have children in their charge, on pain of immediate release from service. I personally find this rule profoundly unjust and discriminatory, but Congress has been refusing for many years now to change or eliminate that rule. I thus put my career as a military pilot first, with the hope that our nation will one day abandon the social and racial prejudices that are poisoning it."

Ingrid then look gravely at Margaret.

"I invited you here tonight to speak with you about the future, Margaret. As you were able to see today, our prototypes that we are testing have the potential to strengthen greatly the influence of the United States in the World. Our XB-50 will, among other things, heavily affect the nuclear balance of power between us, the British and the Soviets, at least until the next step in the armaments race."

"The armaments race? What's that?"

"It is a concept that my adoptive mother taught me about. We are presently in the first phase of a nuclear armaments race, with bombers carrying nuclear bombs being the main players. In a few years time, we will pass to the second phase, with missiles carrying nuclear warheads to much greater ranges than today and with a lot more precision. If we are lucky, we will survive that phase. If not, then Humanity will self-destruct in a monstrous orgy of nuclear destruction, and this before we can all learn to reduce or limit our nuclear arsenals."

"But, many Air Force generals, including General LeMay, say that we could survive and even win a nuclear war, on the condition that we take the initiative."

"That shows you only how badly they understand the implications of such a war, Margaret. For me, the XB-50 is a mean to dissuade and prevent any nuclear attack against the United States. For others like General LeMay, it is the mean to launch a preemptive nuclear attack against the Soviets. Since the Soviets probably could not stop such an attack right now, it only makes it even more tempting for our partisans of the hard nuclear line."

"And why are you telling me all this, Ingrid?"

"Because you are part of the circle of power in Washington and are thus in a position where you can temper the enthusiasm for such a preemptive nuclear strike on the U.S.S.R.. A general nuclear war will have no winners, only losers by the hundreds of millions, most of them innocent civilians. The United States is also facing the prospect of getting implicated in a long and costly guerrilla war in Indochina if we don't act with caution and hindsight. Unfortunately, too many people in Washington see the actual conflict between France and the Vietminh simply as an attempt by the Communists to destabilize Southeast Asia, thus want to militarily support France. In reality, we are seeing a proud people that is simply attempting to free itself from French colonial exploitation. The Chinese and the Soviets implicated themselves in Indochina simply to extend their influence in the region, not because the Vietnamese really want them there. We are unfortunately currently missing a golden opportunity to play the role of honest mediator in Indochina, a role that would allow us to distance the Vietminh leadership from the Chinese and Soviets. I am afraid that we are going to repeat the same mistakes we did in the history known to Nancy Laplante, with the same results: a ten-year conflict that will eventually divide deeply our nation, will cost us 50,000 dead and will finish in an humiliating defeat for the United States."

"My God!" Said softly Margaret, shaken. "Could you tell me more about that, Ingrid?"

"I invited you tonight to do exactly that, Margaret. I am ready to tell you everything that my adoptive mother told me about the future of the United States before her death. That is of course if you are interested to listen."

"Of course I am interested, Ingrid! Take all the time you need."

Margaret ended leaving Ingrid's quarters around eleven at night, after more than three hours of discussions on the future role of the United States in the World and on the obstacles their nation would face. The senator from Maine had a hard time to go to sleep that night.

03:02 (California Time)

Tuesday, June 10, 1952 'C'

Pacific Ocean, 560 miles southwest of Los Angeles

The helmsman of the fishing trawler SEA BOUNTY, alone in the tiny and obscure bridge of his boat, was having a hard time not falling asleep, exhausted by the long days of work spent in a stormy sea. A persistent rain and a thick cover of low, dark clouds made the night even darker and the helmsman could only navigate with the help of his compass. What he didn't know was that the fuse for his mast navigation lights had blown one hour before, leaving the SEA BOUNTY a dark mass in the night. Finally overtaken by fatigue and by the whisky that he had drunk to warm himself in the cold and wet night, the helmsman gradually fell asleep, resting against and on top of his wheel. He never saw the lights of the boat that crossed his path before the tremendous shock of the collision brutally woke him up.

Aboard the luxury yacht PACIFIC DREAMS, owned by the cinema magnate and owner of the Twentieth Century-Fox, Spyros Skouras, the bridge officer and the helmsman on night duty on the bridge only had a few seconds to see the dark mass of another ship approach before it collided with them. Despite the desperate attempts of the yacht's helmsman to avoid the collision, the bow of the fishing trawler smashed through the wooden hull of the PACIFIC DREAMS at the level of its aft deck. The yacht was cut in half at once, with its engine compartment destroyed and all electrical power

instantly interrupted. The shock was also fatal to the fishing trawler, with its wooden bow crushed and letting in massive amounts of water. The 34 occupants of the yacht and the eleven fishermen aboard the trawler suddenly woke up in total obscurity to find themselves on quickly sinking ships.

In one of the cabins of the PACIFIC DREAMS, Marilyn Monroe, formerly known as Norma Jean Dougherty, was sleeping with another Hollywood starlet in the lower bed of a double bunk bed. A total of fourteen starlets of the Twentieth Century-Fox were aboard the yacht with their Hollywood agent, Johnny Hyde, and a small production and photography team. Their destination was Tahiti, where Johnny Hyde was planning to boost the publicity concerning his starlets by a photo session on the magnificent beaches of French Polynesia. The violent shock of the collision threw the two young women down from their bunks, waking them up in a brutal fashion. Marilyn had to push Dorothy Dandridge, who had fallen on top of her, off her in order to get up in the dark cabin.

"Ouch! What the hell was that?"

Her cabin mate, an African-American singer, replied with fear in her voice.

"My God! Marilyn, the boat is listing by the rear! I think that we are sinking."

Those words were enough to fully wake up Marilyn, who groped in the dark to find the light switch. She however flipped it in repetition without results.

"Damn! The power is out. Quick, Dorothy, get dressed! And put on warm clothes!"

Marilyn then hurried to follow her own counsel, groping inside her closet and frantically putting on a pair of pants and a woolen sweater. She and Dorothy suddenly squealed with surprise and shock when cold water passed under the door of her cabin and washed over their bare feet.

"HEEEK! My God, you were right, Dorothy: we are sinking! Let's get out and go up on the forward deck at once!"

Marilyn opened the door of their small cabin and went out in the passageway, only to nearly collide with a crewmember of the yacht running with a flashlight in one hand while shouting repeatedly.

"WE ARE SINKING! WE ARE SINKING! EVERYBODY UP ON THE FORWARD DECK IMMEDIATELY!"

The shouts of the sailor triggered a concert of scared females voices and screams in the darkened ship. The sailor, who seemed to know what he was doing, helped the starlets and the other passengers of the yacht by going up the passageway and knocking on every cabin door while shouting.

“EVERYBODY ON THE FORWARD DECK AT ONCE! USE THE FORWARD LADDER: WE ARE SINKING BY THE REAR.”

Grabbing firmly Dorothy’s hand, Marilyn guided her towards the forward ladder, helped by the light from the sailor’s flashlight. As she was about to climb the latter, a thought made her hesitate and she pushed Dorothy ahead of her.

“Go up first, Dorothy: I’m going to check if Johnny has come out of his cabin.”

Dorothy Dandridge didn’t comment on that, knowing that Marilyn had been having an occasional affair with the powerful film industry agent. She thus climbed the ladder without a word while Marilyn went back against the flow of passengers fleeing their cabins. She finally saw in the dark that the sailor who had given the evacuation order was helping an old man in a bathrobe. Marilyn gently grabbed one of the hands of Johnny Hyde, who seemed to be still confused about the situation.

“Come, Johnny! We must go up to the forward weather deck as fast as we can.”

“But, but, what happened?”

“Another boat collided with us, Mister Hyde.” Explained the sailor. “Our yacht was cut in half at the level of the engine room.”

“My God!” Exclaimed Hyde. “Did we send a distress signal by radio?”

“The Captain tried, sir, but we lost all power and couldn’t use the yacht’s radio. Our motor launch was also destroyed in the collision.”

Marilyn looked with apprehension at the sailor on hearing those words.

“And do we have another boat, or at the least a raft?”

“We still have a life raft and lifebuoys, miss. The First Officer is organizing the evacuation on the forward weather deck. Now, climb up quickly, please!”

Marilyn obeyed, but not before pushing Johnny ahead of her and then helping him climb the steep ladder. They soon emerged in the open air and on the bow deck of the yacht, which was already listing strongly from the stern. Looking around quickly in the rainy night, Marilyn saw with a jump of her heart the dark mass of another boat very close to theirs and which was also sinking rapidly. She could see and hear men on the other boat who were shouting in English while hurriedly putting a rowboat in the water. The

first officer of the yacht, a man of Greek origin like most of the crewmembers, suddenly patted the shoulders of both Marilyn and Johnny.

“Get close to the port side railing: a sailor will give you a life vest before helping you get in the raft with the others.”

What the first officer didn't dare say and that Marilyn understood quickly when she saw the life raft was that it was too small for all of the 34 occupants of the yacht. Other passengers of the yacht understood that as well and started panicking.

“My God, there will never be enough space for all of us in this!” Exclaimed one of the photographers, starting an assault on the life raft by terrified men and women. Herself worried by their precarious situation, Marilyn nonetheless fitted on her a life vest given by a sailor, then helped Johnny put on his own life vest, helped in that by her military experience from World War Two and by the survival and rescue courses she had received in the Pacific. Johnny gave her a weak but grateful smile.

“Decidedly, you are my angel, Marilyn.”

Marilyn shivered under the cold rain and wind before replying.

“You can repeat that to me once we are safely back on the ground and together in a warm bed, Johnny.”

Her attempt at raising his morale however fizzled as it became evident that their life raft was already overloaded, with ten persons, including herself and Johnny, still standing on the deck of their yacht. Waving at the sailors from the other ship, who were now in their floating rowboat, she shouted at them over the howling of the wind.

“HEY, COME TO US! WE DON'T HAVE ENOUGH SPACE IN OUR RAFT.”

Her repeated shouts and those from the first officer finally attracted the attention of the men in the rowboat, who then started rowing in their direction. Half of the yacht had now disappeared under the water and it would be only a question of minutes before the rest went down under the waves. Thankfully, the rowboat from the trawler quickly got side by side with the yacht's bow deck and started pulling aboard the persons still on the yacht. The fishermen then transferred on their rowboat half of the occupants of the life raft, lightening it significantly. The survivors were however still in a precarious situation, with strong waves raising them up and down continuously and with the cold rain further cooling the soaked men and women. Seeing that Johnny Hyde was showing early signs of hypothermia, Marilyn glued herself to him and shouted to the other starlets in the rowboat.

"COME SIT CLOSELY AROUND JOHNNY, GIRLS. WE MUST SHARE OUR BODY HEATH IF WE DON'T WANT TO FREEZE."

Dorothy Dandridge was the first to follow her counsel, followed by Jeanne Crain and Cara Williams, gluing herself to the old man, whose extremities were become pale from the cold. The impresario finally found himself tightly surrounded by seven young women, most of whom wore nothing more than soaked bathrobes or pajamas and who were starting as well to suffer from hypothermia. The occupants of the life raft now tied to the rowboat by a rope were however in an even worst situation, with the pierced bottom of their raft letting seawater freely flow and making them bathe in cold water. The captain of the trawler made his men row hard once the transfer of survivors was completed, wanting to pull as far as possible from the sinking boats before they could suck him down. As the yacht and the trawler disappeared under the waves, barely visible in the dark night, the captain of the trawler activated the small blinking light of his life vest, imitated by his sailors. He then took out of the rear emergency compartment of the rowboat a watertight bag and opened it, revealing a small emergency radio transceiver. Before switching it on, he looked at the captain of the yacht, sitting two meters away from him.

"Did you have time to send a mayday by radio?"

The captain of the yacht shook his head in discouragement.

"No! We lost power immediately after the collision."

"The same here. Let's hope that this portable radio set will have enough range to reach other ships or aircraft in the area."

Praying silently for a miracle, the boss of the SEA BOUNTY switched on his radio and started sending a message requesting help on the international distress frequency, repeating it every minute.

03:41 (California Time)

Prototype # 1 of the Northrop XB-50 CONDOR

20,000 meters above the Pacific

Captain Glen Edwards was at the commands of the XB-50, Major Forbes having gone to the small toilet compartment of the supersonic bomber, when the electronic warfare officer spoke on the intercom.

"Hey, Glen, I am receiving a mayday call on the international distress frequency. A yacht and a fishing trawler collided and sank and the survivors are now clinging to a raft and a rowboat."

"Did they give an approximate location, Charlie?"

"Yes, fortunately! We are approximately sixty nautical miles to the northwest of their indicated position. What do we do?"

"Give me a heading for them based on the radio direction finder, then retransmit their call to the Coast Guard. In the meantime we will go turn around their position until someone can take the relay. With this stormy sea and the low temperature of the water, these survivors will be lucky to survive the next few hours. Note in the log our fuel levels and flight parameters. That way we won't lose all the data from this fuel consumption test."

"Understood! Turn on heading 145 and continue at our present speed for four minutes. I will warn you when our DF set will turn 180 degrees."

Glen Edwards thanked the fact that their prototype had its full electronic warfare suite, its radars and its infra-red cameras as he turned on the new heading: it will make finding these survivors much easier. He put his bomber into a dive as well in order to lose altitude quickly and go down to near sea level. The pilot, Major Daniel Forbes returned to his seat a minute later, a question on his lips.

"Why did we change our heading and altitude, Glen? This will ruin our fuel consumption calculations."

"I know, Major, but we just received a distress signal from close to us."

Glen then explained quickly the situation to Forbes, who nodded his head in approval.

"Good call, Glen. We may be in the middle of a test flight but saving lives always has first priority. Charlie, did anyone else receive their message?"

"It doesn't look good for those people, Major: I retransmitted their call to the Coast Guard but nobody else seems to have heard them. We are presently well outside the regular maritime routes and our radar shows no ship within 190 miles of our position."

"Damn! With this present Sea State 5, this means that even a fast warship just beyond our radar coverage would take a minimum of seven hours to get to the sinking location. These people risk dying from hypothermia well before that."

"Major, we just overflew their position: the DF needle turned 180 degrees."

Forbes immediately put his heavy bomber in a tight turn to the right and gave a series of short orders.

“Charlie, note down our exact position and send it to the Coast Guard. Tell them that we will stay over the survivors as long as our fuel will permit. Then, reply by radio to those survivors and tell them that we will stay over them. Glen, light up all our navigation and landing lights and slow us down to 300 miles per hour. We will go down under this cloud cover and try to visually locate those unfortunate people. In the meantime, I will inform Muroc of the situation.”

The radio response from the XB-50 made the trawler captain shout with joy.

“AN AIRFORCE PLANE JUST ANSWERED US! IT ALERTED THE COAST GUARDS AND WILL TURN OVER US AS LONG AS IT CAN.”

The other survivors shouted their joy as well as the captain acknowledged reception of the XB-50's call, seeing the first sign of hope since the sinking of their boats. Like many others, Marilyn started looking up at the dark, cloudy sky, trying to locate their rescuers. She was actually the first to see the lights of a plane approaching at low altitude under the cloud cover.

“BEHIND US! A PLANE!”

All the heads turned in the direction she pointed. With the half moon hidden by black clouds and with the persistent rain, it was impossible to see anything else than the lights of the plane in the night, which was about as dark as a oven. The powerful engine roar of the plane as it overflew them struck Marilyn, even though she had been accustomed during the war to be around military planes.

“My God! This is a really big bird, probably a bomber or a heavy transport.”

“How did it manage to find us in the dark?” Asked the voice of one of the starlets, coming from somewhere inside the rowboat.

“It is probably equipped with a radar, or even with an infrared camera.” Replied Marilyn. “Many planes of the 99th Wing had such cameras during the war and I was able to see their screens many times. I am sure that the crew of that plane saw us.”

Johnny Hyde, still closely surrounded by seven women and feeling a bit better, patted gently Marilyn's shoulder.

“I am happy that we have an Air Force heroine with us right now.”

Marilyn reddened with embarrassment at this allusion to the Bronze Star bravery medal she had won during the air assault landing in Ambon, in the Dutch East Indies, in 1944, but found nothing to say in response.

“THERE THEY ARE!” Shouted Glen Edwards, pointing at a tight group of small blinking lights at the surface of the ocean, dead ahead. Forbes smiled with satisfaction on seeing the light.

“Bingo! Charlie, inform the Coast Guard that we have visually contacted the survivors and ask them if ships are on the way.”

“Right away, Major!”

After a few minutes, the electronic warfare officer spoke again on the intercom, sounding rather dissatisfied.

“Major, the Coast Guard is saying that the nearest ship is more than twelve hours away, even at maximum speed. The sea is also too strong to allow an amphibian to land. They will still send a patrol aircraft to take the relay from us once the Sun will be up.”

“Twelve hours?! But, half of those poor people will have frozen to death by then. As for waiting for their aircraft, I doubt that we will have enough fuel for that. We just did a return trip unrefueled from Muroc to Hawaii, for God’s sake! There must be a faster alternative than this.”

Glen Edwards then made a suggestion, even though he was expecting it to be rejected at once.

“Major, we have the ideal plane for the job in Muroc: the XC-10.”

“The XC-10? But it is an ultra secret prototype, like our own XB-50. We can’t expose it to civilians.”

“I understand that, Major, but the alternative is to watch most of those people die. Do we want to have that on our conscience by doing nothing, sir?”

Forbes hesitated for a moment, then activated his radio microphone.

“Muroc Control, this is Condor...”

04:14 (California Time)

Prototype hangar, Flight Test Center

North Base, Muroc Air Force Base

Ingrid, alerted by a telephone call to her quarters and having just arrived after a mad dash in her Jaguar XK120 sports car, entered at a run the hangar containing the XC-10, then ran to join a small group that included Brigadier General Albert Boyd and Colonel Fred Ascani.

"What's the situation, General Boyd?" She asked while braking to a halt besides Boyd. The veteran test pilot looked at her with a somber expression.

"We have a mortal dilemma, General. According to the information relayed by our XB-50, about forty survivors from a collision between two ships are clinging to a rowboat and a life raft in a stormy, cold sea about 560 miles southwest of Los Angeles. However, the nearest ship won't be able to get to those people before at least another twelve hours and no seaplane can land in the actual conditions. Major Forbes has suggested that we use our XC-10 to effect a rescue mission, but you can imagine the reaction from the Pentagon if we show off one of our secret prototypes like this. I would need your opinion and support on this, General."

Ingrid glanced at the XC-10, around which a small army of technicians were working frantically. She then looked back resolutely at Boyd.

"My decision is already taken, General Boyd. I take on me the responsibility for launching a rescue mission with our XC-10 and I will go with it as mission commander. Have search and rescue modules bolted on the mission nacelles and load the XC-10 with the maximum of fuel that would allow a short takeoff, a trip to the sinking site and a long hover, plus a subsonic return trip. I also want the XC-100 to fly out and go relieve our XB-50 before daylight over the survivors. Do we have divers on this base?"

"Unfortunately not, General."

Ingrid thought for a moment before speaking again.

"Professional divers will be needed for this mission. General Boyd, contact the Coast Guard station in San Diego and ask them if they could provide us with two divers with their equipment on very short notice. If they agree to loan us divers, we will then go land with the XC-10 at their station to get them, then will go to the site of the sinking. Do we know by the way the type and nationality of the boats that sank?"

"Two American boats sank after colliding: the luxury yacht PACIFIC DREAMS and a fishing trawler, the SEA BOUNTY. Colonel Ascani will take care of preparing the XC-10 for the mission while I will contact the Coast Guard to get those divers."

On this, Boyd ran away towards one of the offices in the hangar's annex, leaving Ingrid with Ascani and the designated crew of the XC-10. Ingrid looked next at Ascani.

"Colonel, we will need as well a doctor for this mission, along with warm blankets, dry clothes, thermos bottles full of hot coffee and sandwiches. Has someone called Major Stapp?"

"Major Stapp is already on his way and should arrive soon, General." Answered Ascani. "I will go get the supplies needed. The C-100 will be departing as soon as it is finished fuelling up."

Ingrid nodded her head at that, understanding Ascani's preoccupation about launching the C-100 as fast as he could: the prototype of the XB-50 was their most secret plane with the XF-83 and they couldn't risk having it being seen in daylight by civilians, for fear that the Soviets could get wind of its existence. Ascani then ran away as well, heading for a telephone.

Ingrid used the time needed to get things organized to go change into her flight suit. The doctor in charge of research in aeronautical medicine in Muroc, Major Stapp, arrived ten minutes later, his doctor's bag in hand. Boyd came back at about the same time, joining Ingrid as she inspected the preparations of the XC-10. As for the XC-100, it was already rolling out of the hangar to take off.

"The commander of the Coast Guard station in San Diego has accepted to loan us two fully equipped divers, General. They will be ready to be picked up in twenty minutes. The Coast Guard also confirmed to me that no ship can get to the location of the sinking before another twelve hours. We are thus the only ones able to react quickly, something that convinced the Coast Guard to cooperate with us."

"Excellent! We should be able to take off in less than fifteen minutes."

Boyd smiled with satisfaction as he observed the technicians working on the XC-10. The mission nacelles of the XC-10, forming cigar-shaped cylinders suspended under the wings, were each made of three parts: a central, fixed section that contained fuel tanks as well as quick connectors; and a tail and nose pods that could be varied according to the type of mission to be flown. Those mission pods could be changed and replaced in minutes, thanks to integral support rails and quick connectors and pipes, without any structural modifications to the plane. In this case, the XC-10 had been fitted with four mission pods that contained respectively a set of powerful, remotely steered projectors, a high definition surface search radar and two supplementary fuel tanks. Fuel drop tanks were also hooked to the wings, to give the XC-10 as long an endurance as possible for this mission. When he had seen for the first time the design concept of the

XC-10, Boyd had found it positively brilliant, especially the multi-mission pod concept. He had never seen a plane so versatile and flexible in its employment and it promised to be a winner.

“By God, if we succeed in saving those poor people, the XC-10 will be able to say that it started its career with a flash and a bang. I wonder what our four visiting senators will think about this.”

“For the moment, I am thinking only about those unfortunate souls freezing in the dark on the Pacific Ocean.” Replied softly Ingrid, returning Boyd to the harsh reality. He however could only agree with her and admire her practical sense.

04:53 (California Time)

U.S. Coast Guard naval air station

San Diego, California

“THE AIRFORCE PLANE WILL LAND IN TWO MINUTES, GUYS!”

The warning shouted by their officer from his office made the two divers sitting with their equipment in a light truck look up at the sky. Dawn was still nearly one hour away and the black clouds covering the sky still spat a constant rain. Seaman First Class Luis Alvarez then looked at his direct superior, Petty Officer Second Class John McBride.

“How will that helicopter land in such poor visibility, P.O.2?”

“I don’t know, Alvarez.” Replied the veteran diver, who had already over thirty rescue missions to his credit. “The Air Force is supposedly sending us a secret experimental aircraft. We will see when it will land. However, remember what the lieutenant said: not a word to others about what we will see of that secret plane.”

“I got that, P.O.. I must say that those poor buggers freezing over there can count themselves lucky: our own helicopters don’t have even half the radius of action needed to get to them.”

“And that is without mentioning about how to find them in such awful weather. The weather forecasts are even announcing fog for the early morning.”

The two Coast Guard divers and their driver then stayed silent, until the noise of an approaching jet aircraft started to be heard, coming from the North. John McBride frowned at that, surprised.

“But, that’s not an helicopter! What kind of game is the Air Force playing?”

The answer arrived a minute later, with the landing on the runway of Lindberg Airfield, adjacent to their Coast Guard station, of the most fantastic-looking jet aircraft they had ever seen. The two divers and their driver watched with open mouths the plane as it rolled towards them on the taxiway after a remarkably short landing.

“My God, what the hell is this?” Exclaimed Alvarez.

“Don’t know but it sure looks like a secret prototype to me. Fred, start your engine!”

The driver obeyed at once and soon rolled slowly to the spot on the tarmac where the Air Force plane was due to stop. A cargo ramp opened up at the rear of the plane as soon as it stopped, with a crewmember coming out and signaling to the truck to approach from the rear. McBride and Alvarez jumped out of their truck once it stopped near the foot of the ramp, to be greeted there by a young and very beautiful woman in a flight suit. McBride’s smile at her sight disappeared when he saw the two silver stars insignias of a major general on the shoulder boards of her flight suit. Coming to attention, he saluted the aviatrix while presenting himself.

“Petty Officer Second Class McBride and Seaman First Class Alvarez, ready for a mission, General.”

“Welcome aboard my Bell XC-10 THUNDERBIRD, gentlemen. I am Major General Ingrid Dows, from Muroc Air Force Base. Load your equipment aboard quickly: we are departing immediately.”

“Yes, General!”

Helped by their driver, the two divers carried their air bottles and their diving equipment inside the fuselage cabin, which proved wide enough to accommodate light vehicles like jeeps and which had folding jump seats along its sides. The young major general led the two drivers forward to a separate compartment and showed them three seats fixed to a partition near a sort of big basket padded with neoprene foam. The basket was suspended by four steel cables to an electric winch fixed to the ceiling of the compartment. A trap large enough to let pass the basket was visible in the floor of the compartment.

“You can take place in those seats and suit up during our outbound flight. Before you ask me a ton of questions, know this: the XC-10 is able to take off and land vertically and is fully equipped to conduct combat, long distance search and rescue missions, including this rescue basket hooked to a winch. It is also a secret, experimental prototype. We may possibly have to reveal it to public view for this mission, but about

forty lives are at stakes right now. However, I will ask you to keep to yourself the details you will learn about this aircraft, except of course to your superiors. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, General!" Answered McBride.

"Good! To your front and left is a small toilet compartment, if you need to go. We have a doctor on board who will care for the survivors once they are fished out of the water. I will play the part of the cargo master and will guide the descent of our rescue basket. Now, if you may buckle up your safety belts, this plane is capable of quite an impressive acceleration."

Ingrid then showed the example and sat in one of the seats, buckling her safety belt as a major exited the cockpit and went to sit beside her after saluting the divers with a nod of the head. The plane was now rolling, with the cargo ramp closing rapidly. Alvarez smiled to his superior, excited: this was his first ride in a jet aircraft.

"This promises to be quite an experience, P.O.."

"Effectively. I wonder if the Coast Guard will acquire this type of aircraft in the future. It looks quite fantastic."

Their plane suddenly started accelerating at a rate that astounded them, to then lift off cleanly from the runway and climb after only a short roll.

"WOW! This bird can certainly climb."

Ingrid smiled to McBride on hearing him.

"The XC-10 is actually more nimble than most of the existing fighter aircraft, Petty Officer McBride. It is also able to nearly attain the speed of sound. We will be at the sinking point quickly enough."

05:45 (California Time)

Sinking site of the PACIFIC DREAMS and of the SEA BOUNTY

Pacific Ocean

The captain of the PACIFIC DREAMS sighed with relief on seeing the first rays of light on the horizon.

"Dawn, at last! With luck, the Sun will help warm us up."

"I...I wouldn't mind." Stuttered Dorothy Dandridge, soaked to the bones and shivering while sitting and rolled into a tight ball besides Marilyn. To add to her misery, a wave bigger than the others splashed more water on her and the others, adding to the

cold water covering the bottom. Captain Chris Caramanlis looked with a critical eye at the situation around him, now that he could see better with the light of dawn. While the occupants of the rowboat were suffering a lot from the cold, the occupants of the life raft showed signs of severe hypothermia setting in, having bathed constantly in cold seawater since the sinking. Unfortunately, there wasn't enough place in the rowboat for all of them, by a long shot. Also, the level of water filling the rowboat was starting to worry him. He thus tried to shake up the lethargy of the survivors and to motivate them. Controlling his own shivering, he raised his voice to be heard by all.

"LISTEN TO ME, ALL OF YOU! WE MUST SCOOP OUT THE WATER FILLING THE ROWBOAT. USE YOUR HANDS IF NEED BE, BUT GET TO IT. THE WORK WILL WARM YOU UP."

A few of the survivors, mostly sailors and fishermen, obeyed him without protesting but the majority of the starlets simply stayed rolled into tight balls. Seeing that, Marilyn stretched her legs, which were half frozen, before getting on her knees and calling out her comrades.

"COME ON, GIRLS! SHOW THESE MEN THAT YOU HAVE GUTS!"

"But, we have nothing to scoop the water with." Pleaded one of the starlets as an excuse. Marilyn stared at her severely.

"Use what you have available, Maggie. Do as I do."

To the delight and amusement of the men in their group, she then took off her bra, exposing her breasts for a few seconds before rolling back down her sweater and starting to scoop out water energetically with her bra cups. Dorothy, then two more starlets soon imitated her example. As more and more of the passengers of the rowboat went to work, Caramanlis examined the passengers of the life raft to judge their state. Two starlets and one photographer in particular were unconscious and were not reacting to the words of their comrades of misfortune. Caramanlis understood that their only chance for survival was to transfer them in the rowboat. The problem was that some of the present occupants of the rowboat would have to transfer in the life raft in order to compensate for the weight transfer and avoid overloading the rowboat. Pulling on the rope linking the two crafts, Caramanlis got the raft closer to the rowboat, then stepped in the raft. It immediately sank deeper by a few centimeters in the water, attracting a protest from one of its occupants.

"Hey! We will sink with you aboard!"

"Just help me transfer this girl into the rowboat instead of complaining, will you!" Replied in a firm voice the captain of the yacht to the man who had spoken. He then grabbed an unconscious starlet under the armpits and started pulling her towards the freeboard of the rowboat. The transfer proved difficult, with waves constantly swaying the crafts around and with the survivors' muscles nearly paralyzed by the cold. The starlet was finally placed safely inside the rowboat, where the starlets there immediately pressed against her to warm her up. Caramanlis then started to transfer another starlet into the rowboat and was then shocked to see Marilyn Monroe step into the life raft.

"What are you doing, miss?"

"We do have to balance the load between the raft and the rowboat, no?"

Caramanlis stared at her for a moment before smiling to her.

"Of course, Miss Monroe! Thank you for your spirit of sacrifice."

Marilyn didn't reply to that as she looked around with growing worry before exclaiming with horror.

"Betty and Sylvia, where are they? I don't see them."

Now alarmed himself, Caramanlis did a quick count of the survivors, something that the previous darkness had not allowed. He soon had to accept that three of the passengers of the PACIFIC DREAM, including two starlets, were missing. On his part, the captain of the fishing trawler announced glumly that one of his fishermen was also missing. With tears in her eyes, Marilyn still helped Caramanlis to transfer the second unconscious starlet into the rowboat, ignoring the cold water now covering her legs.

As they were transferring the unconscious photographer in the rowboat, the noise of jet engines approaching made the survivors look up. Marilyn opened her eyes wide, like the other survivors, at the sight of the fantastic-looking giant plane with triangular wings that passed over them, leading another, smaller but even less conventional-looking aircraft with two pairs of wings attached at their tips by vertical surfaces. The giant delta-winged aircraft then sped away, leaving the newcomer in its place to turn around the survivors. Marilyn screamed her joy while throwing her fists in the air.

"WE HAVE A NEW GUARDIAN ANGEL OVERHEAD. WELL DONE, GUYS!"

"Sweet Jesus, I never saw the like of the plane that just departed." Said Jeanne Crain. "Do you know that model, Marilyn?"

"No! It must be a recent model. It looked truly magnificent."

"Magnificent? I would rather say plainly fantastic."

Their joy was however short-lived, with the captain of the trawler swearing in his beard as he looked at the sea around them.

"Damn! Fog is starting to form up."

That fog quickly thickened, to the point that they soon could not see further than maybe a hundred meters around them, while they lost sight completely of the aircraft circling overhead. That made the morale of the survivors sink again, until they heard the sound of a second aircraft approaching. Marilyn was expecting that plane to have trouble finding them but it actually came straight at them, judging from the noise of its powerful jet engines. It soon pierced through the dense fog, less than a hundred meters from the survivors, proving to be even more fantastic-looking than the first or second plane. It also slowed down to a near hover, like an helicopter, with its two big jet engines pointing upward to the vertical. Marilyn and others screamed with joy when a sort of big basket with a man inside started coming down from the belly of the aircraft, hooked to four cable. The noise level soon became deafening as the strange aircraft hovered above the survivors, with the basket and its occupant touching the water and going down maybe fifty centimeters before floating by itself as it was towed towards the survivors by its mother aircraft. Despite the strong smell of burnt kerosene, Marilyn was grateful when the jet exhausts from the plane brushed over her, bringing warmth to her and the others. An amplified voice soon reverberated in their ears, a female voice that Marilyn knew.

"YOUR ATTENTION, PLEASE! WE WILL NOW START TO TAKE YOU UP BY GROUPS OF EIGHT PERSONS AT A TIME. STAY CALM, BE PATIENT AND OBEY THE INSTRUCTIONS FROM THE DIVER INSIDE THE RESCUE BASKET AND YOU WILL BE SAVED. DO NOT ATTEMPT TO FORCE YOUR WAY INTO THE BASKET, OR WE WILL WASTE PRECIOUS TIME AND MAY RUN OUT OF FUEL BEFORE WE COULD PICK ALL OF YOU UP."

"Ingrid Dows!" Exclaimed Marilyn, jubilant. "ITS GENERAL DOWS COMING TO OUR RESCUE!"

The others didn't comment on that, having only eyes for the approaching rescue basket. It soon bumped against the side of the life raft, with the diver in the basket then quickly grabbing one of the ropes attached to one side of the raft. The man signaled the nearest survivors to get in the basket, only to cause a mad rush by a dozen survivors. The diver

had to forcibly control them, with Caramanlis helping him by taking down one of his sailors that had pushed a starlet out of the way in order to get in the basket first. Caramanlis had to literally sit on the panicking man until the basket started going up with a first load of eight survivors.

“WILL YOU STOP PANICKING LIKE THIS, GEORGE? YOU WANT TO BE CALLED A COWARD?”

The sailor, with wild eyes, would have gotten up again if two other men would not have helped Caramanlis to restrain him. Caramanlis had thus to keep sitting on him until the basket came back down with the diver and was ready to pick up the rest of the survivors still in the raft. Before letting him get in the basket, the yacht's captain grabbed his sailor by the collar and got nose to nose with him.

“If I see or hear that you cause further trouble, George, then I will make sure that no other ship or boat ever hires you again. Now, behave and stop dishonoring your family name!”

He then nearly threw the man inside the basket once the other occupants of the raft, save him and Marilyn were in.

To the admiration of Caramanlis and of many of the other men, Marilyn refused to take place in the basket until all of the other women were up, finally riding in the basket with Johnny Hyde and six other men. She hugged the shivering old man in her arms as the rescue basket went back up on its fourth round trip.

“We are saved, Johnny! We will live!”

“Thank you, God!” Said weakly the impresario. Marilyn smiled from ear to ear when the basket entered the belly of the XC-10 and she saw Ingrid at the controls of the winch. Ingrid in turn stared at her with disbelief.

“Corporal Norma Jean?”

“I am now called Marilyn Monroe, General.” Replied the actress, overjoyed. “Thank you from the bottom of my heart for having come to save us.”

“There were lives to save and I did what needed to be done. To see that I was able to save you as well makes me even happier. Go to the rear cabin now: a doctor will examine you there. I would talk more with you but I have more survivors left to be picked up.”

Marilyn didn't insist and helped Johnny come out of the basket, bringing him in the cargo cabin, now nearly occupied to capacity. An Air Force doctor greeted her there and made

her and Johnny sit in one of the folding seats of the cabin. He was about to examine Marilyn when she stopped him.

“No! Examine Mister Hyde first: he has a cardiac condition and suffers from hypothermia. I can wait.”

Major Stapp nodded his head and changed position, kneeling in front of the old impresario, a stethoscope in one hand. Johnny Hyde looked at Marilyn with infinite tenderness, a tear rolling on his cheek as Stapp started examining him.

“You truly are an angel, Marilyn. Are you sure that you don’t want to accept my proposal?”

Marilyn smiled tenderly to him but still shook her head: Johnny Hyde had done a lot to help her career as an actress and had proved to be a caring man, on top of being rich. He had also proposed marriage to her a number of times and was madly in love with her.

“Thank you but no, Johnny. I want to be successful by myself as an actress, without your millions. I still love you a lot, though.”

“Marilyn, I can’t continue to watch and do nothing when you go hungry because you barely have enough to pay your rent. If you are not ready to marry me, then at least let me help you by making sure that you don’t ever get hungry anymore.”

Marilyn looked Johnny into the eyes in silence for a long moment before answering him.

“Very well, Johnny, I will think about it. In the meantime, rest: you need it.”

An Air Force sergeant then approached the couple, fuming cups of coffee in his hands.

“Would you like some hot coffee, miss, mister?”

“Oh yes! Thank you very much!”

The sergeant handed them two cups, then went to get two wool blankets that he wrapped over Marilyn and Johnny. Feeling already better, Marilyn shivered as the first sip of hot coffee went down to her stomach.

“My God, it’s like I am coming back to life. Thank you, Air Force!”

The rescue operation took a good forty minute, the waves shaking the crafts making difficult the approach of the basket and the maneuvers of the plane. With its reactors at nearly full power for so long, the pilot of the XC-10, Major Robert Cardenas, started to watch with growing apprehension his fuel gauges. He sighed with relief when Ingrid announced by intercom that the last survivor was now aboard and that the rescue basket was securely back in its cradle.

"At last! Let's go back home while we still have enough fuel."

Cardenas pushed his throttles to maximum, making his plane rise while taking forward speed, transitioning to normal flight mode in seconds and heading towards Los Angeles at his economical cruising speed of 550 miles per hour. Ingrid showed up in the cockpit a few minutes later, worry evident on her face.

"A couple of the survivors are iffy and need to get to a hospital without delay, according to Major Stapp. How are we doing on fuel?"

"We have just enough fuel left to get back to Muroc and land normally, General."

"I'm afraid that Muroc won't do, Major. Major Stapp is adamant that its hospital is not adequate to care properly for the number of severe hypothermia cases we have in the back. Can we make it to the Long Beach Naval Hospital?"

"Yes, General, but we would have to land there vertically, as it only has an helicopter concrete landing pad there. Unfortunately, I can't vouch that we won't be burning the last of our fuel while in the middle of a vertical landing."

"Damn! What about the San Diego Naval Hospital, then? We are closer to it than to Los Angeles, no?"

"We definitely could safely land at the vertical there, but we would then have too little fuel to take off vertically, even to effect a short trip to go refuel at the North Island Naval Air Station, General."

"Too bad! Head for the San Diego Naval Hospital anyway and use the helicopter pad there to land: our patients can't wait. Do contact the North Island Naval Air Station in the meantime and request them to send a tanker truck filled with jet fuel to the naval hospital: we will refuel there, then take off vertically to return to Muroc."

Cardenas looked up with shock at Ingrid.

"But, General, that will expose our XC-10 to the public view of half a million people, at the least. General Vandenberg will have your ass for that."

Ingrid grimaced, realizing that Cardenas was probably right about Vandenberg's reaction.

"Fuck it! Lives are at stake here: my career can take a hit or two. We still go for the San Diego Naval Hospital, and don't forget to ask for that fuel truck."

"Uh, I won't, General."

Ingrid then returned to the cargo cabin, leaving Cardenas and his copilot to exchange worried looks.

"She could be stepping into a very big pile of doo-doo, Major."

"I know, Jim! I know!" Replied Cardenas, suddenly feeling dread.

The approach and vertical landing of the XC-10 at the San Diego Naval Hospital effectively proved to be less than discreet, the naval hospital being located right in the city downtown area. Cringing on seeing the amount of undue attention they were going to get, Ingrid was nonetheless encouraged by the sight of one big Navy tanker truck, one light truck towing an engine starting unit and a staff car, all waiting in a far corner of the parking lot of the naval hospital, safely away from the helicopter landing pad. The survivors in the cabin shouted with joy when their wheels touched the ground, with the naval hospital's emergency entrance plainly visible less than fifty meters away. Ingrid went to shake the hands of the two Coast Guard divers as the rear cargo ramp was coming down.

"Thank you again for your assistance, gentlemen. You did a bang up job out there and I will tell so to your commanding officer. Please excuse me if I couldn't drop you directly back at your station."

"Don't worry about that, General." Replied John McBride. "Those Navy trucks will certainly give us a lift back to our station. I must say that working with your prototype was an incredible experience: it is a truly fantastic plane. I hope that the Coast Guard will eventually buy some of them."

"I hope so too, Petty Officer McBride. My biggest hope is that my prototypes in Muroc could eventually be adopted across all of our services air arms. Thank you again for your help."

She then hurried to the rear ramp, where medics, nurses and doctors from the naval hospital were already starting to load up the more severe cases of hypothermia on gurneys to bring them inside the hospital. Seeing a Navy captain waiting some distance from the ramp with two other Navy officers, Ingrid left the aircraft and walked quickly towards them. The three Navy officers were surprised on seeing her rank insignias but still came to attention to salute her. Ingrid saluted back, with the Navy captain then presenting himself.

"Welcome to San Diego, General. I am Captain Charles Griffith, Commander of the North Island Naval Air Station. With me are my air operations officer, Lieutenant Commander Merrick, and my engineering officer, Lieutenant Commander Babbage. As you requested, we brought what you will need to leave for Muroc after this. Could I ask what type of aircraft this is, General?"

"You may, Captain Griffith. This is the first prototype of the Bell C-10 THUNDERBIRD, a multi-mission cargo aircraft able to land and take off vertically. I normally would avoid publicity like the plague concerning this aircraft and my other prototypes, but lives were at stake and I had to make a hard choice between secrecy and saving the lives of American civilians."

"Your choice was commendable, General." Replied Griffith, sounding sincere. "Could you tell us more about that rescue operation you just did? What I was told about it was rather fragmentary."

"With pleasure, Captain." Said Ingrid before resuming in a few minutes the events of the last few hours. The details concerning the rescue operation proper attracted incredulous looks, with Lieutenant Commander Merrick asking her a question with difficulty.

"You say that this aircraft was able to hover above the ocean for more than forty minutes, and this after flying over 600 miles to get to the sinking spot, then came here to land vertically, General?"

"That's right, Commander! The XC-10 was designed specifically for the combat rescue of pilots shot down behind enemy lines, which entails long range and endurance in hover mode. Once all of the survivors are safely admitted into this hospital, I can give you a quick tour of my aircraft, if you would like it."

"We certainly would want to see in detail your fantastic aircraft, General." Replied at once Captain Griffith with enthusiasm. Griffith's smile then faded away as he asked in a cautious manner a question to Ingrid.

"General, aren't you afraid that Washington will slap your hands for exposing one of your secret prototypes like this? Please don't get me wrong: I approve of any initiative that can save lives."

Ingrid gave Griffith a sober look, appreciating his frankness.

"You are probably right about the reactions from the Pentagon to this, Captain. However, I am ready to live with the consequences of my decision. I will never apologize for saving innocent lives, especially those of American civilians."

"For what it's worth, General, you have my heartfelt approval for your actions today. Who are these people anyway? I thought that I could recognize some of them."

"We saved the crew of a fishing trawler, the SEA BOUNTY, as well as the crew and passengers of the luxury yacht PACIFIC DREAMS. The yacht belongs to the

president of the Twentieth Century-Fox, Spyros Skouras, and was transporting an impresario and a group of starlets to Tahiti.”

Griffith opened his mouth wide on hearing this.

“But, this story will be front page in all the newspapers of the country then! The secret about your prototype is as good as blown!”

“I know, Captain.” Said Ingrid in a resigned tone.

Forty minutes later, the XC-10 took off again for Muroc, followed by the camera lens of at least four television crews plus those of over fifty photographers. Major Cardenas, seeing that, swore to himself and pushed his engine throttles to maximum power.

“Fuck it! If we are going to provide a show anyway, we might as well give the best performance possible. GO AIR FORCE!”

The XC-10, having taken in only a few tons of fuel, enough for a safe take off and a trip to Muroc, was presently weighing only about 23,000 kilograms. With a total thrust at maximum power of 49,000 kilogram force, representing over twice its present mass, the assault transport literally jumped in the air and climbed nearly like a rocket, accelerating forward at the same time and leaving the thousands of spectators open-mouthed with awe and disbelief.

It landed at Muroc less than fifteen minutes later, finding a welcome committee waiting in front of its hangar. That committee was formed of Brigadier General Boyd, Colonel Ascani and their four visiting senators, with all of them greeting Ingrid and the crew of the XC-10 with warm handshakes and wide smiles.

“Congratulations, General: you did the impossible.” Said Margaret Chase-Smith as she shook hands with Ingrid. The latter kept a sober appearance, knowing that this affair was only starting.

“Thank you, Madam Senator. However, I am afraid that there will be repercussions to this success, negative repercussions.”

“What do you mean?” Asked Margaret, her own smile fading away. Ingrid then explained to her the fact that she had to publicly show the XC-10, as well as her fears about the possible reactions in Washington. Henry Cabot Lodge’s face hardened on hearing that.

"If those damn bureaucrats in Washington react to this rescue mission by accusing you of negligence or irresponsibility, then I will make sure to raise enough of a stink in the Senate to shut them up. We are talking about 41 American civilians that would have been dead if not for your intervention."

"I know, Senator Lodge, but covering one's ass is a national sport at the Pentagon."

"And who would dare fault you for your decisions, General?" Asked Margaret, getting a pinched smile from Ingrid.

"Lieutenant General Thompson, Commander of the Air Materiel Command, for starters. You can add to him all the Air Force generals who feel that I was unduly promoted in the past to successive ranks without the proper seniority, which must include nearly all of the general officers in the Air Force. If you will excuse me, I will go write a mission report to be sent to the AMC headquarters and to General Vandenberg." Margaret watched Ingrid walk away, then looked at Albert Boyd.

"General Boyd, could General Dows really risk negative reactions from Washington about this?"

"That is very possible, Madam Senator." Replied Boyd glumly. "Normally, me and Colonel Ascani would also be in hot water for this, but General Dows covered us by taking responsibility for this mission."

"And someone could really want to discipline an officer of her caliber?"

"Madam Senator, like General Dows said herself, covering one's ass and avoiding to take initiatives is a national sport in the Pentagon." Margaret sighed in frustration, then seemed to take a decision.

"I think that I will go make a few calls to Washington, General Boyd. Could I use your phone for a little half hour?"

"But of course, Madam Senator!" Replied Boyd with a little smile.

17:32 (Washington Time)

Hole # 8, Army and Navy Country Club golf course

Alexandria, Virginia

"Nice shot, Hoyt!"

"Thanks, Bill!" Replied Hoyt Vandenberg, Chief of Staff of the Air Force, while following his golf ball with his eyes. The ball rolled to less than six meters of the Number

Eight hole before stopping. Satisfied with his shot, he put back his club in his golf bag and let his two companions hit their balls before walking with them towards the green, towing his bag on its small wheels.

Thirty minutes later and after completing nine holes, the trio of generals entered the lobby of the Army and Navy Country Club, tired but satisfied with their golf game and with a solid appetite. Vandenberg's piercing eyes noted at once the crowd assembled around the television set in a corner of the lobby. With all the new technology brought from the future by Nancy Laplante in 1940, the television industry had made great strides since then and was now a lot more advanced than in Laplante's history. In particular, television sets and image transmission quality were much better, resulting in television being now a common and very popular medium. Intrigued by the crowding, Vandenberg approached the TV set and joined the twenty or so men listening to what proved to be a news flash. He was shocked to see then on the screen a picture of a plane that was supposed to be still secret.

"But, how could these photographers film our XC-10?" Said Vandenberg to himself in a low voice. Another Air Force general nearby looked at him, curious.

"You know that aircraft type, Hoyt?"

"Yes! What's happening? Did it crash?"

"Not at all! It supposedly saved about forty shipwrecked persons off San Diego this morning. It was photographed when it landed vertically at the San Diego Naval Hospital in order to drop the survivors for emergency treatment."

"But, the XC-10 is supposed to be a classified prototype. Why did it intervene like this, instead of the Coast Guards?"

"According to the commentator, no other ship or plane could respond in time. The story is however still quite confusing."

"Damn, I need to go check this story A.S.A.P.!"

Excusing himself with his two companions, Vandenberg left the club at an hurried pace and went to his car, putting his golf bag in the trunk before sitting behind the wheel and driving away towards the nearby Pentagon.

Less than fifteen minutes later, Vandenberg was about to enter in the Pentagon when a young lieutenant who was apparently waiting for him intercepted him while saluting.

"General, Major General Finlay have been trying to contact you for about one hour now and posted me at your door in case you came back here."

Vandenberg nodded his head at that: Finlay was the commander of the National Military Command Center, or NMCC, in the Pentagon and would be one of the first to know about a situation or crisis implicating American forces around the World.

"It it about our XC-10 prototype, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir! General Finlay has received a report from Major General Dows, based in Muroc, plus a call from Lieutenant General Thompson, the commander of the AMC. Here is a copy of the report from General Dows, sir."

Taking the message offered by the lieutenant, Vandenberg read it carefully before looking again at the junior officer.

"And the call from General Thompson, was it about that rescue operation?"

"Yes, General! According to General Finlay, General Thompson was furious to see one of our secret prototypes be shown publicly like this and wanted to take immediate disciplinary action against Major General Dows."

"Well, I can understand at first General Thompson's reaction. On the other hand, if I can believe General Dows' report, she took the only decision that could have saved those survivors. Very well, tell General Finlay that I will call Muroc at once to get to the bottom of this. Tell him also to keep me informed if this rescue operation causes more public reactions.

"Understood, General!"

Two minutes later, Vandenberg had the Flight Test Center in Muroc on the line, but was told by the duty officer there that Major General Dows had gone by helicopter to San Diego to visit the survivors in hospital. He however was able to get Brigadier General Boyd on the line, who gave him his version of what had happened this early morning. Vandenberg digested for a moment that information before thanking Boyd. The latter however hurried to add something before he could hang up.

"General, if I may. I received one hour ago a call from Lieutenant General Thompson, who told me that he intended to relieve Dows of her command and to put her in front of a court martial for compromising the secret of the XC-10. I just want to say that, in my humble opinion, General Dows took the only decent decision possible in the circumstances."

“With what I know now, I would tend to agree with you, General Boyd. If General Thompson calls back, tell him on my behalf to suspend any disciplinary action he had in mind concerning General Dows. I am going to fly to Muroc to investigate this incident myself.”

“Understood, General! We will be expecting you.”

Vandenberg cut that line and composed another number at once, calling the operations center of Andrews Air Force Base, situated close to Washington, and getting the duty officer there.

“Captain, this is General Vandenberg. I need to get to Muroc, in California, as fast as possible. What do you have available right now as a fast jet aircraft?”

“Uh, we have a few F-86 SABRE fighters on the base, plus two B-45 TORNADO light bombers, sir.”

“Excellent! I am requisitioning one of those two B-45s. Have a crew and flight gear set ready for me and fill that B-45 with fuel. I will be there within the hour.”

17:21 (California Time)

Muroc Air Force Base, California

Margaret Chase-Smith, like her three colleagues, was frustrated and irritated on her return to Muroc following a long but fruitless visit to the China Lake Naval Air Test Center. Despite the fact that the commander of the test center had been a lot more open and honest with them than Captain Williamson had been in Patuxent River, the planes and weapons systems they had seen in China Lake had deeply disappointed the four senators. Now that they knew what the Air Force had in its bag, the low technology and lack of vision in the Navy projects were only more frustrating. A navy captain in China Lake had even rejected with a wave of the hand the idea that the new Navy fighters should have swept or delta wings in order to attain higher speeds, saying that only classic straight wings allowed safe landings on an aircraft carrier. Dispirited by such narrow thinking, Margaret was ready to write a stinging investigation report tonight, prior to her return to Washington.

Once their C-60A had stopped in front of one of the hangars of the Flight Test Center, Margaret thanked her two pilots and climbed down to the tarmac, where Colonel Ascani was waiting for the senators.

"Madam Senator, I would like to know if you and your colleagues would still want to leave tonight for Washington aboard the XC-100?"

Margaret, exhausted by their travels and by the changes in time zones, looked at her colleagues before answering Ascani.

"Would it be possible to delay that flight until tomorrow, Colonel? I believe that I will need a good bed and ten hours of sleep tonight."

"Delaying the flight won't be a problem, madam."

"Thank you, Colonel. Uh, do you have news from the survivors saved by the XC-10?"

"Yes, Madam Senator! General Dows just visited them in their hospital in San Diego. Two of the survivors, one man and one woman, are still in a coma, victims of severe hypothermia. The other survivors are under observation in hospital."

"And where is presently General Dows, Colonel?"

"In the hangar of the XC-10, with Brigadier General Boyd and a rear admiral from the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard now seem highly interested by our XC-10 and we offered them a guided tour of our prototype."

"At last! Someone in the Navy that is showing common sense for a change." That remark made Ascani smile in amusement.

"Technically, the Coast Guard is a separate service from the Navy, like the Marine Corps, but I can understand your reaction. I have staff cars ready for you and your whole group. You are of course welcome to have supper with me, General Boyd and General Dows at the officers' mess."

"We accept your offer gratefully, Colonel."

"Then, let's get in and roll!"

The group arrived at the officers' mess of the base and took a table in the dining room only to see that Boyd and Dows still had not arrived. They in fact arrived a full twenty minutes later, accompanied by a rear admiral from the Coast Guard. Ingrid Dows made a wide smile to excuse herself as she presented the rear admiral.

"Excuse us for being late, but Rear Admiral Bissell was so excited by his visit that we also showed him our other prototypes. Rear Admiral Bissell, may I present you Senators Margaret Chase-Smith, Henry Cabot Lodge Junior, Edward Martin and James Howard McGrath. Those four gentlemen here are from the Secret Service, while

Captains Holly Carruthers and Patricia Long are the pilots of the C-60A that brought the senators to Muroc.”

Bissell, a man in his fifties with a balding head and a slight paunch, shook hands with the members of the senatorial group before sitting down at the table. He then smiled to Margaret.

“And may I ask the reasons why a group of senators would visit Muroc, Madam Senator? Are you inquiring about the new planes of the Air Force? I must say that they are well worth the visit.”

“Uh, actually, our investigation sub-committee is inquiring on the state of the Navy’s new aircraft programs, Rear Admiral Bissell. We just visited the China Lake test center today, while we visited two days ago the Patuxent River Flight Test Center.”

“Oh!” Said Bissell, his smile fading partly out. “I hope that you were satisfied by what you saw there.”

“Without wanting to be impolite with you, Admiral, I must say that we were deeply disappointed by what the Navy had to show us, especially after seeing what is here in Muroc. Does the Coast Guard intend to eventually acquire some C-10s?”

“If it depended only on me, certainly, Madam Senator! It is the ideal aircraft for long range rescue missions at sea. It is also perfect for coastal maritime patrols. I intend to recommend to the Commandant of the Coast Guard that he acquires at least sixty of those planes, at a minimum.”

“And the Navy?” Asked Henry Cabot Lodge. “Could it use the C-10?”
Bissell wiggled on his chair, apparently embarrassed.

“Uh, can I ask you to keep my answer anonymous, Senator Lodge?”

“You won’t be mentioned by name, Admiral.”

Bissell, reassured, then committed himself.

“To be franc, the C-10 would be perfect for the Navy in many roles, including service aboard aircraft carriers. I can see it be used for sea search and rescue, anti-submarine patrol, long range maritime patrol and the transfer of cargo and personnel between ship and shore. The Navy could easily use dozens of C-10s in those various roles.”

“I can tell you right now that adapting the C-10 to these various roles will be simple, due to its modularity.” Added Ingrid Dows. “I can also see the Marine Corps use the C-10 in the assault transport role and the rescue of pilots shot down behind enemy lines. That last role is in fact the main role it was designed for in the Air Force.”

Margaret looked at Ingrid with barely disguised admiration.

“My God, Ingrid, do you have many more ideas like that in your head?”

“Actually, I have a number of other projects in progress that you haven’t seen, concerning various types of missiles and rockets that will arm our new planes, as well as a few electronic systems. My ultimate dream, though, is to be able to launch the United States into Space.”

“Space?” Exclaimed Edward Martins. “You mean, go in orbit, get to the Moon?”

“Exactly, Senator Martin.” Replied Ingrid, sounding sure of herself. “We already possess the basic technology and knowledge to send within a few years persons in Earth orbit, if we take the right roads and don’t waste our resources in those stupid inter-service rivalries we are so good in.”

Margaret fixed Ingrid, a word from her having attracted her attention.

“Persons in orbit, and not men in orbit?”

“Of course, Margaret!” Replied Ingrid, a grin on her face. “Why let Space only to the men?”

The group ate slowly while they discussed, sometimes with passion, about the future of the Air Force and of the new planes being tried in Muroc. They were about to order desserts when a junior officer came up to their table and saluted Ingrid and Boyd.

“General, I was sent to inform you that General Vandenberg is about to land in a B-45 at the North Base, coming from Washington.”

“Damn!” Exclaimed Boyd while getting up from his chair. “We better hurry if we want to have the time to go greet him on landing.”

“Can we come as well, General Boyd?” Asked Margaret.

“Uh, I am not sure that this would be appropriate, Madam Senator. General Vandenberg is coming to examine the use we made of the XC-10 this morning, if you see what I mean.”

“It this could help you, General Boyd,” said Rear Admiral Bissell, also getting up, “I would like to be present, to give the point of view of the Coast Guard about the rescue operation.”

Boyd, like Ingrid, smiled on hearing that.

“Admiral, you are certainly welcome to accompany us.”

Letting Ascani accompany the senators to their quarters, Ingrid, Boyd and Bissell nearly ran out of the officers' mess and jumped in Ingrid's staff car, which drove off towards the North Base. They barely had time to arrive at the hangar sheltering the XC-10 when a B-45 medium jet bomber landed in the dark on the main northern runway. Guided by a jeep, the B-45 soon stopped in front of the hangar and shut down its engines. As one of the pilots stayed with the aircraft after coming out, the other walked to Ingrid's group while taking off his helmet. Ingrid, at rigid attention, saluted Hoyt Vandenberg when he stopped in front of her.

"Welcome back in Muroc, General. Apart from Brigadier General Boyd, whom you met before, I am with Rear Admiral Bissell, Commandant of Rescue Services of the Coast Guard for the West Coast. The admiral came to see the XC-10, sir."

"Excuse me to ask, Admiral Bissell, but did you come to see the XC-10 at the invitation of Major General Dows?"

"No, General! I asked on my own initiative to come see the XC-10 prototype, following this morning's rescue mission. Two Coast Guard divers in fact participated in that mission on the XC-10. General Dows had realized that such an operation required the use of experienced divers and she thus asked the help of my services, which I was too happy to offer."

"I see!" Said Vandenberg, his tone visibly softening. "And what is the opinion of the Coast Guard concerning that rescue operation, Admiral?"

"That 41 persons would probably be dead without the intervention of General Dows and of her XC-10, General." Replied Bissell without hesitation. "No ships were in position to render assistance before at least fourteen hours and no seaplanes or helicopters of the Coast Guard could get to the sinking site, either because of the bad weather or of the distance. In fact, one extra hour of delay to save them would have probably meant the death of many of those 41 persons because of hypothermia. The XC-10 was the only aircraft available capable to save those persons, General, and I believe that breaking the secret of your prototype was a very small price to pay to save so many people."

Ingrid nearly sighed with relief on hearing Bissell speak. She could not have asked for a more impartial support than that of the Coast Guard rear admiral. That support in fact seemed to erase Vandenberg's last doubts, who then looked at Ingrid and smiled to her.

"Well, I believe that it is time for me to finally see with my own eyes this famous XC-10, General Dows."

Reassured now, Ingrid smiled back at him and showed him the access door of the hangar, guarded by two Air Force policemen.

“In this case, this way, General.”

09:24 (London Time)

Thursday, June 19, 1952 ‘C’

Official residence of the Prime Minister

10 Downing Street, London

Great Britain

The weekly meeting of the committee on military and security affairs was already well underway at the Prime Minister’s residence when Doctor Reginald Jones’ turn came to present his agenda items. The enormous weight of his responsibilities as the head of the famous Athena Section and as the scientific advisor of the Prime Minister, positions that he had been cumulating since 1945, had already given him his first gray hair at 39, but he was still fit and trim and his mind was as quick as ever. He however could not say the same about the enthusiasm for his work. Despite the enormous influence he yielded thanks to his management of the data base left by Nancy Laplante in 1941 and his role in the creation of the British nuclear force, he didn’t like at all the direction taken in the last eight years by the external policies of Great Britain. The obsession to preserve and even reinforce the British Empire around the World seemed to have gained precedence over everything else in London, and this at the expense of the relations with old allies like France and the United States. One of the results of this imperialistic policy had been to push France, which Great Britain had refused to help in Indochina, to ally herself more closely with the United States and to join the new European Economic Union, or EEU. Also, in Jones’ opinion, that same imperialistic policy had contributed to what he was going to talk about this morning.

Giving a sign to the operator of the slide projector to make the first slide appear on the wall screen of the conference room, he cleared his voice and looked at Prime Minister Attlee, sitting at one end of the long table.

“Mister Prime Minister, gentlemen, my presentation this morning concerns the new American transport aircraft revealed nine days ago following a sea rescue operation off the California coast. By luck, the cruiser HMS GLOUCESTER was visiting the port of

San Diego that day and was able to take good pictures and even films of that aircraft. We also had available to us the various pictures and film footage taken by American reporters who reacted to the landing of that plane at the San Diego Naval Hospital. After careful analysis of these pictures and films, I can say that, apart from proving to be a true vertical takeoff and landing aircraft with outstanding performances, that new Bell XC-10 THUNDERBIRD shows us a few crucial things. First, it is propelled by two very large diameter jet engines that probably are of the high bypass turbofan type and that have a thrust of at least twenty tons each. Such a type of engine is actually a novelty for the Americans, and even for us, and their design was certainly inspired by the copies of our Athena files brought to Washington by Nancy Laplante in 1940. Thus, someone in the United States seemingly has woken up or was able to convince the powers to be in Washington to start to finally use seriously those data files. Second, if the Americans developed such a VTOL aircraft with the help of Athena information, I doubt very much that they limited themselves to only a transport aircraft design. I thus expect very much to see more new aircraft designs from the Americans soon, including combat aircraft. The fact that this XC-10 was developed in utter secret and that it took that rescue operation to reveal its existence to us militates in favor of more secret American prototypes being developed or tested right now. Now, about the performances of that XC-10. Based on the testimony of the survivors picked up at sea by the XC-10, it was able to hover and maneuver like a helicopter for a good forty minutes, and that after flying nearly 600 miles to get to the sinking point. For those who may not see the importance of that, I must stress that using jet engines to do a hover burns up a tremendous amount of fuel per minute. That it then had enough fuel to get to San Diego shows us that this XC-10 is capable of a tremendous operational range. With its very high thrust to weight ratio it is also probably able to cruise at speeds very close to Mach 1, if not beyond. The fact that it was equipped with a large rescue basket hooked to a winch and able to pick up to eight persons at a time tells us that its primary mission as designed is probably combat search and rescue. Before anyone asks, no, we don't have anything even remotely close to such a plane in our inventory, but we sure could use one like the XC-10."

Air Chief Marshal Leigh-Mallory, the head of the Royal Air Force, nodded his head at those words.

"I effectively would love to have such a plane in my inventory, Doctor Jones. Our pilots cost a fortune to form and train and are a precious resource. Do we know how fast that XC-10 can go?"

"Not as a fact, Air Chief Marshal. However, a few technical points revealed by the photos we have point to the possibility that it could actually fly very close to the speed of sound, if not beyond."

"By Jove! A supersonic VTOL transport aircraft with a range of at least 1,200 miles? I would call that an aeronautical wonder. Who is the genius who designed this XC-10?"

Reginald Jones smiled at that before asking for the next slide, with the picture of a very beautiful and shockingly young major general of the United States Air Force appearing on the projection screen.

"We probably can thank Major General Ingrid Dows for this, Air Chief Marshal. She was publicly congratulated by General Hoyt Vandenberg, the chief of staff of the United States Air Force, for leading the rescue mission off San Diego. Now, major generals generally don't serve as simple crewmembers in a plane, thus she was most probably instrumental in the development and testing of the XC-10. Furthermore, and even more importantly for us, Ingrid Dows was secretly adopted by Nancy Laplante in 1941, while she was still only a very young German prisoner of war held in the Tower of London. Nancy Laplante is said to have secretly educated her for months before her untimely death. If anyone would know about the value of the information contained in the Athena files, it would be Ingrid Dows."

While Leigh-Mallory, who had a history of bad blood with Ingrid Dows dating to World War Two, looked darkly at the picture of Ingrid, Jones noticed that Major General Menzies, the head of the British secret services, was smiling at Leigh-Mallory's reaction. As for Prime Minister Attlee, he was looking at Ingrid's picture with a mix of incredulity and admiration.

"This girl is an undeniable beauty, Doctor Jones, but she looks damn young for her rank. How could she be a major general already?"

"If I may answer that, Mister Prime Minister." Said at once Menzies, jumping in. "I happen to have a brief ready concerning that Ingrid Dows and her plane designs."

"Then, if the good Doctor Jones is finished with his presentation, you may go ahead, General Menzies."

"I am effectively done, Mister Prime Minister." Replied Jones, who then sat back at his place while Menzies gave a new tray of slides to the projectionist. The first slide from that tray showed again the XC-10, as it was lifting off vertically from the helicopter pad of the San Diego Naval Hospital.

"Mister Prime Minister, the public revelation of this XC-10 prompted me into asking my agents to dig deeper about this plane. What they found was quite stunning. First, the XC-10 was not the only prototype used in that sea rescue operation. According to what the survivors said while in hospital, what was probably a supersonic heavy bomber reacted first to their mayday call, answering first by radio and then circling overhead until another plane took over. That second plane was also a jet aircraft but was a transport aircraft of some sort. Then came the XC-10 to effect the rescue. Now, the United States Air Force has its flight test center in Muroc Air Force Base, a bit to the northeast of Los Angeles. Muroc was thus most probably the base from which those planes came. It happens that Major General Dows is presently in Muroc, with the title of Director of Aircraft Development Programs for the United States Air Force. I would thus agree with Doctor Jones when he said that Dows was responsible for the XC-10, and probably for the development of many other new aircraft. Unfortunately, security in and around Muroc Air Force Base, which is situated besides a large dried salt lake bed in the middle of a desert area, is very tight and my agents were not able to get close enough to take pictures of the base or of the planes operating from it. However, my agents were able to ascertain that the civilian residents around Muroc have started complaining about what are most probably repeated supersonic bangs as early as six months ago. This means that the Americans, with this young Dows in charge of the program, have produced a number of supersonic aircraft and are well advanced in their flight testing. Thus, we can expect the entry in service of some very interesting American combat aircraft within a year or two. Now, about Major General Dows. Next slide, please!"

The slide that appeared then showed Ingrid Dows, wearing a German Luftwaffe auxiliary uniform and smiling while standing next to Nancy Laplante, herself in her uniform of Canadian brigadier general.

"Mister Prime Minister, here is Helferin Ingrid Weiss, while she was being held as a German prisoner of war in the Tower of London in the Summer of 1941. We eventually learned that she had lied about her age in order to join the Luftwaffe and was then in reality only fifteen."

"FIFTEEN?!" Exclaimed the Prime Minister, stunned. "Was she some kind of Nazi fanatic, to want to join the Luftwaffe when so young?"

"Not at all, Mister Prime Minister. I must say that a rather tragic event pushed her to enroll: her whole extended family was killed by a British bomb during our first raid on Berlin in 1940. Alone and an orphan, she then joined the Luftwaffe, apparently in order to help defend her country against our air raids. She was also secretly a German Jew, something that militates against her having been a true Nazi. She was captured in France in early 1941, during a commando raid on the Luftwaffe headquarters she was working in. That raid was led by Nancy Laplante, who apparently became quickly a sort of surrogate mother to young Ingrid Weiss. Weiss was secretly adopted by Laplante and by her American husband, Major Michael Crawford, sometime in the Spring of 1941. Then, after the successive deaths of both Major Crawford and of Nancy Laplante, Ingrid Weiss, who had gained American citizenship via her secret adoption, was pardoned from the Tower of London and married a young American Marine Corps officer, Major Kenneth Dows, accompanying him to his new post in the Philippines in the Summer of 1941. Next slide, please!"

The next picture projected showed Ingrid Dows, wearing a flight suit and standing in front of an antiquated P-26 propeller-driven fighter.

"Here is where Ingrid Dows' story is becoming really interesting, Mister Prime Minister. She earned her civilian pilot's license in Manila and, when the Japanese attack came and when the situation became desperate, she managed to convince the Filipino Air Force to take her as a fighter pilot. She shot down her two first Japanese planes on her first ever combat mission while flying this P-26 fighter. Those were however only the first kills in a very long list to come. Showing both incredible bravery and utmost tactical savvy, as well as impressive skills as a fighter pilot, she quickly became the American Ace of aces, a title that she still holds with a total of 138 confirmed air victories to date accumulated during both World War Two and the Korean War. She also proved to be a tactical and strategic genius of the first order as she went up quickly in rank, devising and executing numerous air and joint operations in the Pacific, such as the taking by helicopter air assault of Lae and many other important Japanese airfields in Papua New Guinea and the sinking of the battleships YAMATO and MUSASHI in Rabaul Harbor. She was a full colonel when she was recalled to the United States to work in the Joint Plans Section of the Army Air Forces for a few months in 1943. She was then promoted to the rank of brigadier general and sent to England in early 1944, to take command of

the Ninth Tactical Air Command. She had a big hand in the planning of our big amphibious landing on the southern coast of France, around Marseilles, and also provided very effective air support to the invading American ground forces with her tactical air command. She actually led the taking by air assault of Karlsruhe, on the Rhine and became military governor of Karlsruhe for five months after the war ended, having accumulated an incredible collection of bravery and merit medals. Next slide, please!"

A typical university graduation picture followed, showing Ingrid receiving a diploma while wearing a graduation cape and hat.

"This is Dows, as she graduated in the Summer of 1948 from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, receiving a degree in aeronautical engineering with honors. After the war, she served part-time in order to study at the M.I.T., with her rank of brigadier general kept thanks to General Marshal. Just after graduation, she was urgently recalled to full-time service and sent to Korea, where she commanded her old all-female combat wing with distinction, saving the skin of many American ground units from near certain annihilation. She even fought in the ground front lines with her female personnel, using her tactical and operational savvy to devastating effect against both North Korean and Chinese troops. Her unit was about the only American unit to withdraw in good order from the Pusan Pocket with all its equipment and with its honor intact."

The next picture, showing Ingrid resplendent in a mess dress and standing beside a man during some kind of reception, made Prime Minister Attlee smile in appreciation.

"That girl is decidedly a true looker, General Menzies."

"She certainly is, Mister Prime Minister. You see her with ex-President Martin at a White House reception in late 1948. She had then returned from Korea and was asked by interim President Martin to be his special military advisor. She also became at the same time Director of Aircraft Development Programs for the United States Air Force and was promoted to major general. We may thus surmise that the new American aircraft we are starting to see now, including the XC-10, were initiated in late 1948 and are now in their fourth year of design, development and testing."

"So," said Air Chief Marshal Leigh-Mallory, "the Americans should be very close to introduce those new planes into operational service, right?"

"Correct, Air Chief Marshal. While this is not really a reason for us to be alarmed, the Soviets will certainly be shocked when they will appear in American

frontline squadrons. Stalin will probably react by ordering his air force to play catch up at the double, or may even panic, with all the possibilities of political miscalculations and mistakes this could bring.”

“I see!” Said Prime Minister Attlee, suddenly becoming glum. “The last thing we need now in Europe is a panicky Stalin. I certainly can’t fault this young Dows for that if it happens, but I agree that these new American planes are bound to impact heavily on the present strategic situation. We certainly need to know more about those American planes anyway. Have your services do their best in that regard, General Menzies.”

“I will put a priority on that, Mister Prime Minister.” Assured Menzies before Attlee declared the meeting over.

Reginald Jones was pensive as he walked out of the Prime Minister’s residence and walked back to his office in the nearby Home Office Building. He had known Ingrid since early 1941 and, despite being married and having children, had always felt a weakness for the beautiful young German, now a celebrated American general. He intensely hoped that Ingrid Dows’ meteoritic rise would never become some obstacle for Great Britain and its imperial interests. If that ever happened, he sincerely didn’t know which way his heart would go.

CHAPTER 14 – THE LITTLE PRINCES

20:54 (London Time)

Tuesday, September 2, 1483 ‘A’

White Tower, The Tower of London

London, England

“I’m still hungry, Edward.” Cried out nine year-old Richard after finishing to eat his meager ration of bread. His twelve year-old brother, equally famished, looked sadly at the little of what was left of his own ration and ripped in two his remaining bread, giving one piece to Richard. The boy, gaunt and weak from weeks of starvation diet, quickly grabbed and ate the piece of bread while Edward ate slowly his own piece. The latter then looked through the window of their third floor room while still sitting in bed. Both he and Richard were partially covered by their bed sheets, in order to keep warm in the cold, damp room. The fireplace of their room had no burning wood for it, this on orders from Sir James Tyrrell, the right-hand man of the usurper, Richard of Gloucester, who now called himself King Richard III of England. Rain was falling outside in the night, adding to the gloom of their situation. Edward thought with bitterness about the fate of both he and his young brother. He should have been King of England by now, as the eldest son of the late King Edward IV. However, both he and Richard had been declared illegitimate by an act of parliament and their uncle had then grabbed the crown for himself while having them confined to the Tower of London, where they had been wasting away for months under tight guard. Nobody knew about their fate, while they didn’t know what to expect next. Edward was however afraid that he and Richard would never come out of the White Tower alive, as they constituted a threat to Richard III’s reign as long as they lived. Unfortunately, all their supporters seemed either to have gone away or to have forgotten about them.

His head still full of gloomy thoughts, Edward tried to go to sleep, urging Richard to do the same in order to save the little strength left into them. There was anyway nothing to do in their room, bare except for their bed, a chamber pot and a pitcher of water with two cups. With hunger pains knotting their stomachs, it took them a long time

to go to sleep, with little Richard whimpering and crying until he fell asleep from sheer physical weakness.

It was well past midnight, with the boys having been asleep for a few hours, when two men silently entered their room, tiptoeing to their bed while each holding a thick pillow in their hands. Once in position on each side of the bed, one of the men made a sign with his head to his companion, then jumped on the bed, kneeling astride Edward and smothering the boy with his pillow. The other man did the same with Richard, putting all his weight and strength in pushing down his pillow. The two boys, awakened brutally and finding it impossible to breathe, tried in vain to break free, but their famished bodies were no match to two strong grown men. The leading assassin felt cruel satisfaction as his victim started becoming limp, being on the verge of passing out. Someone then touched the back of his neck and he briefly felt a tremendous shock through his brain before he fell off the bed, unconscious. His accomplice was also stunned and fell off the bed, then the pillows smothering the two boys were hurriedly removed. Edward gasped, avidly gulping air in a few quick breaths before looking up at his savior. He however could only see a dark shape in the unlit room, but he could have sworn that it was a woman's shape. Looking sideways at his brother, Edward saw that another shape stood over Richard, who was also gulping air. A female voice then spoke softly, confirming his first impression.

"Please be quiet, my prince: we don't want to alert your other guards. We came to save you from those jackals."

"Thank you, milady! Have my supporters finally decided to unseat our uncle from the throne he so unjustly took from me?"

The woman bent over him was silent for a second before answering him.

"Unfortunately, the throne is lost for good for you, my prince. The best we can do now is to save your life and that of your brother. Now, please dress quietly, so that we can take you out of this tower."

Too happy just to be still alive, Edward obeyed his savior and, stepping out of bed, found his clothes in the dark and started getting dressed. With his eyes gradually getting accustomed to the dark, he could see as he finished putting on his clothes that his attacker lay unconscious on the floor, near the bed. What however truly attracted his eyes was the fact that the two women who had saved him and Richard were dressed in a most strange manner, with dark clothes that tightly molded their bodies in a most

immodest way. They also appeared to wear wide belts with pouches and possibly sheathed knives.

"Who are you exactly, milady? Why did my supporters send women rather than men to save us?"

"Please stop asking questions now, my prince. We have little time to make you disappear from the Tower of London and to bring you to safety. Then you will be able to ask all the questions you want. Are you ready now?"

"Just let me put on my shoes, milady." Replied Edward as he slipped one foot in one of his soft sole leather shoes, then laced it. Another minute and he got up, fully ready. One look told him that Richard had also finished getting dressed.

"We are ready, milady. How do we get out of here?"

His savior didn't answer then, instead gluing herself to him and wrapping her arms around him, surprising Edward. A brief flash of white light then made him close his eyes. A very brief fall by a few centimeters made his knees bend slightly on hitting the ground, then he opened his eyes, only to close them at once at finding himself in a well-lit place. Blinking repeatedly, it took him a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the light and before he could look around him. His jaw fell wide open and he felt a mix of awe and dread on seeing that he was now somehow in a room totally different to that he had just been in. The room was big, with walls apparently made of metal, and strange fixtures lined the walls on two sides, while some kind of very bright lamps were fixed to the ceiling. He next detailed his savior, who had taken one step back. She was a beautiful young woman in her late twenties and with dark blond hair and blue eyes. Their other savior was an even more beautiful young woman with reddish-brown hair and blue eyes. Both women appeared very fit, while their body-hugging grey uniforms made evident their feminine curves. Edward's savior gently took his left hand and spoke softly to him.

"Don't panic, Your Highness: this may appear like witchcraft for you, but it only involves highly advanced science and knowledge. What truly counts is that you and Richard are now safe."

"Where are we, and who are you exactly, milady? You are not part of my supporters, are you?"

"Not of the ones you knew, Your Highness, but I do believe in the legitimacy of your claim to the throne. Unfortunately, as I said before, the throne is now out of your reach. We are now on my ship, the BRITANNIA, and my name is Elizabeth Windsor.

My friend over there is Ingrid Weiss. Before you may ask more questions, let me bring you and your brother to the ship's mess, where you will be able to eat a good meal."

The promise of a meal seemed to wake back up his hunger pains and Edward then followed eagerly Elizabeth, his numerous questions temporarily forgotten. With Ingrid Weiss following with Richard, Edward was led out of their present hall and into a staircase also apparently made of metal. Touching one wall as he went up the stairs confirmed to Edward that this ship was indeed made of steel. That such a quantity of steel be possible in one place truly bemused him: he was not certain that the whole treasury of England could pay for that much steel. They then followed a steel corridor before entering in a fairly large and luxuriously furnished room, at least according to the standards Edward knew. Elizabeth invited him and Richard to sit at a long table in one corner of the room, then went to search inside a kind of big metal box along a wall, taking out two flat boxes and two square bottles. In the meantime, Ingrid Weiss fetched two food trays and sets of utensils, putting them in front of the two boys and smiling to them.

"We are accustomed to use different utensils than you do to eat. Let me explain to you how to use a fork."

That took her a minute, by which time Elizabeth put down in front of the boys the square bottles, which she had opened for them.

"These are milk quarts. They are made of waxed cardboard, so don't squeeze them too strongly or you will splash milk all over you. Your food will be warm in three minutes. You may start drinking some milk now but don't gulp it all at once: your stomachs have shrunk because of your starvation diet and filling them too quickly would make you sick."

"So, you know that we were being starved, Lady Elizabeth?" Asked Edward just before drinking some milk, which proved cold and fresh. Elizabeth nodded her head, a pained look on her face.

"Yes, we did, Your Highness. In fact, the cruelty of your treatment decided us into acting and coming to your rescue."

"And who is 'we' exactly, Lady Elizabeth? Are your friends powerful enough to unseat our usurper of an uncle and put me on the throne?"

Elizabeth then sat across from Edward before answering in a sober voice.

"Your Highness, while we could save you and Richard, we were not permitted to put you back on the throne of England. Let's just say that the situation is a lot more complicated than it would appear to you. However, I will wait until you were able to eat before speaking further. In fact, I will go check on your menus: they should be warm by now."

Getting back up, Elizabeth went to a series of metal boxes set on top of a counter and, after a short wait, opened two of them, extracting two flat plates. She brought the plates to the table, putting one each down in front of Edward and Richard.

"Be careful: the food is quite hot. Again, eat slowly and in small bites at first." With the smell of the hot food making him nearly crazy, Edward did his best to obey her, grabbing a chicken leg with both hands and biting in it with delight. Elizabeth and Ingrid watched in silence as the two boys ate their meals with gusto while gulping milk from time to time.

The boys were close to finishing their meals when another woman and two men wearing the same kind of grey uniforms as Elizabeth and Ingrid entered the mess and came to their table. The woman was very tall and appeared quite strong and sported long black hair and sparkling green eyes. The two men following her were tall, muscular and looked like they could be very dangerous if they wished so. Elizabeth smiled and presented the newcomers to the boys.

"Prince Edward, Duke Richard, let me present you our leader, Nancy Laplante. With her are two of our agents, George Townsend and Otto Skorzeni." Using a custom the boys would soon get accustomed to, Nancy shook hands with them, showing perfect white teeth as she smiled to them.

"Your Highnesses! We just finished setting up things in the White Tower, so that Sir Tyrrell will actually believe that you are indeed dead. That way, nobody will further try to hurt you. Besides, we would not let anyone hurt you from now on."

"And, as I asked Lady Elizabeth before, who is precisely the 'we', Lady Nancy?" Asked Edward, his curiosity back now that his stomach had stopped growling. Nancy and the two men sat at the table before the former answered while looking gravely at Edward.

"Your Highness, please do not think of what I will tell you as a proof of witchcraft. We come from the far future and are time travelers dedicated to studying and documenting history. Your disappearance from the Tower of London is, or rather was,

one of the enduring mysteries of history. Now we know who ordered your deaths and how it was done. The circumstances were such that we were able to prepare a setup that will respect what was known to history while being able to save you. Why did we save you? Because of simple humanity. You and Richard are innocents who deserved better than this. If this may make you feel better, know that your uncle Richard will be killed in two years at the battle of Bosworth Field. A Tudor will then take the throne of England after marrying your older sister Elizabeth in order to unite the houses of York and of Lancaster.”

Edward and Richard were left stunned speechless for a moment, with Edward finally managing to ask a question in a hesitant voice.

“Time travelers? How could such magic be possible?”

“Not magic, Your Highness: science of a very high level. There is nothing magic in what we do, even if it would appear like witchcraft to you and others from your century. Know that our science originates from the end of the 34th Century, nearly two millenniums into your future.”

This time, Edward was unable to speak for a long moment, a rush of blood to his head making him wobbly. Nancy then extended an arm and gently covered his left hand.

“What is important now is that you and Richard are alive and safe, Your Highness. We will now bring you to the future, where you will be able to find kind, new parents to care for you.”

08:17 (London Time)

Wednesday, September 3, 1483 ‘A’

Room of the two princes, White Tower

Tower of London

Miles Forrest was awakened by progressively more brutal kicks, to see through blurred eyes and a pounding headache that his master, Sir James Tyrrell, was looking down severely at him. Tyrrell nearly screamed at him, making Forrest’s head resonate painfully.

“I sent you and Dighton to do one of the most delicate missions possible and I find you two drunk instead, in the princes’ room? Where are the boys?”

Looking sideways and seeing that John Dighton was slumped near him, a cup in his hand and a spilled pitcher of wine by his side, Forrest tried to concentrate, managing to have a few mental images come back to his mind before speaking in a slurred voice.

"They're dead, Sire...I think!"

"YOU THINK? YOU BETTER FIND A BETTER ANSWER THAN THAT, OR YOU WILL REGRET IT!" Shouted Tyrrell, furious. With his head hurting like hell, the henchman did his best to remember what he could.

"We...we smothered the boys as they slept, then buried them under the staircase leading to the chapel, Sire."

"Then, show me! And wake up that idiot as well!"

Only then did Forrest realize that he was also holding an empty cup and that wine had splashed over his shirt and tights. He managed with difficulty to shake Dighton awake, then got up and led his master and his accomplice out of the bedroom, with his head pounding painfully all the while. Going down towards the chapel, the trio arrived at a large heap of stone rubble under the foot of a staircase. Under the watchful eyes of their master, the two henchmen started digging with their bare hands through the rubble, to finally uncover a large jute bag with its top tied close. Undoing the rope closing the bag, Forrest opened it and showed to Tyrrell the top of the heads of two blond boys.

"Here they are, Sire."

Taking a quick look at the boys' heads, Tyrrell then grunted his satisfaction.

"Very well! Close the bag and rebury it. Nobody is to learn about this, or you will pay for it. Understood?"

"Yes Sire!" Answered at once the two henchmen, knowing what their master was capable of. They then hurried to cover again the jute bag containing the two small bodies, piling up even more stone rubble on top of it.

19:11 (London Time)

Tuesday, August 21, 1951 'B'

Ballroom of the Palace of Buckingham

London, Great Britain

"LORD HENRY STOKE, DSO, OBE, MC, AND LADY SARAH STOKE, EARLS OF WEIMOUTH!"

Princess Margaret Windsor, who was officiating at the reception to celebrate her 21st birthday and her coming of age, gracefully greeted the graying couple just announced by the master of ceremony. She then looked to see who would be the next guest to arrive for her birthday party and felt her heart accelerate when she saw a group of bald giants that had just arrived at the entrance to the ballroom, in which over fifty guests already mingled. One of the giants, Prince Len 'B' of Cardiff, had become more than a good friend to her during the last few years. Apart from being very handsome, the young man from the defunct Imperium 'B' had proved to be kind, compassionate and intelligent. In turn, Len had seemingly been conquered by her graceful beauty, her intelligence and her wit. They had started to date each other a year ago, but had to be cautious about it, in order not to give hints to the horde of tabloid reporters hunting down the members of the royal family everywhere they went.

"KING STAN 'B' THE SIXTH, LORD OF CARDIFF, WITH LADY MIRI GOSHENK 'B', PRINCE STEN 'B', PRINCE LEN 'B', PRINCESS DRUUNA 'B' AND PRINCESS XINIA 'B'!"

Margaret did a graceful curtsy when Stan 'B' stopped in front of her, holding the arm of his first mistress Miri and followed by his two sons and two daughters, who were only a small part of his household. After all, even if she would soon be crowned as Queen of England now that she had attained the age of majority, she was still only a princess, while Stan 'B' had been a powerful monarch in his time.

"Your Majesty, Lady Miri, it is a true pleasure to be able to greet you to this little party tonight."

"And it is even more of a pleasure for me to be able to see you again, Princess Margaret." Replied Stan, sincere. He still remembered too well the time nine years ago when he had risked his crown and his life by defying the powerful Ministry of Security of his Imperium 'B' and had gone to deliver a then young teenage Margaret from a torture chamber and given her asylum in his palace. His counterpart in the Imperium 'C' had however taken care of that potential problem by simply taking the powers of his Ministry of Security away. He didn't miss the complicit look Margaret and his son Len exchanged as greetings were exchanged, but simply smiled at it, as he approved of their relationship. In fact, if his Imperium 'B' would still exist and would have had peaceful relations with the Great Britain of Timeline 'B', he would have been the first to push for such a relationship, as a marriage between one of his sons and the heiress to the throne

of England would have been politically most desirable. However, even with the Imperium 'B' now vanished, replaced in the 34th Century by the World Council, such a marriage would make him happy. The irony in all this was that the royal courtiers at Buckingham Palace would have preferred for Prince Len 'C' to eventually have the hand of Margaret, reasoning that Len 'C', who was the royal representative of the Imperium 'C' in this century and who resided in the Imperium embassy in Paris, held real power, while Len 'B' was little more than a royal exile.

As the members of the Imperium 'B's royal family went to the service tables to get cups of Champagne, yet another group of guests showed at the door, to be announced out loud by the master of ceremony.

"HER MAJESTY NANCY LAPLANTE, VC AND BAR, GBE, DSO AND BAR, DFC, MC, QUEEN OF JERUSALEM AND OVERSEER OF THE HOLY LAND OF PALESTINE..."

There was then a distinct pause in the announcement, with the voice of the master of ceremony next coming out a bit shaky.

"HIS HIGHNESS EDWARD OF ENGLAND, PRINCE OF WALES, AND HIS HIGHNESS RICHARD OF YORK, DUKE OF YORK."

A stunned silence then descended on the ballroom, with all present turning their heads to look at the two young boys accompanying Nancy Laplante as the Overseer of Palestine made her way towards Margaret. Both boys wore royal clothes typical of the 15th Century and had gold neck chains supporting the blazon of the defunct Royal House of York. The trio finally stopped in front of Margaret, who had eyes only for the boys. Looking up with difficulty, Margaret asked hesitantly a question to a smiling Nancy.

"Nancy, are they..."

"Yes they are, Margaret. May I present you Edward the Fifth and his brother, Richard of York, which were recently saved from assassins in 1483 by the Time Patrol."

"Your Highness..." Said politely young Edward while saluting Margaret with his hat, imitated by Richard. "Nancy told us that you were a beautiful princess but, in truth, I do not believe that so great a beauty as yours have sat or will ever sit on the throne of England."

Margaret smiled at the compliment and bowed her head.

"Your Highness is too kind. May I ask what are your projects for your future and that of your brother, Edward?"

"You may, Margaret." Replied Edward, now most sober. He had to learn quickly to adapt to a brand new world full of wonders and weird, disconcerting concepts. He had been particularly struck by the fact that the sovereigns of England were now no more than figureheads with very little real power left to them.

"Nancy, through her great kindness, had us meet prospective parents for us. Those prospective parents in turn proved to be nice and caring, apart from being of high blood themselves, and we accepted to go live with them in Cardiff." Stan 'B', who had quietly approached with Miri Goshenk, grinned with amusement on hearing that, a cup of Champagne in his left hand.

"I have to say that I don't get to be called 'nice' too often." A stunned Margaret looked in turn at Stan 'B', the boys and then Nancy.

"Well, I'll be! A king from the future who lost his empire will be caring for another king who was usurped out of his throne in the past. So, Edward and Richard will be living in your family castle in Cardiff, Stan?"

"Correct! Me and Miri have much time on our hands, while poor Nancy has to handle simultaneously three lives, a family and a kingdom. I will be most happy to be able to teach them what I know about power and its management." Looking back at the little princes with gravity, Margaret then took a quick decision.

"Edward and Richard of York, you truly represent part of the history of England. As a soon to be Queen of England, I promise you that you will both have a part to play in my kingdom. You are of course invited to attend my coronation, scheduled to be held next month, along with your new parents and with Nancy." Edward and Richard saluted her again then, with Edward next looking gravely at Margaret.

"Then, I have one wish concerning your coronation, Princess Margaret: that I be the one to put the crown on your head." Even Nancy, who did not expect this, was left stunned by that request. While also stunned, Margaret quickly understood how powerful the symbolism of such a gesture would be in the eyes of her subjects. She thus smiled to Edward, who was a half head shorter than her.

"Since I wanted someone else than the head of the Church of England to put the crown on my head, I will be most happy to have you take his place, Edward." A bit confused by that, Edward looked at Nancy, then at Margaret.

“What about the head of the Church of England, Princess Margaret? Has he fallen into disgrace in the kingdom?”

“Contempt would be a better word in this case, my dear Edward. You can ask Nancy later about the sordid details. Let’s forget him for the moment and let’s have some good time at this birthday party. The one six years ago was spoiled through and through by the Church and I don’t intend to have a repeat of that now.”

CHAPTER 15 – DA NANG

15:36 (Washington Time)

Thursday, November 13, 1952 'C'

Joint Chiefs of Staffs Conference Room

National Military Command Center (NMCC), The Pentagon

Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

Dwight D. Eisenhower had come to this meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff with the sole intent of informing them of what President Dewey, newly reelected to a second term with a comfortable margin, wanted done. He had also been ready to offer some advice if need be, but the old demon of inter-service rivalry had reared its ugly head again, derailing the meeting and turning it into an acrimonious exchange, with little concrete being accomplished. What President Dewey wanted was simple enough, though: to form and send a joint military task force to Indochina to deter any hostile moves by either the Chinese or the Russians in support of the Vietminh insurrection in that country. Basically, this would have the goal of avoiding a repeat of the Korean War and preventing a further expansion of communism in Asia. The task was straightforward enough, but choosing who would go and under whose command was proving the old saying that 'the devil is in the details'. Eisenhower finally decided to put his foot down as the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Lemuel Shepherd, was arguing with the Army Chief of Staff, General Lawton Collins, and with the Air Force Chief of Staff, General Hoyt Vandenberg, about which service would provide the task force commander. Rapping his knuckles on the conference table, Eisenhower waited for the chiefs of staff to fall silent and to look at him, then spoke firmly, with clear displeasure in his voice.

"Gentlemen, the task given to you was straightforward enough in my mind. Yet, you can't seem to be able to work together and to place national interests ahead of your respective services. The President envisioned a joint military force with a land component not too large to be deemed an offensive force, yet strong enough to defend itself and also to ensure the perimeter security of the airbase to be used by an air component powerful enough to deter a Chinese or Russian intervention in Indochina.

The President also intended to give to the commander of that joint task force a mandate strong enough to allow him to strike back or effect preventive strikes against any foreign military threat to Indochina. Since we are still technically at war with Communist China, this means the authority to launch airstrikes into China if need be. That commander will thus have to be a proven expert in joint operations. General Shepherd, you said that the 1st Expeditionary Marine Brigade could be made available quickly for this task.”

“Yes, General!” Replied Shepherd, using Eisenhower’s old military rank instead of his civilian title, something common in the American armed forces. “The units of the 1st Expeditionary Marine Brigade are already based in the Pacific, in Hawaii and in Okinawa, and are maintained at a high level of preparation and readiness. The brigade includes the 4th Marine Regiment, the famous ‘China Marines’, which served in the past in China, the Philippines and around the Pacific. It also includes a Marine Air Group equipped with helicopters.”

“And who is in command of that brigade, General Shepherd?”

“Brigadier General Lewis Puller, our most decorated combat veteran. He also happens to speak French, thanks to his past service in Haiti, and served two tours in China before going to fight in the Philippines, at Guadalcanal and on other islands in the Pacific.”

Eisenhower nodded his head, properly impressed. He next looked at General Lawton Collins, the Army Chief of Staff.

“Your 10th Special Forces Group was only recently activated and was slated for service in Europe, General Collins. Why do you think that its 1st Battalion should be included in our proposed Joint Task Force – Indochina?”

“First, sir, they are our best-trained soldiers in terms of unconventional warfare. Second, the commander of our new special forces units, Colonel Aaron Bank, was part of the OSS unit that went to Indochina at the end of World War Two to liaise with the Vietnamese resistance forces fighting the Japanese. He even met numerous times the current leader of the Vietminh, Ho Chi Minh, so he knows both the country and the opposition well.”

Satisfied with that answer, Eisenhower took some quick notes, then looked at General Vandenberg, who was wondering like the others where Eisenhower was leading to.

“General Vandenberg, how far along are the squadrons of the 99th Composite Air Wing in their retraining and reequipping with our new aircraft?”

“Their retraining on our new types of aircraft as an operational test unit is already quite advanced, General Eisenhower. They have been at it in Muroc, California, for over three months now. As for their degree of reequipping, they should get their last aircraft in at most two weeks, according to their commander, Brigadier General Teresa James.” Those last words made Admiral William Fichteler jump in his chair.

“Wait! You are not planning to send a female air unit to Indochina to support Navy and Marine Corps units?”

The Marine Corps Commandant, who would normally be expected to support the Chief of Naval Operations, gave Fichteler a dubious look.

“Admiral, for your information, those aviatrix are positively revered in the Marine Corps, and not simply because they are nice-looking. They fought with our Marines on Guadalcanal and around the Pacific and always gave top priority to supporting our men on the ground as well as our sailors fighting at sea. They again supported in a splendid fashion our Marines and soldiers in Korea, on top of fighting themselves in frontline trenches to defend the Pusan Perimeter. My Marines know that they can always count on those women to provide them effective air support. Besides, whether some like it or not, they are truly an elite combat air unit and I would trust them to do the job any time.”

“Well, that seems to seal the deal concerning the 99th Wing, gentlemen.” Announced Eisenhower, now having all he wanted to know. “Admiral Fichteler, I will need your naval construction units to get to Da Nang as soon as possible and to start work at once to improve and enlarge the airbase there and to add facilities for a Marine brigade, an Army battalion and an Air Force wing.”

“What about the commander of that task force?” Asked Fichteler, still not seeing to where Eisenhower was driving. The latter gave him a pinched smile.

“Who will command our joint task force in Indochina? Our only officer who always proved to truly believe in joint operations.”

21:10 (California Time)

Saturday, November 15, 1952 ‘C’

Prototype hangar, North Base, Muroc Air Force Base

California, USA

Ingrid felt truly happy as she climbed down from the cockpit of her pre-production YF-83A EAGLE with Captain Jack Ridley, who had acted as her radar officer: her flight,

meant to operationally certify the new radar-guided variant of the Raytheon AIM-1 COBRA air-to-air missile, had been fully successful. Her two missiles, each fired at different targets and from different angles and speeds meant to simulate long range air combat, had hit and destroyed their targets with convincing effectiveness. Now that the planned main air-to-air armament of the F-83A was finally ready after years of often frustrating development and trials, nothing was going to further delay the full entry into operational service of what she considered to be by far the best combat aircraft in the World. The women of the Fifinellas were also well advanced in their conversion program in Muroc and the girls of the 170th Fighter Squadron, 'The Witches', already had a good handle on their new YF-83As and positively loved their new planes. The other squadrons from the 99th Wing, each reequipping with a different new model of aircraft, also loved their new aircraft, which were at least two generations ahead of what they had been flying in the Philippines. Overall, the combat effectiveness of the 99th Wing, already impressive a few months ago, had just taken a big jump in Ingrid's mind.

To her surprise, she found the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Omar Bradley, waiting besides Colonel Ascani and Brigadier General Boyd when she set foot on the concrete floor of the hangar. Letting Jack Ridley do the post-mission inspection of their aircraft, she walked briskly to the trio and stopped in front of Bradley, saluting crisply.

"Sir! What brought you to Muroc tonight, General?"

Bradley saluted her back before answering her in a soft voice.

"I came to give you new marching orders, General Dows...orders direct from the President. Where could we speak in private?"

"I have my office in the annex of this hangar, sir. If you could please follow me."

As she was about to lead Bradley towards her office, Ingrid gave a quick smile to both Boyd and Ascani.

"By the way, both of my missiles went true, with no deviations. Our AIM-1B is ready for combat."

"Excellent!" Replied Boyd, truly happy. "Just that missile will do a lot to add an extra punch to our combat aircraft."

Ingrid agreed with a nod of her head and walked away with Bradley. As they were walking across the vast hangar, Bradley spoke to her in a low voice, in order not to be overheard.

"I am afraid that I am about to send you into yet another potential war, General Dows, along with the women of the 99th Wing. The Chinese and the Soviets are showing signs that they intend to meddle with the Vietminh insurgency in Indochina and the French simply do not have the means to stop or even to deter them. The President has ordered that a joint task force be sent to Indochina in order to act as a deterrent and shield against possible Chinese or Soviet aggression. President Dewey is in no mood to let a new Korea-like mess happen."

"And I suppose that I will be taking command of the air component of that task force, sir?"

Bradley stopped on the spot then and turned to face her, forcing her to stop as well.

"Brigadier General James will command the air component, which includes the 99th Wing, sent to Indochina, General Dows. You will be the task force commander and will be answering only to me, General Eisenhower and to the President."

Ingrid took a moment to digest that: an Air Force officer commanding units from other services? The discussions about that at the Pentagon must have been fierce indeed.

"And what will be the composition of that joint task force, sir?"

Bradley answered her at the same time that he took two sealed envelopes out of a vest pocket.

"You will have command over a Marine Corps expeditionary brigade, an Army special forces battalion, your old air wing and various Navy construction and support units. Here are your new orders, plus a confidential letter from the President. Please read them before asking more questions."

Blood rushed to her head on understanding the magnitude of her new command and the weight of her new responsibilities. In essence, she was being asked to do what Lieutenant General Hodge could not do in Korea. She opened first and read carefully her official orders, which listed the units under her command and the goals of her mission. She then opened the letter from President Dewey, having to first break a wax seal. Reading quickly that letter, she had to reread one of its parts a second time, then looked up at Bradley.

"Do you know the content of this presidential letter, sir?"

"No! It was meant strictly for you, General Dows. Is there something I should know?"

"I am not sure, sir, as the President wrote to me in confidence, but he basically gives me a free hand in how to manage the situation in Indochina, including the right to

strike inside China if need be. I am to even ignore the advice or directives from the State Department or from other federal agencies if need be. It seems that being securely in his post for his second and last presidential mandate gives him a lot of extra free way politically. I knew that he was getting uncomfortable with the advice he was getting from State Secretary Dulles, but this letter all but tells me to ignore Dulles entirely. I will still do my best to be conciliatory with our ambassador there, but I will definitely pass my mission and my units first, sir.”

Bradley, who was not known to sacrifice or neglect units for political expediency, nodded in approval at her last words.

“That is what I wanted to hear from you, General Dows. As you can see in your orders, you are free to arrange and group your units as you wish and will brief yourself your unit commanders before departure for Indochina. One last point that is not in your orders: you are to go to Indochina in a newly-produced YF-83A that will become your personal command aircraft. I know that you like to lead from the front, like good old General Patton, minus the profanities of course.”

Ingrid smiled at that, amused.

“You have never heard me on the radio intercom, sir. Thank you for the vote of confidence, sir.”

“You can thank General Eisenhower instead, General Dows: he was the one who overruled the Joint Chiefs about who would command our new Joint Task Force – Indochina. Do you have any more questions, now that you have read your orders?”

“Just one, sir. When are the Navy constructions units expected to complete their work in Da Nang and to make the airbase operational?”

“I was told that Da Nang should be open to occupation in about a month. I told in turn the Navy to hurry on that work. The rest will be up to you.”

On hearing this, Ingrid came to attention and saluted Bradley.

“You can count on me, sir. The Chinese and Soviets will have to stay clear of Indochina or they will be slapped silly.”

08:12 (Indochina Time)

Friday, December 12, 1952 ‘C’

Pilots ready room, Wuxu Airfield

Guangxi Province, Southern China

The small crowd of Soviet fighter pilots waiting in the nearly bare ready room of Wuxu Airfield got up from its benches when their commander, Colonel Ivan Kozhedub, entered the room with an aide. Captain Lilya Livyak, present in the first ranks as the sole female pilot, rose with the others. Sitting back down on an order from Kozhedub, she then listened to the decorated veteran of the Great Patriotic War¹³.

"Gentlemen...and lady of the 64th Fighter Regiment," said Kozhedub with a blink to Lilya, "we will soon be ready to strike the Imperialists in Indochina and thus help our Vietminh comrades to establish there a just, socialist state. Our Vietminh spies in Saigon have however learned a few crucial news in the last days. While I am confident that you will easily be able to sweep away with your Mig-17s the collection of propeller-driven fighters the French have, a new adversary may show up soon. I am of course speaking about the Americans. American construction units are presently working full tilt to rebuild and enlarge the airfield and port in Da Nang, on the East coast of Vietnam. It seems that Da Nang will eventually become the home for an American expeditionary force that could arrive in Indochina in the next weeks or months. Yes, Major Pepelyaev?"

Pepelyaev, a veteran of the Korean War who had fought against American pilots, got up from his bench and spoke in a strong voice.

"Comrade Colonel, do we know what kind of force the Americans will send to Indochina, especially in terms of planes?"

"We still have no details about that, Major. Our Vietminh allies are however watching closely what is happening in Da Nang and will inform us if anything happens there. We are however more than able to face anything that they could use to oppose us. Our Mig-17 is superior in speed and climb performance to the F-86 SABRE, their best fighter at this time. Now, about our French adversaries..."

Kozhedub spoke for a good twenty minutes, describing to his pilots the French Air Force units deployed in Indochina, their tactics and their known weaknesses. As he concluded his briefing, he pointed a few of his pilots in particular and called them forward.

"Major Pepelyaev, Captains Smotskow, Karelin and Litvyak, stay here for a moment, please."

¹³ Great Patriotic War : Name used by the Soviets to designate World War Two.

Getting up with the three other pilots named, Lilya got up and went to form a line with them in front of Kozhedub, who fixed them soberly one by one.

“I asked you to stay because you all fought the Americans in Korea and have experienced their tactics. I thus want you all to start instructing our other pilots about American fighter tactics, so that they could learn from your experience. Even though I am certain that we are ready for them, I do not want our pilots to underestimate those Americans: we lost many good comrades to them in Korea, some of which are still their prisoners. Talk to our pilots as a group after supper.”

“You can count on us, comrade Colonel.” Replied at once Pepelyaev, a veteran with fifteen kills over Korea.

16:03 (Indochina Time)

Saturday, December 20, 1952 ‘C’

Lockheed YF-83A, call sign ‘Lady Hawk’

South China Sea, 270 kilometers northeast of Da Nang

Ingrid looked briefly at her fuel gauges, then at the map display of her inertial navigation unit. Her plane and the YC-152A GLOBEMASTER heavy transport with which she was flying in formation were now about twenty minutes away from the east coast of Vietnam and Da Nang and they were on the last leg of a long trip from Muroc to Da Nang via Hawaii, Guam and the Philippines. There were still no American planes in Da Nang, except for two YC-152A and one YC-20A, something Ingrid could blame the Navy for, it being late delivering the reserves of fuel and aircraft ammunition and ordnance that her air wing would need to operate. Unfortunately, until those reserves were delivered and in place in Da Nang, she would be unable to move her planes in, on pain of putting them at risk of being caught on the ground by some enemy attack, with no fuel to fly off. The situation had been rendered even more frustrating by the fact that jet aircraft of the supposed ‘Democratic Republic of Vietnam Air Force’ had started two days ago to attack the French forces in Indochina from bases in China. Her air wing was now more needed than ever in Da Nang, but she could simply not move it in without fuel and ammunition. Finally, losing patience, she had decided to go alone to Da Nang with her fighter and a cargo aircraft loaded with missiles, munitions and spare parts for her YF-83A. The meager reserves of kerosene in Da Nang should at least be enough for a single fighter-bomber, she had told herself. A short call on the intercom from her radar

officer in the rear seat of the YF-83A, Captain Julia Miller, then made her look down at the surface of the South China Sea.

“Here is our aviation fuel, Ingrid, making its merry way to Vietnam.”

Ingrid had a bitter smile at the sight of the tanker ship escorted by a destroyer.

“About time! It will however take a few days to unload its cargo once in port. How are you doing, Julia? Not too tired by our trip?”

“I won’t mind being able to walk a bit on the ground in Da Nang, Ingrid.”

Ingrid smiled at that. Julia Miller had recently graduated from a specialist course in electronic warfare but she was already an experienced aviatrix who had served as a navigator and bombardier with the 777th Bomber Squadron of the 99th Wing. She was also a qualified pilot, according to the custom of the 99th Wing to have all its aircrew officers able to land their plane in an emergency. Julia was tall and quite pretty, with red hair and green eyes, but she was more importantly very competent, holding a diploma in electronic engineering from the prestigious M.I.T., something she owed like Ingrid to the G.I. Bill at the end of World War Two. She had then tried to find employment in the civilian market, but the still widespread sexism in the United States had blocked many doors and she had finally decided to join back the Air Force and her old unit, the 99th Composite Wing.

Three minutes later, Ingrid received a radio call from the YC-152A she was escorting.

“Charlie 23 to Lady Hawk, we just got a call from Da Nang. You are requested to contact the call sign ‘Tori Rouge’ on 233.4 megahertz.”

“Tori Rouge on 233.4 megahertz, understood, Charlie 23. Continue alone to Da Nang: I will join you there later. Am changing frequency now.”

Ingrid felt excitement rise in her as she changed the frequency on one of her radios: Tori Rouge was a call sign typical of a French tactical air controller. The French were probably having some serious problems somewhere, possibly with that new ‘Democratic Republic of Vietnam Air Force’. She then spoke on her intercom.

“Heads up, Julia: the French are calling for help. We might see some action on this trip yet.”

“Understood! I will keep a close look on my radar screen.”

Ingrid nodded, then spoke in fluent French on the new frequency.

"Tori Rouge, this is Lady Hawk, in transit to Da Nang over the South China Sea. What is your location and situation, over?"

"Lady Hawk, this is Tori Rouge, near Hanoi. My assigned fighter planes are attempting to intercept an enemy air raid coming from the direction of Kunming, in China, but are not fast enough to catch the enemy planes. Approximately thirty enemy jet aircraft are presently heading towards the port of Haiphong and will be there in twelve to fifteen minutes. We presently have both warships and cargo ships in the harbor. Can you lend assistance, over?"

Glancing at her navigation screen, Ingrid saw that she could be over Haiphong in time to intercept the enemy...if she went right away to maximum speed. Turning abruptly her plane towards the Northwest and Haiphong, she pushed her engines to maximum power as she answered the French air controller.

"Tori Rouge, from Lady Hawk. I am alone but fully armed and ready for combat and should be able to intercept those hostiles in time. Please advise the defenses in the port not to fire at a solitary plane coming from the Southeast, over."

While she was waiting for the reply from the French air controller, Ingrid refined her course and checked her fuel reserves. The two big 5000 liter external drop tanks she was carrying, which she had used up to now, were nearly empty and would only cut on her top speed. Selecting her internal fuel tanks, which were still full, she jettisoned her two drop tanks and felt her plane jump forward at once, its aerodynamic drag now greatly reduced. The French air controller spoke again on the radio after a few seconds.

"Lady Hawk, from Tori Rouge, our port defenses are being advised right now about your impending arrival. Be advised that the enemy planes are presently flying at a speed of about 900 kilometers per hour and are now fifty kilometers north of Hanoi, still flying towards Haiphong."

"Thank you, Tori Rouge. I will advise you once over Haiphong, out! Julia, we will have to deal with about thirty enemy aircraft. I will thus need you and your missiles soon. Keep them in their internal bays for the moment: I will have to go to top speed in order to arrive in time. Our first shot will be a frontal engagement with a radar semi-active AIM-1B."

"Understood, Ingrid." Replied Julia, excitement in her voice.

Their YF-83A accelerated in less than a minute to a speed of Mach 3.2, time that Ingrid used to calculate in advance a heading to Da Nang from Haiphong. Julia suddenly gave a warning on the intercom.

"I have a large group of contacts that just appeared at the edge of my screen! Heading correction to intercept: turn four degrees to port and go down by 6,000 feet. Distance: 95 miles and decreasing."

Following the instructions from her radar officer, Ingrid kept accelerating her aircraft, even equaling her own speed record as she dived down to the level of the enemy aircraft.

"Congratulations, Julia: you are now part of the Mach 4 Club, with Mach 4.05 our present speed."

"YEAH! Now for my first air victory. Distance to the enemy now 86 miles and decreasing. We are now level with the enemy and on a direct collision course. I can now distinguish two sizes of targets: fourteen probable heavy bombers and eighteen fighters. One moment! The enemy is now descending quickly. They probably want to attack the port from low altitude."

Ingrid dove as well at once while replying to Julia.

"That makes sense, if their goal is to sink the ships anchored in the port. We will thus have to also fight at low altitude. The ride could get rough. I'm lowering my wingtips for improved stability."

Turning quickly a setting knob, Ingrid made her wing tips, which represented a sizeable portion of her wing area, down by sixty degrees, making them act as vertical stabilizers and also decreasing the lift from her wings. Apart from making her plane more stable longitudinally at high speeds, that also made it less sensitive to air turbulence and crosswinds, making low altitude fast rides much less bumpy. Seeing on her own radar repeater screen that the enemy planes were now less than eighty miles away, she pulled back on her engine throttles once level with the enemy at an altitude of 6,000 feet: she didn't want to put at risk for too long the structure of her aircraft because of the strong aerodynamic heating caused by flying over Mach 2 at low altitude. She was however still going at the merry speed of Mach 2.4 when the port of Haiphong became visible ahead on the horizon.

"The enemy bombers just leveled at an altitude of 5,000 feet, Ingrid, dead ahead. Distance to target now 34 miles and decreasing. We should arrive before them over the

port, with an advance of ten miles. The enemy fighters are staying over the bombers, at an altitude of 10,000 feet.”

Ingrid refined further her altitude and lowered her speed to 1,100 kilometers per hour, just below the speed of sound.

“Julia, arm and deploy two AIM-1B semi-active radar-guided missiles. Illuminate the leading bomber and fire one missile once you are within range. Fire your other missile at the next bomber once your first missile has hit its target.”

“Understood!” Simply said Julia, who could feel adrenaline flow through her veins. Pushing a few select buttons, she made two COBRA B air-to-air missile deploy from their belly internal bays. With the missiles now in the airstream, their seeker heads would be able to pick up the radar echoes produced by her secondary, target designation and illumination radar, situated in a pod at the top of their vertical stabilizer, and reflected by the enemy bombers. She however could only illuminate one target at a time and would have to manually track her chosen target to keep her illumination radar on. In a modern fighter aircraft in Nancy Laplante’s time, this procedure would be fully automated, with the capacity to target and illuminate many targets simultaneously. However, the American computers available in 1952, while having advanced tremendously in a few years only, were still primitive compared to those of 2012. Watching simultaneously her main radar screen and her targeting radar screen, which had a much higher definition, Julia waited for her first target to be within range and for the radar echo it was sending back was strong and clear before pushing her firing button.

“MISSILE AWAY!”

As the AIM-1B flew from its launch rail ahead of a long trail of fire and smoke from its solid rocket motor, Ingrid was careful to keep flying straight, in order to facilitate the job of Julia. The missile accelerated quickly to Mach 4, its top speed, while tracking on the still unsuspecting enemy bomber, thirty kilometers away. The YF-83A was starting to overfly the ships in Haiphong Harbor from an altitude of 5,000 feet when Ingrid saw an explosion in the sky, far ahead of her, with Julia pushing a triumphant shout.

“FIRST TARGET DOWN! FIRING MY SECOND MISSILE NOW!”

The officers and sailors standing on the bridge of the French destroyer LE HARDI, anchored in Haiphong Harbor, were trying frantically to get their ship under steam in order to move it when the YF-83A, now visible on the southern horizon, fired its

first missile. The French followed with incredulous eyes the missile as it sped across the sky and over the port, to finally explode far away to the North. The captain of LE HARDI opened his mouth wide with surprise when the flaming debris of a large aircraft were seen falling to the ground in the distance.

"Bon Dieu! What is this sorcery?"

"IT IS FIRING A SECOND ROCKET, CAPTAIN!" Shouted the bridge officer, making his commander point his binoculars at the plane now overflying the port at high speed. American insignias were plainly visible on the wings of the newcomer, which had a fantastic silhouette.

"What a fantastic bird! LIEUTENANT, MAKE SURE THAT OUR GUNNERS DO NOT TARGET THAT PLANE!"

"YES, CAPTAIN!"

One of the lookouts shouted after another few seconds.

"SIR, ANOTHER ENEMY PLANE HAS BEEN SHOT DOWN."

As the captain smiled, encouraged by the successes of the American plane, his first officer looked at him with a dumbfounded look while putting down the handset of the telephone he had been using.

"Captain, our radar just confirmed the maximum approach speed of that American aircraft: it was going at over 4,000 kilometers per hour."

"But, that's impossible! No plane can even approach such a speed."

"None except that one, Captain." Replied soberly the first officer while pointing the aircraft speeding northward after firing a third missile.

Julia was positively ebullient as her third AIM-1B ran true and hit squarely its target, exploding and breaking it in flaming pieces. The enemy bombers were now visible as small dots in the sky ahead of them. An order from Ingrid then sobered her a bit.

"JULIA, PREPARE TWO INFRARED-GUIDED AIM-1As! WE ARE GOING TO ENGAGE IN CLOSE COMBAT. WATCH OUR BACK!"

Julia obeyed quickly and deployed and armed two new missiles, then solidly took hold of the padded handles fixed on both sides of her front instrument panel, to next start looking all around them for enemy planes. Their fighter-bomber then sped through a formation of eleven big aircraft heading for Haiphong. She had only a second to detail them but what she saw shocked her.

"INGRID, I NEVER SAW THE LIKES OF THOSE BEFORE! AND THEY'RE BIG!"

"PROBABLY THE NEWEST THE SOVIETS PRODUCED, JULIA. MY GUN CAMERA FILM SHOULD PROVE OF HIGH INTELLIGENCE VALUE AFTER THIS FIGHT."

"AND THEIR CREWS ARE ALSO PROBABLY SOVIET ONES, EVEN IF THEY WEAR THE INSIGNIAS OF THAT SUPPOSED DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM."

"AGREED! SEND A SHORT RADIO REPORT TO DA NANG WHILE I DISCUSS WITH THESE GENTLEMEN."

"GOT IT!"

As Julia started speaking to Da Nang on the radio, Ingrid effected a half-turn in order to come in the back of the heavy bombers. That also allowed her to have a better view of her targets. The new Soviet bomber model looked impressive indeed, with long swept wings and with two huge turbojet engines positioned at the wing roots, against the long, slender fuselage.

"Nice beast! Knowing the Soviets, I bet that it has at least a tail gun turret."

Receiving a steady tone from the infrared seeker head of her selected missile, denoting that it had acquired a target, Ingrid fired that missile and watched with growing expectation as it tracked the bomber she was targeting. It went straight into the big exhaust nozzle of the bomber's port side engine, with its huge heat signature, exploding inside the engine. The sixty kilo explosive fragmentation warhead utterly destroyed that engine and blew away the port side wing, sending the burning bomber down in a terminal spin. Ingrid had time to fire her second infrared missile and watch it destroy a fifth bomber before a shout from Julia alerted her to what she had been expecting already.

"ENEMY FIGHTERS HIGH AT EIGHT O'CLOCK!"

Ingrid immediately launched her aircraft in a tight turn to the left, making herself and Julia absorb seven Gs of centrifugal force. Julia tightened her jaws and started breathing in short gulps as she was crushed in her seat. Her G-suit however prevented her from passing out as Ingrid made their aircraft climb like a rocket as she kept turning. Ingrid was able to have a quick look at the enemy fighters as the latter did their best to come out of their dives and go after her.

“THESE FIGHTERS ARE NOT MIG-15s, JULIA. THEY HAVE DIFFERENT WINGS.”

Julia was able to look and see for herself, then lost track of the enemy fighters as Ingrid kept climbing. After a few seconds of climbing, with the enemy fighters left way behind, Ingrid reversed course and dove at the enemy, lining up their leader in her sight.

“Time to play with cannons!”

She shot a short burst of her four 30mm cannons once lined up, firing from 2,000 meters while diving on her target. Hit hard by the big cannon shells, the Soviet plane exploded in a fireball, leaving no chance to its pilot to eject. Diving past the surviving five fighters that had been pursuing her, Ingrid turned and dove on the nine remaining heavy bombers, which were still heading towards Haiphong Harbor, now less than four kilometers from the bombers. Another burst from her cannons, fired with her customary deadly accuracy, turned another bomber in a flying torch, its big fuselage fuel tanks shred open. The rest of the bomber escort, seeing how dangerous a threat she was, then tried to join the fight. Tried was the operative word, as Ingrid peppered another bomber, putting one of its engines on fire before diving through their formation. By then the bomber crews must have been close to panic, a very human reaction when you see your wingmen being killed one by one by an apparently invincible opponent. Waiting until close to the ground before climbing back, Ingrid targeted the large belly surface of the bomber now in the lead and selected her unguided rocket pods for that shoot. In view of the large number of enemy aircraft to deal with, she would definitely need to use all of the considerable weaponry available on her YF-83A. With a pressure on her firing button, her two belly rocket pods contained inside her fuselage deployed in a flash, firing in total sixteen 76mm rocket before retracting back as quickly inside the fuselage, thus cutting drag to a minimum. Caught in a deadly spread of rockets, the enemy bomber was hit by no less than five rockets that exploded against its belly, tail, port wing and starboard engine. The bomber then disintegrated in a huge fireball, its bomb load exploding as well. Ingrid had to change course to avoid the rain of debris coming down at her and went into yet another zoom climb, followed by the swearing enemy fighter pilots. With her plane's thrust-to-weight ratio now above one, thanks to the fuel she had burned up, the Migs stood no chance of catching her and were quickly left behind in her trail. That was when the surviving senior bomber pilot decided that enough was enough and gave the order to his wingmen to turn around and withdraw after jettisoning their bombs. Julia, using the ten fixed batteries of thermal/daylight/light intensification

cameras pointed at various angles and that gave the F-83A much of its all weather/night fighting capability, saw that and shouted a warning to Ingrid.

“THE BOMBERS ARE ABORTING THEIR BOMBING RUN AND TURNING AROUND!”

“Well, they’re not out of trouble yet.” Replied Ingrid, who then made her plane do a tight looping that put her in a dive aimed at the now fleeing bombers. She zoomed at the same time past the Soviet fighters, whose pilots were increasingly feeling useless against such an opponent. Some 23mm tracer shells from the dorsal turret of the bomber she was now targeting went by, missing her aircraft by a wide margin. She replied by firing another salvo of unguided rockets at the bomber, which she would later learned was a Tupolev Tu-16. Out of four rockets that hit the bomber, one exploded right in the cockpit, killing instantly its crew. Falling into a mad spin, the bomber quickly broke off in multiple pieces as Ingrid fired a third rocket salvo against another bomber. That bomber lost one wing and entered a wild terminal dive as Ingrid dove past it, to climb back yet again for a new attack. Gunners on the surviving four bombers tried their best to shoot her down, with some shells passing uncomfortably close a couple of times. That made Ingrid a bit more cautious, not because she was fearful, but because she was supposed to command a full joint task force out of Da Nang: dead task force commanders were not very useful to anyone. Deploying her last two missiles, infrared seeker models, she fired them in succession, finishing off the bomber she had already damaged with cannon fire and destroying an eleventh bomber with her last missile. She was now down to one salvo’s worth of unguided rockets and a few seconds of cannon fire. Looking at her fuel gauge, she saw that she still had plenty of fuel for a few minutes more of combat and for her trip to Da Nang. What stopped her from continuing this fight was the fact that the Soviet air raid had been successfully turned away. She had also just killed over fifty Soviet aviators in what had been nearly a simple massacre. She had nothing personally against those aviators and killing more of them would only bring her remorse afterward. Besides, the more panicked bomber crews returned to their base to spread terrifying tales of her plane, the better. She thus turned her plane away towards the Southwest and headed for Da Nang.

“The show is over, Julia. Let’s save what fuel we have left for another day: we don’t know when the fuel brought by the Navy will arrive in Da Nang.

“With twelve air victories in one sortie, I believe that no one will call us slouches, Ingrid.”

“True! By the way, good shooting with your radar-guided missiles, Julia. Two more and you will qualify as an ace.”
That brought a big grin on the face of her radar officer.

16:51 (Indochina Time)

Da Nang airbase

Annam (Central Vietnam)

A jeep with a large panel saying ‘Follow me’ guided Ingrid’s plane to a parking spot protected on three sides by corrugated steel plates sandwiching big piles of loose dirt. There were in fact dozens of similar protected revetments along the main tarmac of Da Nang, but there was only a grand total of five other aircraft on the ground, including two French light liaison aircraft. What looked like a whole procession of jeeps and trucks was parked behind the revetment, while over thirty persons were watching the YF-83A approach. Ingrid used the time taken by an aircraft tractor to push her fighter-bomber inside the revetment to note down the results and vital statistics of her mission, then opened her canopy as a female mechanic was approaching with an aircraft ladder. Ingrid could now recognize many of the faces in the waiting crowd, which was composed in majority of women. Most of them were members of her old 99th Composite Wing. The sub-units of the 99th Wing in fact constituted the major portions of the air component of her joint task force. Even though the lack of fuel and aircraft ordnance had stopped her from sending her planes to Da Nang, she had ordered most of her support units to arrive in advance by sea, using the military port adjacent to the airfield. The land component of her joint task force, under the command of Brigadier General Lewis Puller, had also started to arrive in Da Nang, lodging themselves in the newly built camps around the airfield. In fact, everything in Da Nang smelled of new and prefabricated.

Coming down using the ladder brought by the mechanic, Ingrid then gave a series of short orders to the chief mechanic present with ten more mechanics and four civilian technicians from Lockheed and Raytheon.

“Master Sergeant, have my plane refueled immediately and rearm my canons and rocket pods. I want four AIM-1B and two AIM-1A, plus one AGM-1R, loaded in the missile bays. The photo-reconnaissance pod brought from Muroc will also take the place of the ferry tank in the main bomb bay. Change as well the gun camera film and

give me right away the used film. I will also need our luggage to be taken out of the plane.”

“Right away, General!” Replied the tall brunette in her thirties before distributing orders to her mechanics and technicians. Ingrid waited to be given her used gun camera film before walking with Julia towards the small crowd waiting to one side of the revetment. She smiled on seeing Colonel Peter Shmelling, an old friend who had served with her from the start of the 99th Wing.

“Hey, Peter, you old paper pusher! It is nice to see you again.”

“The same here, Ingrid.” Said the logistics officer, who was approaching fifty, shaking hands with her after saluting her.

“So, the Pentagon chose you to command the support units of this new base?” Asked Ingrid. Shmelling replied with a forced smile.

“That was the plan. The problem is that I still am not effectively in command here. Colonel Evans, who commands the engineer construction units still building up this base, has kept control of it and refuses to transfer power directly to me. He seems to absolutely want his passage of power ceremony between you and him.”

Ingrid gave him in turn a critical look.

“And where is this Colonel Evans, Peter? I suppose that he is not here, the way you are talking of him now.”

“Effectively, but I only know that he went somewhere in town with his driver.”

Ingrid took a deep breath then to keep her calm: she detested administrative chicaneries, especially when they served no useful purposes.

“Are the main officers from this base present here?”

“I brought them with me, Ingrid.” Replied Peter while sweeping one arm towards a group of male officers. “They all were anxious to see your new plane, which looks fantastic, by the way.”

“Thanks, Peter. Well, I believe that it is time to reset the clocks here.”

Ingrid looked at the men and women facing her and spoke in a strong voice, her hands on her hips.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I present myself: Major General Ingrid Dows, Commander of the Joint Task Force – Indochina. I am also known under the nickname of ‘Lady Hawk’ and had until this morning a total of 138 confirmed air victories. I am now going to claim another twelve air kills, done over Haiphong Harbor on my way in from California. This is to tell you that this base is now under war conditions and that the

enemy could very well attack it as soon as tomorrow. So, chuck away your peacetime practices and switch to warrior mode. For starters, I am taking as of now command of this base, to transfer it to Colonel Shmelling, Commander of the 405th HQ and Base Services Group. All the questions concerning the maintenance, administration and development of this base and of its facilities will from now on be the exclusive domain of Colonel Shmelling, while I will command the air and ground combat units that will use this base. In turn, Colonel Shmelling will answer directly to me, and nobody else. Do you have any questions or objections to that?"

Since no one dared speak then, she continued after a short pause.

"The mission of the Joint Task Force – Indochina is simple and comes directly from President Dewey: to prevent and stop the Soviets and the Chinese from intervening militarily in Indochina. Unfortunately, the communists have decided that they couldn't wait and have started to effect air raids over Vietnam. I just forcibly turned away such a raid that was targeting the port of Haiphong, shooting down in the process eleven Soviet heavy jet bombers of unknown, new design, plus one Mig jet fighter, also of a new design. The enemy is thus now painfully aware of the presence of my plane here in Vietnam and will probably react badly to it. We will thus have to think and act accordingly. Please take note now of what I will tell you, ladies and gentlemen."

Ingrid waited that everybody had taken out a pen or a pencil and a notepad, then hammered her points one by one.

"First, if this has not already been done, I want air raid shelters or trenches dug near each building, so that our personnel can quickly find shelter in case of an enemy air raid on this base. I will not tolerate any delay in the execution of that order. Second, I give you until tomorrow night to see effective blackout measures be applied to this base. I want this base to become a pocket of darkness at night. Runway lights will be on only on approach, landing or takeoff of planes. Third, all the personnel, and I mean all, will be armed at all times or will have a weapon within arm's reach, including in messes or when on permission in town. This region is infested with Vietminh sympathizers and guerrillas who will seek a chance to ambush you or to come sabotage our planes and installations. Don't provide them with defenseless targets! Finally, even in view of my third directive, we are here to block any Soviet or Chinese intervention, not to treat all the Vietnamese like potential enemies. The political and social situation in Indochina is a lot more complicated and ambiguous than American newspapers might have led you to believe. Be thus polite and courteous with the local citizens and, especially, with our

local employees, if we have any. If you arrive here with the idea that you are bringing with you the superiority of the American and Western civilization, then I say that you are full of shit! We are guests in a country that is proud of its cultures and traditions, a country that existed over a thousand years before the arrival of the first European settlers in America. If you wish to learn the local language, I will certainly encourage you in this and will try to arrange language classes in the future. This said, I want now to see the Navy liaison officer and the operations officer of the air wing. For the others, I believe that you now have enough to keep busy for the next couple of days. Do you have any questions? No? Then you are dismissed!”

A tall and thin Navy officer, as well as Lieutenant Colonel Elizabeth Whitlow, which Ingrid knew already, came to her as the rest of the group dispersed. A young airman however stayed in her position near a jeep. Ingrid signaled her to approach and examined her as she came to a halt in front of her and saluted while presenting herself. She was relatively tall, measuring about 170 centimeters, had blond hair and blue eyes and had a curvy, sexy body that must be attracting men all over.

“Senior Airman Denise Bateman, General. I was assigned to be your driver in Da Nang.”

Ingrid returned her salute and pointed to her Julia Miller, standing besides the pieces of luggage taken out of the crew kit compartment of the YF-83A.

“Pleased to meet you, Senior Airman Bateman. While I talk with these two officers, could you help Captain Miller load our luggage in your jeep?”

“Right away, General!”

As the young blonde hurried to the pile of luggage, Ingrid faced Elizabeth Whitlow and the Navy officer, who presented himself.

“Lieutenant Commander Jeremy Jones, Navy Liaison Officer, General!”

“I am certain that we will be able to create a climate of effective cooperation with the Navy, Commander. This said, I saw on my way in the tanker USS TALUGA and its escort destroyer: they should arrive in Da Nang early tomorrow at their present speed. However, I am expecting that the enemy will attack this base by air and I do not want to risk seeing the TALUGA being bombed. Its cargo of aviation fuel is too precious to me to risk it. I would like you to contact the TALUGA and its escort ship and to ask them to slow down and delay their arrival until nightfall tomorrow. That would leave the TALUGA free to unload its cargo under the cover of darkness. Obtain confirmation that they understood and accepted that request after sending your message. Warn as well the

carrier MIDWAY that the enemy could launch air raids against Da Nang as early as tomorrow morning.”

“Excuse me, General,” said Elizabeth Whitlow, “but what tells you that the enemy could attack us by air tomorrow?”

“I base myself on the fact that I already pricked the Soviets pretty hard today by turning around their raid against Haiphong Harbor, and to their probable reaction to my oncoming photo reconnaissance mission that I intend to fly over Kunming, the probable home base of the raid against Haiphong. I hope by the way that we have at least enough kerosene on this base to sustain my YF-83A for a few missions?”

Whitlow made a grimace at that.

“We have a grand total of 79 tons of kerosene on this base, General, including what is being pumped right now in your plane.”

That answer made Ingrid shake her head in frustration.

“Only enough for three long range combat missions, or five short range ones. It is really too little, even with the TALUGA’s arrival tomorrow night. Do we have communications with the 99th Wing in the Philippines, Colonel?”

“We presently have a full battery of communications means, General, including encrypted radio-telephone links with the Philippines and Japan.”

“Excellent! Call Brigadier General James in Clark Field and ask her to send two of her new KC-200 tanker aircraft before noon tomorrow, so that I can constitute some fuel reserves here before the arrival of the TALUGA.”

“I’ll take care of this right away, General.”

The air operations officer of the joint task force was about to turn around when Ingrid touched her arm to keep her in place, while taking out of a pocket of her flight suit the used gun camera film of her battle over Haiphong.

“Just one last thing before you go.”

Ingrid then wrote down her name, date and approximate time of her fight on the film cassette’s label before giving it to Elizabeth Whitlow.

“Have this developed and analyzed at once, Colonel. It contains photos of a new Soviet heavy jet bomber and of a new variant of Mig fighter. Have also confirmed the number and type of the planes I shot down in that fight.”

“Understood, General!” Said Whitlow, grabbing the film and saluting Ingrid before leaving.

Julia Miller and Denise Bateman had in the meantime finished loading the luggage in the jeep. Ingrid went to the vehicle and took place in the front passenger seat, with Julia sitting in the back over the pile of kit bags and rucksacks.

"Let's go drop our luggage to our quarters, Senior Airman Bateman."

"Yes, General!"

As Bateman drove, following an asphalt road leading to the personnel quarters of the base, Ingrid had her identify the building and hangars they were passing by, so that she could start familiarizing herself with her new base. Apart from the aircraft hangars and of the technical depots and workshops, the majority of the buildings were single-storey prefabricated wooden structures with sloped roofs. While the use of that type of construction did not bother her, Ingrid appreciated much less the location of some of the buildings. The base operations building, along with the aircrew dispersal buildings, were much too far to her taste from the aircraft parking areas, something that would make impossible to the aircrews to get quickly to their planes, unless they pitched tents near their planes. She also could not see a single air raid shelter, while the base's officers' mess turned out to be an overblown complex, complete with pool and garden patio. It was as if those who had built this base had given priority to personnel comfort over operational needs. The quarters for pilots and senior officers were a series of long prefabricated, motel-type buildings, with each suite or room opening directly on a covered porch. Denise Bateman finally parked in front of one of the officers' quarters buildings and stepped out before fishing out two pairs of keys, giving them to Ingrid and Julia.

"Here are the keys to your quarters, General, and to yours, Captain. There is a communal laundry room at the end of the building, but each suite has its own bathroom and is air-conditioned. A local cleaning lady comes every Monday and Thursday mornings to clean the officers' quarters. Captain, you have the suite 141-E, while you have the suite 141-A, General."

Taking her key set, Ingrid then ignored the protests of her driver and carried herself her personal kit, which consisted of an old army kit bag, one rigid suitcase, one backpack, one locked briefcase and her M2A1 carbine. Unlocking the door to her suite, Ingrid entered a small lounge that had also a work desk in a corner, near a window. The fresh air inside, thanks to the air conditioning system, was a relief from the oppressive, humid hot air outside. Ingrid went to the adjacent bedroom, which had a large double bed, and

dropped her luggage there before eyeing quickly the small but functional bathroom. Satisfied, Ingrid picked back up her carbine and her locked briefcase and went out, joining up with Julia, who also had simply dropped her luggage in her suite. Julia, like Ingrid, had her carbine and pistol with her, making Denise Bateman conscious of the fact that she had not brought her own carbine with her. Ingrid noted and understood her embarrassment and spoke to her in a neutral tone.

“You will have the time to go get your weapon after dropping us at the officers’ mess, Senior Airman Bateman. Meet me at the Joint Task Force headquarters after supper: I will need to go back to my plane tonight with Captain Miller.”

“Uh, understood, General.”

The trio then took place in the jeep, with Bateman driving to the mess in less than two minutes, where Ingrid and Julia stepped out and entered the sprawling building.

Ingrid recognized and saluted many female officers in the dining room before sitting at a free table with Julia. She did not pay attention to the male officers, mostly from the Air Force engineering branch, that started to whisper to each other while eyeing her discreetly once she had entered. As a steward took their orders for supper, Julia lowered her own voice in order not to be overheard from other patrons.

“What do you have in mind for tonight, General?”

Ingrid smiled, understanding that Julia didn’t want to call her by her first name in public, something only proper. It was however a different matter once inside the cockpit of their plane.

“I actually am planning to do a photo-reconnaissance mission over Kunming Airfield, in China, possibly followed by a strike mission on Kunming, depending on what we will find there.”

“Do you have the authority to strike inside Chinese airspace, General?”

Ingrid looked with determination into Julia’s eyes.

“I got permission directly from President Dewey to strike at will at its source any enemy force violating the airspace or territory of Indochina. The President is not ready to tolerate the same kind of hypocrisy that the Soviets served us in Korea...and that they are trying to do here in Vietnam. He is ready to play hardball with the Soviets and the Communist Chinese and he has the support of the American people in this. By initiating their air attacks against Vietnam from Chinese bases, the Soviets marked themselves

for retaliatory strikes. In fact, we will do a lot more than simply reply: we will prevent more attacks against Vietnam by destroying the Soviets' planes in China."

"With only one plane, General? You are the best, but you can't be everywhere at the same time."

"True, but I fully expect to have the rest of our air wing here within a few days at most, once our fuel and ammunition reserves will have been delivered. So, do you feel ready for a night reconnaissance mission, possibly followed right away by a strike mission before dawn? Understand that, if we get shot down over China, we can expect the worst if captured."

It was the turn of Julia to look at her with determination.

"They won't get me alive, General."

Ingrid smiled and patted gently her hand.

"I'm sure that we will not get to that point, Julia."

Eating quickly their meals, the two women then left the mess, walking to the nearby headquarters of the joint task force, a wooden building that immediately appeared way too vulnerable in view of its importance. At least, it was well guarded, with two sandbagged sentry posts occupied by four Air Force police women. Returning the salutes of the MPs, Ingrid entered the headquarters building with Julia, finding it still mostly empty of personnel and equipment. A passing Air Force female clerk was able to show them where the operations center of the task force was. They were greeted there by Lieutenant Colonel Jenny Kawena, the intelligence officer of the 99th Wing, who had been named by Ingrid as her task force intelligence officer. The beautiful Hawaiian-Japanese broke military protocol then by giving a warm hug to Ingrid, who happily returned it.

"Ingrid, it is truly nice to see you again after all those years."

"The same here, Jenny. I feel like I am returning to my family, our family. Look, I will need the services of your specialists and technicians in photo imagery tonight. I want to conduct a night photo-reconnaissance mission over the airfield of Kunming, in China, since the Soviet raid on Haiphong seemed to come from Kunming. I will need to see the maps and information you have on Kunming."

Jenny became serious at once and nodded her head, pivoting on her heels to go towards one of the doors along the walls of the operations center.

"Then follow me, Ingrid."

With Julia still following her, Ingrid went with Jenny in the large room occupied by the intelligence section and to a woman in her late thirties who wore the ranks of a master sergeant, with Jenny presenting the woman to Ingrid.

“General, this is Master Sergeant Maggie Sturgis, my best air photo technician. She served like us in World War Two, but in Burma and China, including Kunming. I will leave you in her competent hands while I get you some maps of the region.”

Before Jenny could walk away, Ingrid touched her left arm, making her stop.

“Jenny, I will want to speak with the commanders of the various units of our joint task force, or to the senior officers present in Da Nang if their commanders have not arrived yet, on return from my mission over Kunming, at about two in the morning. Please ask Mary Hiller to arrange that meeting and warn the participants.”

“Will do, General!”

Ingrid then looked back at Sturgis and shook hands with her.

“I am happy and honored to meet a veteran like you, Master Sergeant Sturgis. So, what can you tell me about Kunming that would facilitate my photo-reconnaissance mission?”

“I have a few points for you, General.” Answered in a modest tone of voice the NCO before starting to enumerate a long list of facts and details about Kunming.

01:27 (Indochina Time)

Sunday, December 21, 1952 ‘C’

Operations center of the Joint Task Force – Indochina

Da Nang Air Base, Annam

“GENERAL DOWS JUST CALLED BY RADIO, COLONEL. SHE JUST CROSSED BACK THE BORDER AND HER PLANE IS INTACT. SHE SHOULD LAND IN ABOUT FORTY MINUTES.”

Screams of joy greeted that information passed by one of the duty radio operators in the joint operations center, while Lieutenant Colonel Mary Hiller, the chief of staff of the joint task force, felt immense relief wash over her. Ingrid Dows had kept strict radio silence right from the start of her mission, a standard precaution that had nonetheless left many to worry about her fate. Hiller was about to leave the operations center to get to her jeep when she nearly collided with Captain Judith Meyer, who commanded the air photo section, and with two of Meyer’s technicians.

"Oh, sorry, Colonel! We were going to the parking apron of General Dows' plane to be ready to extract quickly the films from her reconnaissance cameras."

"Then, let's go together!" Said Hiller. The four women were about to leave the building when Jenny Kawena came to them at a run.

"Wait for me! I'm going with you!"

It was finally a small convoy of four vehicles, including a light truck and Denise Bateman in her jeep, that showed up at the parking apron. The YF-83A arrived and landed smoothly over fifteen minutes later. Ingrid followed the guide jeep to her designated revetment but waved away the aircraft tractor waiting to push her plane inside the revetment, pivoting and parking her plane in front of it before shutting down her two huge jet engines. The group of waiting officers and technicians approached the big fighter-bomber once the chief mechanic present had declared it safe to do so, greeting Ingrid and Julia as they climbed down from their cockpit. Ingrid did not refuse the warm hugs she got then from her old comrades.

"You didn't need to be so worried about me, girls. Wait until I do my strike mission on Kunming."

"So, there is enough in Kunming to justify an airstrike, Ingrid?" Asked Jenny Kawena, bringing sober looks on the faces of both Ingrid and Julia.

"Oh yes, Jenny! We saw enough there to scare you shitless, but we have it all on camera. We will talk in detail about that once at the operations center."

"Then, let's go!" Said Mary Hiller to the others. "Judith, I am counting on you and your technicians to develop and analyze those films quickly."

"I'm on it, Colonel!" Replied Meyer, who was already with her two technicians under the main bomb bay of the YF-83A, which contained the photo-reconnaissance pod used by Ingrid. Before getting in her jeep with Julia, Ingrid gave some orders to the chief mechanic of her aircraft's ground crew.

"Master Sergeant, take out the photo-reconnaissance pod once the films are out of it, then replace it in the bomb bay by six 750-pound napalm canisters. I also want two AIM-1B radar-guided missiles on the overwing rails and 32 500-pound general purpose bombs on the wing pylons. You will put as well in the seven missile bays a total of four SUU-7 submunition dispensers loaded with explosive fragmentation bomblets, two AGM-1R anti-radiation missiles and one AIM-1A heat-seeking missile. Check as well that my rocket pods and cannons are fully loaded and fill the plane up with fuel. I intend

to do a 'Shake and Bake' style strike on Kunming as soon as my films will have been analyzed."

"Your plane will be ready in two hours, General." Promised the chief mechanic.

Mary Hiller joined Ingrid in her jeep for the ride to the joint task force headquarters, allowing Ingrid to ask her a question.

"So, who will be able to attend my command meeting, Mary?"

"Not too many people, unfortunately, Ingrid. Most of your unit commanders are still not deployed on the ground, due to the present limitations on our supplies and facilities. However, Colonel Victor Krulak, the commander of the 4th Marine Regiment, will be present, along with Colonel Marion Carl, commander of the Marine Air Group 16. I and Colonel Shmelling will of course be there as well with Jenny Kawena and Elizabeth Whitlow."

"What about that Colonel Evans, the commander of the construction units on this base?"

"He is still out somewhere in town, Ingrid. From what I could gather, he may be visiting a local bordello tonight."

"Great! We are on the verge of clashing with a major Soviet force and are in need of preparing to defend and repair if need be our base and he decides to go dip his stick in town."

They were then silent until they arrived at the headquarters building. While Mary Hiller went to warn the various participants that the command meeting would start soon, Ingrid sat down and took the time to write her mission report. She also wrote a short but concise message addressed to General Bradley at the Pentagon, telling him the extent of the Soviet involvement in Indochina that she had witnessed so far, and had that message encrypted and sent as a CRITIC priority before going to the headquarters' conference room. She found there a total of five women and six men waiting for her around the long table. Still wearing her sweat-soaked flight suit, Ingrid nodded her head when the group got up at attention on her entrance.

"At ease, ladies and gentlemen! Please sit down."

She sat down herself and then looked soberly around the table. Apart from the American officers present, the French liaison officer assigned to her joint task force, a handsome French Air Force commandant named Pierre Larose, was here as well.

Ingrid already knew well three of the male officers present, along with all the female officers. She had met Colonel Victor Krulak and Colonel Marion Carl when the two Marine Corps officers were fighting with her on Guadalcanal in 1942 and knew them as top combat officers.

“You will excuse me if I didn’t have time to wash after my latest air mission, ladies and gentlemen. That will however have to wait further, until after I make a second mission over Kunming Airfield, in China. What I found there was evidence of a massive Soviet air involvement in the Indochina conflict. I saw on the tarmac in Kunming nineteen of the new heavy jet bombers I encountered this afternoon over Haiphong Harbor, along with about thirty Ilyushin-28 medium jet bombers, over thirty Mig jet fighters, twelve twin jet fighters of unknown type and a few transport aircraft. I even spotted what looked like surface-to-air missile batteries being set up. For those of you who didn’t know already, I encountered on my way in from the Philippines a Soviet strike force of fourteen heavy jet bombers, escorted by Mig fighters. I then shot down eleven of those bombers, along with one Mig fighter, before landing in Da Nang. The gist of all this is that, if we don’t act first, this airbase may well be crushed under Soviet bombs by the end of this day. I thus am going to conduct an airstrike on Kunming in a couple of hours, in order to eliminate as much as I can of that Soviet force. In return, I will be expecting you to put your units already in place in and around Da Nang on full combat alert and be ready for an enemy airstrike. Since I haven’t had time yet to go through my paperwork, I will ask the main unit representatives present to give me a quick update on what you have presently on the ground in Da Nang and when the rest of your units will move in. Colonel Krulak, you may speak first.”

“Thank you, General.” Replied Krulak, who was nicknamed ‘The Brute’. While he was a man of medium height and built, he was in top physical shape for his age and his manners denoted a strong, dominating character. “While nearly all the infantry elements of our Marine brigade have arrived in Da Nang, only a small portion of our logistical equipment and supplies has been landed, while our heavy weapons, tanks, artillery and anti-aircraft guns are still in ships at sea and are due in Da Nang late this coming Monday. As for my regiment, we brought with us four days of combat rations and ammunition. It isn’t much, but we can at least defend ourselves.”

“Can you provide perimeter security for this airbase at this time, Colonel?”

"Yes, General! In fact, my second battalion has already started to assist your own airfield defense company in defending this base and is busy building sandbag bunkers around the perimeter."

"Excellent!" Said Ingrid, pleased, while taking notes. She next smiled to Colonel Marion Carl, the commander of Marine Air Group 16. She had first met Carl on her own arrival in Guadalcanal with her air group in 1942 and had fought the Japanese in the air at his side, with the two of them developing a mutual respect as top fighter pilots.

"Colonel Carl, what is the status of your MAG 16?"

The tall, lanky but fit Marine aviator shrugged his shoulders in a sign of near helplessness.

"I'm sorry, General, but not one of my helicopters and aircraft has arrived yet, due to the lack of fuel and ammunition in Da Nang. They are still at sea, on the carrier MIDWAY and on four LPDH amphibious carriers that are also carrying the heavy weapons and vehicles of the Marine brigade, which will arrive on late Monday."

"Well, without that fuel and ammunition, I guess that none of us can do much here." Conceded Ingrid. "What about the 99th Wing, Colonel Hiller?"

Mary Hiller, a veteran who had joined in 1942, looked briefly at her notes before answering.

"As you requested, General, two KC-200 tanker aircraft will be sent from Clark Air Force Base very soon and will deliver at total of 160 tons of aviation kerosene before returning to the Philippines to get more. That fuel will in turn be dispersed at once aboard our fleet of tanker trucks and in barrels stored in various points. As for the ammunition situation, we have only sixty tons of bombs, rockets and cannon ammunition in Da Nang, a pittance really, until the ammunition ship VESUVIUS can dock in Da Nang Monday night, in company of a combat stores ship loaded with 2,000 tons of spares and various supplies and 1,200 tons of refrigerated stores and fresh food. The VESUVIUS itself is carrying 4,500 tons of ammunition, most of it aircraft bombs but also including rockets and cannon ammunition. Once these ships will be unloaded, we will be in business here in terms of consumables and supplies. In terms of aircraft, we only have presently in Da Nang two C-152s and one C-20, on top of your own YF-83A. As soon as we will have our fuel and ammunition reserves in place here, the planes of our wing will fly in. As for our helicopters, they are aboard the same LPDHs carrying the helicopters of MAG 16."

"Good! Send another message to Brigadier General James, asking her to start a permanent listening and detection patrol over Northern Vietnam with her new EC-200R. Tell her to find Vietnamese and Chinese-speaking radio operators for those patrols, in order to be able to monitor enemy radio traffic. Apart from doing long range air surveillance, our EC-200R are to passively detect and triangulate any source of radio traffic that is not from French or approved Vietnamese stations. I want to be able to locate any hidden camp of the Vietminh or of its sympathizers in Indochina, on top of any Chinese or Soviet units along the border inside China."

"Uh, the patrols themselves won't be a problem, but finding quickly Vietnamese and Chinese language specialists in sufficient numbers will be difficult, General." In reaction to that, Ingrid looked at her French liaison officer.

"Commandant Larose, do you think that the French Command in Saigon could provide us quickly with such linguists? Please keep in mind that those linguists will have to be completely reliable: I don't want locals that were not fully vetted inside my electronic reconnaissance planes."

"We do have French-born officers and technicians that speak fluent Vietnamese or Chinese, General, especially in our own intelligence units. How many of them would you need?"

"Let's try for starters for sixteen specialists for each of those two languages, Commandant. Have them brought here and I will arrange for them to get on our planes. What can your air force oppose to those Soviet jet incursions?"

Pierre Larose shrank with discouragement at that question.

"Very little, unfortunately, General. Our best fighter in Indochina is the BEARCAT, a propeller-driven model that is much slower than the Soviet jet models. Furthermore, we have only three squadrons of BEARCAT based in Indochina and they are mostly busy tackling the Vietminh guerrillas. While I have the floor, General, may I transmit to you a request from my superiors to see you in Saigon this afternoon? They are anxious to discuss with you the strategy you will use against the Vietminh."

Ingrid gave Larose a circumspect look.

"Commandant Larose, I will have to say no to the request from your superiors for two reasons. First, I will probably be most busy in the air today, fighting Soviet planes and defending this base. Secondly, my intent is to avoid having to strike at the Vietminh as much as possible for the time being."

Larose was not the only one to be surprised by her answer, with Krulak stiffening in his chair. The French officer then managed a question in a neutral tone.

"And why so, General? Aren't you here to help us defeat the Vietminh?"

"I'm sorry, Commandant Larose, but I think that your superiors misread the intents of the directives I got from President Dewey. My joint task force was sent to Indochina in order to prevent and, if need be, turn away any attempt by the Chinese or the Soviets to interfere in Indochina. President Dewey's wish is ultimately for a political settlement in Indochina that would bring true democracy to the region. He has also made amply clear to your own president that he believes that your country should let go its colonial grasp on Indochina and allow truly democratic elections for independent local governments."

"I see, General!" Replied stiffly Larose, making Ingrid eye him coldly.

"I hope you and your superiors really can see the situation as it is, Commandant Larose. It will allow them to avoid tens of thousands of unnecessary casualties in the near future, because France will eventually have to let go Indochina, willingly or not. Please make sure that your superiors understand what my position and that of President Dewey is on this."

"I will pass the word, General." Said a clearly unhappy Larose. Seeing the disapproving expression on the face of Krulak, Ingrid glanced back at Larose.

"Could you please excuse us for a moment, Commandant Larose. You may go get a cup of hot coffee in the meantime."

"Yes, General!" Replied Larose stiffly before getting up from his chair and walking out, closing the door behind him. Ingrid then looked at Krulak as the others present held their breath.

"Speak your mind, Colonel Krulak, and don't be afraid of being brutally frank. I am like 'Chesty' Puller in that I hate bullshit and hypocrisy."

"Very well, General! I must say that your reluctance to strike at the Vietminh both shocks and surprises me. Those Vietminh are committing daily terrorist acts with the goal to establish communism in Indochina. Furthermore, they allied themselves with the Soviets and the Communist Chinese, thus clearly are our enemies. I don't understand why we should go easy on them."

"Your arguments would normally have a lot of merit, Colonel Krulak, but I and President Dewey based our opinions and decisions on information from the future that you probably never saw. What I will tell you and the others present here right now is

classified Top Secret ATHENA and is not to be repeated outside of this room. In the history known to Nancy Laplante, which I believe still mirrors pretty closely the present situation in Indochina, the French tried to vanquish militarily the Vietminh, who didn't enjoy direct Soviet air support like right now, but were still decisively defeated in the field in 1954 and were forced to agree to free elections in Vietnam and to leave Indochina. They were also forced eventually to leave Algeria later on after a bloody civil war that left France all but financially broke and socially divided. The era of European colonialism is reaching its end and President Dewey wants to avoid meaningless bloodshed by using political settlements instead. Another pertinent point is the fact that, while the main leaders of the Vietminh are indeed communists, other leaders and the majority of the Vietminh rank and file can be more correctly described as nationalists who simply want the French to leave their country. Remember a certain country that fought off European colonial domination to the cry of 'no taxes without representation'? Up to now, the French have simply siphoned off the riches available in Indochina while providing very little in return to the local people. We thus cannot blame the Vietnamese for wanting their independence, do we?"

Krulak, who understood very well her allusion to the rallying cry of the American War of Independence, seemed shaken by her argument.

"But, this doesn't change the fact that the Vietminh are led by communists and that they rely on Soviet and Chinese support, General."

"True again, Colonel. I however intend to try to build a rift between the dedicated communists and the simple nationalists among the Vietminh, notably by playing on the deep-seated historical ethnic animosity that exists between the Vietnamese and the Chinese. Did you know that Ho Chi Minh, who was fighting the Japanese during World War Two, twice asked for the help of the United States then and got some through the services of our OSS, now replaced by the CIA? We could have then convinced Ho Chi Minh to participate in a democratic local government, but we missed the boat and let the French retake control of Indochina. Now, we are again trying to clean the local mess for the French and, if we don't find a peaceful long term solution to this crisis, we will be stuck with it for the years to come. In Nancy Laplante's history, that led to increasing American involvement, including some very dirty play by the CIA to rig elections in favor of a series of corrupt, unpopular local politicians and generals whose only virtue was to be anti-communists. The CIA even arranged terrorist attacks and assassinations, in order to blame the Vietminh and push the local people away from them. We basically

cheated true democracy while pretending to defend democracy from communism. This sorry state of affair eventually resulted in direct American military involvement in Indochina, culminating into the presence of up to an half a million-strong American contingent during a long war to be called 'The Vietnam War', a war that cost us over 50,000 dead and resulted in a shameful defeat for the United States and the fall in disgrace of a president. Colonel, I am resolved to do my best to avoid such a future mess and will do everything to promote a peaceful settlement that will end with true democracy and independence for the local people of Indochina. First, though, we have to stop and beat away the Soviets and the Chinese and thus convince the Vietminh that relying on those two is both futile and a mistake. Are you ready to support me in attaining those goals, Colonel Krulak? If not, can I at least rely on you to obey my orders when fighting the Soviets and the Chinese?"

After a short hesitation, Krulak nodded his head once.

"You can count on me, General."

"Thank you, Colonel." Said Ingrid, sincere, before looking at the others around the table. "Do any of you still have questions or objections about my stated goals and tactics? No? Then, I have two last points before we end this meeting. Colonel Krulak, did General Puller tell you when he expects to fly in Da Nang?"

"He did, General. He intended to arrive tomorrow evening, via the Philippines."

Ingrid next looked at Mary Hiller, her chief of staff.

"Colonel Hiller, when are the men of the 1st Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group, due in Da Nang?"

"Tomorrow evening as well, General. I understand that Brigadier General Puller is going to be aboard one of the two C-200A transport aircraft that will carry those Special Forces soldiers."

Ingrid covered her face in mock despair at those words.

"Chesty, the only Marine aboard a plane full of Army pukers. I'm sure that he will love it."

Her joking remark made both Krulak and Carl grin in amusement. Ingrid then became serious again.

"Very well, Colonel Hiller. Advise Clark Field of the potential air threat around Da Nang and make sure that those two C-200s are escorted by fighters. The moment that our fuel and ammunition starts to be unloaded, I want the rest of our task force to join us

and land in Da Nang. We must be fully operational within 72 hours, ladies and gentlemen. As for what will happen in the next few hours, here are my intentions...”

04:30 (Indochina Time)

Luxury bordello, city of Da Nang

Colonel Garry Evans woke up with a startle when the thunderous, high-pitch noise of powerful jet engines echoed into the night. The very young prostitute sleeping with him in the large bed of the bordello’s room he was using for the night also woke up with a startle. Jumping quickly out of bed, she ran naked to the balcony doors and flung them open to look outside at the sky. Evans got up much more slowly, swearing at the pilot who had awakened him for the second time in the night.

“If I catch the damn maniac who flies in and out like this at night...”

The young prostitute, who apparently spoke no English at all, suddenly pointed at the sky while speaking excitedly in Vietnamese. Intrigued but still flustered, Evans looked up and saw the long blue flames from twin jet engines as they climbed in the sky at an apparently impossible rate.

“Now, what kind of damn aircraft could that be?” He muttered before his sleepy mind finally clicked into gear. “Oh, yeah: that must be that hotshot ‘Lady Hawk’ and her super-secret F-83. That young opportunist couldn’t resist making a show of herself, of course. Major General at the age of 29, what a joke!”

Evans, busy following the fast receding jet exhausts of the aircraft, didn’t see the way the young prostitute glanced briefly at him then. Far from knowing no English, Dinh Thi Hoa spoke very good English and even better French, having been specially selected by her madam to serve the tastes of that big American senior officer. Hoa was also no simple peasant girl, having been well educated by French Jesuits. Having a young body that made most men mad with desire, she had volunteered to help the cause of the Vietnamese people in the way she would be most useful. If what that American colonel had said to her during past previous nights while thinking that she couldn’t understand him was true, then many more Americans would soon come to visit her. Her madam would then be able to select the more senior officers as customers for Hoa.

05:30 (Indochina Time) / 06:30 (China Time)

Area of Kunming, Yunnan Province, China

Julia, like Ingrid, was shaken constantly by air turbulences as their YF-83A flew at a speed of 900 kilometers per hour and an altitude of barely fifty meters in the dark night sky. With the wing tips of their aircraft pivoted down by sixty degrees by Ingrid, the ride was however bearable, with their longitudinal stability improved as well. Julia had to recognize that Ingrid was proving up to now to be the best pilot she had seen yet. With only a half moon to provide some illumination, Ingrid kept rolling and turning her plane in order to follow as closely as possible the terrain contours and stay under the enemy radar coverage. Their plane having turned westward over the Chinese town of Ch'u-Chin and now following the railway track towards Kunming, Julia nervously glanced yet another time at her radar warning receiver set. She was getting a fairly strong signal from the E/F band search radar positioned near Kunming Airfield as well as weak signals from three FIRE CAN gun fire control radars presently scanning in search mode. However, at her present altitude, Julia doubted that those radars could pick their plane up. They were now barely eight minutes away from Kunming, with no signs yet that the Soviets or the Chinese knew that they were around.

As they approached the city of Kunming, with the reflective surface of Lake Dian Chi to its south, the signal from one of the FIRE CAN gun fire control radars went from search mode to tracking mode, concentrating its scanning in her general direction.

"One of the FIRE CAN radars seems to have caught a whiff of us, Ingrid. It just went into targeting mode."

Her heart suddenly beating faster, Ingrid dropped down a further fifteen meters, trying to hide behind the radar shadow caused by the city of Kunming. Now concentrated solely on her flying, which was exhausting for her nerves at such speed and low altitude in night conditions, Ingrid soon jumped over the buildings of Kunming, dropping back down afterwards.

"The FIRE CAN seems to have lost us, Ingrid."

"Perfect! Arm the bombs under our wings for our first pass. We will hit those big jet bombers first from an altitude of 200 feet and a speed of 500 miles per hour. Release our bombs in fast ripple mode. You will press the trigger once I'm lined up."

"Got it!"

Julia was flipping on the arming switches of her 32 500-pound retarded bombs and selecting fast ripple release mode when the FIRE CAN signal, which had lost them for a

moment, caught back with them: one Soviet radar technician out there was definitely on the ball this early morning. Ingrid could now see lights on the airfield, visible to her front left as she prepared to do a North to South sprint over it. Pushing her throttles all the way forward to military power and switching on her aft-and-down-facing bomb damage assessment, or BDA, camera, Ingrid performed a wide turn to the left to line her aircraft towards the parking apron used by the nineteen Soviet heavy jet bombers she had spotted during her reconnaissance mission. The signal from the FIRE CAN radar then became a continuous shrill, telling Ingrid and Julia that the Soviet radar technician had acquired them and was firmly tracking their aircraft. Julia felt cold sweat on her forehead as the gun batteries she could see started pivoting their barrels in their direction. Her jaws clenching together hard and with her heart pounding, she forgot about everything else but the heavy bombers as Ingrid lined up their plane in order to overfly the whole line of parked bombers. Julia suddenly felt savage joy at the sight of numerous fuel trucks, tractors and bomb dollies parked or circulating around the bombers: they were being prepared for a bombing raid and were thus surrounded by bombs and fuel, making the whole parking apron area a volatile target indeed for their bombs. The men present on the tarmac around the heavy bombers started to run away on hearing the F-83 approach, but they now had little chance of escaping. A gun flash then registered in the corner of Julia's left eye as the bomb-aiming crosshairs of her heads up display unit came on top of the first bomber. She pressed the bomb release trigger as she felt a distant detonation behind their aircraft. Released in quick succession from a height of sixty meters, their 32 bombs each fell from the wing weapons pylons for maybe twenty meters before their tail sections opened up, deploying like the petals of a flower and brutally braking aerodynamically the bombs. Falling behind their aircraft, the bombs hit the ground at a 45-degree angle and with roughly 25 meters between them. Some made direct hits on heavy bombers, while the others exploded among the fuel trucks and bomb dollies. The bombers parking apron then turned into an exploding inferno, with burning fuel spraying the whole area. As soon as all of her bombs were released, Ingrid turned hard to the right but stayed low, performing a half turn and lining up on what she had assessed by studying her reconnaissance photos to be the base operations building, which was topped by a number of radio masts. The barracks housing the flight crews were just behind that building.

"JULIA, DEPLOY AND ARM OUR NAPALM CANISTERS!"

"LIQUID FIRE, COMING UP!"

Julia was able to see men starting to run out of the barracks as she armed their six 750-pound napalm canisters. She then felt bad for a moment: she was about to roast alive a lot of men in the next seconds. She however did not hesitate to press the trigger again and release the canisters. Those hit and easily pierced the thin wood and tile roofs of the barracks, bursting open inside and spraying their content. The barracks were suddenly engulfed in giant fireballs as the YF-83A turned yet again towards the parking aprons while being chased by tracer shells. This time, Ingrid went for the thirty or so Iluyshin Il-28 medium jet bombers lined up as in parade order, with fuel trucks and bomb dollies around them as had been the case for the heavy bombers.

“JULIA, SWITCH TO SUBMUNITION DISPENSERS! YOU FIRE THEM!”

“UNDERSTOOD!”

Two more detonations shook their aircraft just before they overflowed the line of Soviet medium bombers. Julia fired their four sub-munitions dispensers at that same moment, making hundreds of small, one-kilo explosive fragmentation bomblets fall down over the bombers. The bomblets exploded on impact in dense patterns on the ground and atop the planes, projecting steel pellets all around and turning the light bombers into sieves, making many of them also catch fire.

Still having munitions aboard her plane, Ingrid made yet another turn at low altitude, passing behind the hangars of the airfield in order to try masking her plane from at least a few of the dozens of anti-aircraft guns pursuing her. With dawn still a few minutes away, the Soviet gunners found it extremely difficult to line up on her aircraft while she flew so low. Ingrid thus managed to come back for yet another pass, selecting her rocket pods and firing in a long salvo her 64 76mm unguided rockets against the Mig fighters parked in a line facing the now burning Il-28 light bombers and shredding them to pieces.

Now judging that she had done enough damage, she switched on her afterburners and dashed eastward across Lake Dian Chi, flying so low that her aircraft's aerodynamic shock wave created huge water sprays in her trail. Her desperate tactic worked, with the proximity fuses of the 85 mm and 57 mm shells fired at her being initiated by the water sprays or being confused by the radar-reflective surface of the lake. Her aft-looking BDA camera was still filming when she finally flew over the opposite bank of the lake, now out of range of the anti-aircraft guns. Switching off her

BDA camera, Ingrid blew air out in relief as she pulled up the nose of her aircraft and took some altitude. She however forgot to take account of the late reaction by the suspected surface-to-air missiles, which she had judged erroneously, based on her previous photos, to be still non-operational. Julia's radar warning receiver set reminded her about them with a new pulsed E/F signal that quickly turned into a shrill.

"TARGETTING RADAR PAINTING US ON ILLUMINATION MODE!"

Feeling a chill descend on her, Ingrid hurried to fly over the next set of hills and then drop down behind them. Her quick reflexes paid off, with a big missile zooming over her head, missing her by maybe 200 meters. Not taking any more chances, Ingrid switched off her afterburners and flew eastward close to the ground for another thirty kilometers before turning south and taking a heading for Da Nang while climbing towards medium altitude. Being detected now would not be important, as only a missile could catch up with her now and she doubted that many of those Soviet missiles were yet in China. She accelerated to mach 1.5 and stayed at that speed until after crossing back the Chinese-Vietnamese border, then slowed down to 900 kilometers per hour in order to conserve her fuel. Only then did she allow herself to relax a bit, her hands shaking from the nervous fatigue.

"God, what a mission that was!"

"Yeah!" Replied Julia, equally spent. "And the Soviets are not about to forget about it."

06:47 (Indochina Time)

Da Nang Air Force Base

Annam, Vietnam

"Please, tell me that my plane is undamaged!" Pleaded Ingrid as she climbed down with Julia from her cockpit after parking her plane and switching off her engines. The Air Force and Lockheed technicians and engineers that had swarmed over her aircraft quickly inspected it from nose to tail, with one technician soon shouting out to Ingrid.

"General, you have a few pock marks from low speed shrapnel around your tail section, plus two small holes in your left vertical rudder."

Running to the tail section, Ingrid examined the damaged and blew air out in relief.

"Thank God that it's only that! We should be able to repair that quickly enough."

An airframe technician and a Lockheed engineer used a mobile staircase to climb up and examine closely the holes in the vertical rudder, then announced that nothing substantial had been touched and that the holes could be patched up in a couple of hours. Ingrid felt much better then and looked at Mary Hiller, who had been waiting for her at the revetment with Senior Airman Bateman.

“Mary, I really, really pissed off the Soviets this time. While Kunming is probably out of action for a while, other Soviet air units may retaliate against Da Nang. While the repairs are being done, make sure that the whole plane is inspected, then refueled and rearmed for air-to-air combat.”

Ingrid then lowered her head and leaned against her aircraft, looking exhausted. Mary Hiller gently touched her left arm.

“Ingrid, you flew three combat missions in the last twelve hours. You need to rest, like Julia. Let your ground crew do the work here and go back to the air operations building to fill your flight report before going to sleep a bit.”

“Not before I get the films from my gun camera and from my BDA camera.” Said Ingrid, then forcing herself to walk to the keel housing containing the BDA camera. She extracted the film cassette from its compartment, then went to the air intakes and did the same with the film from her gun camera. A ground mechanic replaced the films at once without even her having to ask for it, drawing an approving nod from Ingrid.

“Thanks, Sergeant! Keep up the good work.”

“It’s a pleasure, General.”

Her two precious film cassettes in her hands and her flying helmet still on her head, Ingrid then went to Denise Bateman, standing beside her jeep. Bateman saluted her at rigid attention.

“It’s a pleasure to see you and Captain Miller back in one piece, General.”

“Not as much for you as it is for me, Senior Airman.” Joked Ingrid. “Let’s go to the air operations building: I have two films to deliver, plus a report and a message to write.”

11:40 (Indochina Time) / 12:40 (China Time)

Wuxu Airfield, Guangxi Province

Southern China

The pilots of the Soviet 64th Fighter Regiment assembled in the pilots' ready lounge immediately grew quiet when they saw the hard expression on the face of Colonel Kozhedub. They all took their seats at once as Kozhedub walked to the improvised lectern near a wall map of Indochina and Southern China. Kozhedub then spoke firmly, wanting to prepare psychologically his pilots for action.

"Pilots of the 64th Fighter Regiment, I have the sad duty to inform you that your comrades in Kunming Airfield have been attacked early this morning by what was probably a single American plane of previously unknown design, with very heavy loss of life and equipment on our side. That attack followed an earlier intervention yesterday by what is probably the same plane over Haiphong, when eleven TU-16 bombers and one MIG-17 from Kunming were lost in air combat. Our information is still sketchy but it appears that this new American plane also flew a low level reconnaissance photo mission over Kunming barely five hours before returning there for a bombing strike. That strike hit as our bombers were being fuelled up and armed for a strike against Da Nang, the suspected base of that mystery plane. All nineteen remaining TU-16 bombers of our heavy bomber regiment were destroyed, along with 26 Ilyushin 28 medium bombers, 23 MIG-17s, the base operations building and the aircrew barracks. Over 900 of our men are dead and at least 600 were wounded, many being severely burned. The American plane then made good its escape by flying away at extremely low altitude. As a result of this, the air division commander, who barely escaped death in that raid, has ordered our unit to launch a strike against Da Nang at once. From some very recent intelligence we received, we are apparently facing the famous American female 'Ace of aces', Ingrid Dows, who is now a major general. She has an official score of 138 confirmed air victories and is better known as 'Lady Hawk'. Worst, she is probably flying a top-secret prototype of a new American supersonic fighter aircraft called the F-83. That F-83 supposedly has flown faster than mach 2. We are thus facing the best that the United States can throw at us. It will be your job this afternoon to show to the Americans that their best is not good enough against the 64th Fighter Regiment."

11:51 (Indochina Time)

Da Nang Air Force Base

Mary Hiller stepped out of her jeep as soon as it stopped besides the YF-83A that had been pushed inside a revetment by an aircraft tractor. The two KC-200 tanker

aircraft that had been escorted by the YF-83A were already surrounded by a fleet of tanker trucks that had been ordered by Mary to take in the fuel carried by the KC-200s as quickly as possible and to then disperse in caches. The chief of staff of the wing was walking towards the big fighter-bomber when the pilot and radar officer climbed down from their cockpit. Mary hesitated on recognizing Colonel Helen Richey, the deputy commander of the 99th Wing, then came to attention and saluted.

“Colonel Richey? But, I was not expecting you today.”

The small aviatrix, who stood only 155 centimeters tall, smiled to Mary while returning her salute.

“Somebody had to escort those two KC-200 tankers, no? Where is Ingrid?”

“She is presently sleeping, like her radar officer, and she needed it: a trans-pacific ferry flight followed by three combat missions in the same 24 hours is a lot, even for Ingrid. I must say that she hit a real hornets’ nest in Kunming, 610 miles to the North, in China. She found a regiment of a new Soviet heavy jet bomber, along with a regiment of Il-28s and another regiment of Mig fighters, plus dozens of anti-aircraft guns and even a surface-to-air missile battery.”

Helen, like her radar officer, looked with shock at Mary.

“Surface-to-air missiles?”

“Yes, Colonel! According to the analysis of the pictures taken over Kunming, they would be a Soviet offspring of the German A-4 WASSERFAL of 1944 and use a semi-active radar guidance mode. They however are not very effective at low altitude.”

“That’s always good to know. Let Ingrid sleep for the moment. Me and Gloria will go eat quickly, then will go see the pictures taken by Ingrid. We flew in on the fuel contained in our drop tanks and our internal tanks are still full, so no need to refuel my plane. Just have our supersonic drop tanks removed and I will be able to play alert interceptor aircraft. My missile bays are already loaded with AIM-1 air-to-air missiles and my rocket pods and cannons are fully loaded. How are the aircrew quarters here?”

“They are very adequate and are air-conditioned. I must say that the construction units that rebuilt this base seemed to have paid more attention to creature comforts than to operational needs. Let’s load your luggage in my jeep, then I will drive you to the officers’ mess.”

“Thanks, Mary.” Said Helen before looking at the scenery around her, with the sea visible nearby to the East. “Da Nang seems to be a nice enough place.”

"It is also a hot and humid place. Our girls from the Philippines should however feel at ease here, contrary to all these men fresh from the United States."

Gloria Swanson, Helen's radar officer, smiled on hearing the word 'men'.

"I hope that the men here are worth the look, Colonel."

"Oh, I don't know. We have a brigade of Marines here and a battalion of Army Special Forces troops is due in tomorrow, along with a Marine air group."

"That should be enough...for a while." Replied Gloria in a malicious tone, making Helen laugh.

"Gloria, you will never change! Come on, let's load our stuff: I'm hungry!"

15:46 (Indochina Time)

U.S. Navy combat air patrol

Sixty kilometers east of Da Nang

"Hey, Bulldog, did you ever meet that famous Lady Hawk before?"

"Never had that pleasure, Thunderbolt. She looks damn cute in pictures, though."

"Scuttlebutt has it that she owns the skimpiest bathing suit this side of the Pacific, Bulldog. Maybe we should get some shore leave time in Da Nang."

The chatter between the two bored Grumman F9F PANTHER Navy fighter pilots was then interrupted by the voice of their air controller aboard the aircraft carrier USS MIDWAY, sounding all business.

"Sea Dog Four, this is Home Plate. We have two bogeys that have just entered our radar range to the Northeast. Range is 95 miles, bearing 026 and speed approximately 550 miles per hour. The bogeys are heading directly for Da Nang. You are to intercept and identify. Please copy, Sea Dog Four."

"We copy your transmission, Home Plate." Replied the navy pilot nicknamed Thunderbolt, becoming very serious at once. "We are turning to intercept."

Navy Lieutenant Danny Rushmore, feeling excitement rising in him, turned his plane towards the Northeast, then glanced at his radar screen: the suspected enemy aircraft were still out of detection range of his own radar. Rushmore flipped off the safety on his four 20 mm cannons, then spoke in his mask microphone.

"Bulldog, go to military power and drop your external tanks."

“Understood, Thunderbolt!” Replied nervously Second Lieutenant Harry Cosgrove, a young pilot barely out of Navy Fighter School who was on his first carrier cruise. While confident about himself and being a five year veteran of the Navy, Rushmore was green in terms of wartime air combat, having barely missed the Korean War. He however firmly believed that the United States Navy fighter pilot training was the best in the World. The two pilots dropped their external fuel tanks and accelerated to 550 miles per hour, near their maximum speed. Five minutes later, Rushmore saw two blips appear on his radar screen. They were flying towards Da Nang alright and were certainly jet aircraft.

“Bulldog, I have the two intruders on my radar. Make sure that your gun safety is off and follow me in a left hook around those incoming commies: we are going to take them in the ass, over.”

“Won’t they see our move on their own radars, Thunderbolt?”

“Naah! These soviets don’t have radar on their planes yet. They will never know what hit them. Thunderbolt out!”

Rushmore then veered thirty degrees to the left, followed by Cosgrove. That maneuver made him lose temporarily the two blips on his radar, which had limited range and coverage, but he already had calculated his trajectory and the time needed before he would need to turn back to take the enemy by surprise with all guns blazing. However, when he made his half turn to the right, his two targets were not there anymore. Perplex, he scanned visually the sky around him and barely managed to see two dots fleeing eastward.

“Our two bandits are fleeing eastward at ten O’clock! Put on the juice and follow me, Bulldog!”

Resolved not to let the two enemy planes escape, Rushmore turned his fighter to the left and accelerated to his maximum speed of 575 miles per hour, followed by Cosgrove’s PANTHER. The two enemy aircraft grew slowly in the sky as the PANTHERs gradually gained on them. That however led Rushmore to get to the limit of the radar coverage of his carrier, prompting a call from his air controller.

“Sea Dog Four, this is Home Plate. You are about to exit our radar coverage. Do you have the two suspect bogeys in sight, over?”

“Affirmative, Home Plate! I now have two twin-jet aircraft of unknown model with swept wings in sight and am about to intercept, over.”

“I copy that, Sea Dog Four, out.”

15:48 (Indochina time)

Lead Soviet YAK-25 all-weather fighter

The radar operator of the lead twin-seater YAK-25 all-weather fighter took the time to confirm the heading and speed of the two approaching enemy jets visible on his radar scope before calling the commander of their decoy force.

“Red Star Two, this is Red Star Two One. We have two fast jets on approach from bearing 228, chasing after our two lead decoy aircraft. Distance is 54 kilometers and closing and speed is 920 kilometers per hour. They may be coming from an American carrier rather than from Da Nang, over.”

“Understood, Red Star Two One. Hold your position and be ready to guide in interceptors: I am surging forward four aircraft.”

The commander of the decoy force, Major Pepelyaev, smiled to himself: even if Da Nang was supported by an American aircraft carrier, it would only mean that his mixed force of Yak-25 all-weather fighters, Mig-17 fighters and Il-28 medium jet bombers was going to attract even more American aircraft away from the main strike force, headed by Colonel Kozhedub in person. With the best fighter pilots of the regiment with him and with the eight YAK-25s providing him vital radar warning and guidance, Pepelyaev was confident that his force was going to teach a lesson to those arrogant Americans.

“Red Star Two Four, surge ahead on heading 228 and intercept two approaching American fighters now 54 kilometers away. Red Star Two One will provide you with interception vectors, over.”

“Surging forward now, Red Star Two!” Answered the apparently calm voice of Captain Lilya Litvyak. Pepelyaev grinned ferociously on hearing her: the Americans were not alone in having female fighter aces. Litvyak had already fourteen victories in her career and probably was going to add to that total today. As for himself, Pepelyaev wouldn't mind improving on his collection of 23 American aircraft shot down in Korea.

Navy F9F combat air patrol

The two American Navy pilots were about to get within cannon range of the two fleeing aircraft when Rushmore saw from the corner of one eye a group of dots diving on him and Cosgrove.

“BANDITS TWO O’CLOCK HIGH! IT’S AN AMBUSH! VEER TO STARBOARD, BULLDOG!”

Hoping that Cosgrove would obey him, Rushmore chose to attack, turning and climbing to meet his opponents, four of which he could now see. The new enemy aircraft, Mig-15s in his opinion, opened fire first, being in a more favorable position and also having bigger caliber cannons. To the surprise of Rushmore, who held communist fighter pilots in low esteem, the first enemy salvo hit his plane, hard. The PANTHER shook as a 37mm shell exploded against his left wing extrados, ripping away the aluminum skin over more than a square meter of surface and peppering his fuselage with shrapnel. He was left with a barely controllable aircraft as the four Migs zoomed past him while coming out of their dive. Trying to turn right to pursue them, Rushmore had to recognize that his plane was in no state to fight: it was vibrating badly and had lost a lot of speed, while his left aileron held in place only by a miracle. He clenched his jaws when he saw the plane of his wingman, now transformed into a flying torch falling towards the sea, and made a radio call on an urgent tone of voice.

“Home Plate, Home Plate, this is Sea Dog Four! I have fallen into an ambush and I have been hit, while my wingman has been shot down. Four Mig-15s dove on us as we were about to intercept the two first bogeys. I need backup urgently. I say again, I need...”

As he was still speaking on the radio, one of the Migs came back towards him and fired a head-on salvo, pulverizing Rushmore’s canopy with 23mm shells and killing him instantly. He never saw the wave of over thirty enemy aircraft now appearing from the East.

Lilya Litvyak, turned hard right to avoid being hit by debris from Rushmore’s plane. Exalted by her success, she radioed at once to Pepelyaev.

“Red Star Two, this is Red Star Two Four. The two enemy fighters are down and the way is clear. No damage to my planes, over.”

“Good Job, Red Star Two Four! Turn to heading 190 and follow the guidance of Red Star Two One: four more enemy jets are approaching fast. Red Star Two Three will be joining you, over.”

“Understood, Red Star Two! Red Star Two One, I am counting on you to guide me to those juicy American asses.”

The laughter of the YAK-25 leader answered her.

On the carrier USS MIDWAY, the air controller looked with shock at his radar screen, on which he had just seen the echoes from his two fighters disappear, then turned his head to look up at the commander of the carrier's air group, Commander Elbert McCuskey.

"CAG, our two PANTHERs just got shot down by four Mig-15s. I lost contact with Lieutenant Rushmore in mid-sentence and...one moment! About thirty new contacts just appeared from the Northeast, at the limit of my detection range. They are heading for Da Nang."

"SHIT! Launch the alert pair of F9Fs on the catapults! Have all our fighters launched as quickly as possible to intercept those bogeys."

McCuskey then grabbed a telephone and called the Captain on the bridge.

"Captain, we just lost our patrol element in an ambush by four Migs and another thirty or so aircraft just appeared from the Northeast on our radar screens. I have ordered all our fighters to be launched to intercept those bogeys. I advise that you put the fleet on combat alert."

"Understood, CAG! I am turning the carrier into the wind for the launches. In the meantime, call Da Nang and warn them about these approaching bandits."

"Right away, Captain!"

The next fifteen minutes were chaotic on the USS MIDWAY, with the crew of the aircraft carrier working feverishly to launch as quickly as possible the twenty F9F PANTHER fighters left aboard, while the escort fleet of the MIDWAY tightened its protective screen around it. Commander McCuskey was however not reassured as the last PANTHER was catapulted off the carrier. The enemy force was much larger and past experience had show that the Mig-15 was technically superior to the F9F. Now, he had only twelve F3D SKYKNIGHT night fighters, an aircraft type that performed poorly in dogfights, plus a collection of propeller-driven aircraft and helicopters left aboard the carrier to defend it. One of his radar operators then shouted an information to him.

"CAG, ONE F-83 JUST TOOK OFF FROM DA NANG TO INTERCEPT THE ENEMY."

"Thank you!" Replied McCuskey, who knew that there was supposed to be still only one F-83 in Da Nang. Not having heard yet about Ingrid murderous raid against Kunming, he wondered for a moment what had pushed the enemy to launch such a

massive attack against a base that was basically empty. A bemused look and a hand signal from his chief radar operator four minutes later then made him walk quickly to his radar screen.

“What is it, CPO Kelly?”

“That Air Force F-83 that took off from Da Nang a few minutes ago, sir: it has just broken through Mach 3 and is still accelerating.”

“WHAT? MACH 3 AND ACCELERATING? BUT THAT’S IMPOSSIBLE!”

“I’m sorry, sir, but that is what my radar is saying.”

Still stunned, McCuskey looked at the radar display screen and effectively saw a solitary dot flying West to East that was over three times faster than all the other dots.

“Good God! I will definitely have to visit Da Nang after this to go see that new beast. But, how could the Air Force be so much ahead of us?”

The senior radar operator looked up at him but didn’t reply to that. His brother worked as a Navy medic at the San Diego Naval Hospital and had written him a letter after seeing the fantastic Air Force prototype transport aircraft land vertically besides the hospital in order to bring urgent medical cases. The Navy high brass often took a long time to see what it didn’t want to see.

15:53 (Indochina Time)

Aircraft revetment, main tarmac

Da Nang Air Force Base

“STAND CLEAR OF THE AIRCRAFT!”

Ingrid finished doing her quick pre-flight checklist with Julia while the ground technicians scrambled out of the way, carrying or pulling their equipment so that it would not be sucked up or projected by the two big jet engines of her YF-83A when she would start them up. She gave a thumbs up signal to the two last technicians to stay near, who then injected pressurized air in her inlets from their mobile engine starter units. The two powerful turbofans thankfully started at once, building up power quickly. With the two starter unit trucks scrambling out of the revetment, Ingrid switched on her radio to the frequency of the Da Nang air control tower.

“Lady Hawk to Da Nang Tower, are these two big buggers going to get out of Dodge soon, over?”

“Affirmative, Lady Hawk. They will be next after you to take off.”

“Then tell them to roll on the taxiway as soon as they can! We are about out of time! Also, sound the air raid warning and have all ground personnel except those involved in the air control loop go to the shelters.”

Pushing her throttles forward, Ingrid rolled her plane out of its revetment while eyeing worriedly the two big C-152 heavy jet transport aircraft parked a few hundred meters away. Those two transports would be nothing but fat, juicy targets for Soviet pilots if they stayed on the ground too long. Ingrid then switched to the tactical ground air controller’s frequency and found it alive with distant radio chatter. She had to wait impatiently for a few seconds before she could speak in turn on the radio while rolling towards one end of the main runway.

“Da Nang Control, this is Lady Hawk, on takeoff procedure. What is the latest radar picture you have, over?”

“Lady Hawk, we now have an enemy force totaling 46 aircraft in two waves approaching from the Northeast at a speed of 550 miles and now 33 miles away. Ten enemy bogeys have detached themselves from the enemy package and have engaged the four navy fighters rushing to intercept them. More navy fighters are on the way, while call sign ‘Hell Girl’ just joined the fight. The situation is now quite confused, over.”

“What about the original navy air patrol, Da Nang Control?”

“It appears to have been shot down, Lady Hawk. The enemy raid is flying at 30,000 feet and should be over Da Nang in about four minutes, over.”

“Lady Hawk, understood! I will call back once airborne, out!”

Ingrid barely touched the brakes before wheeling around her aircraft on the main runway and pushed her engines to maximum without taking the time to line up on it. Flipping on both her engine afterburners and her 2D nozzles, she accelerated like a rocket down the runway, pulling on her stick and taking off in less than 500 meters. She climbed at a gentle angle for a few seconds at first, taking on airspeed before going into a much steeper climb and thundering up into the sky, followed by the fascinated eyes of nearly everyone in and around Da Nang. She was about to turn towards the Northeast when the ground air controller came back on the radio, his voice nearly panicky.

“Lady Hawk, this is Da Nang Control! We now have on radar a total of 29 bogeys approaching low from the North at 550 miles per hour, distance, 22 miles.”

Ingrid swore loudly to herself then: the Soviets had devised a crafty attack plan indeed, showing that some true veterans were in charge of that force. She now had no choice

but to hope that the Navy fighters now rushing in could deal with the raiding force from the Northeast with the help of Helen Richey, as she was now obviously the only one who could deal in time with the new threat. She flipped her aircraft over and turned it northward while answering the ground air controller.

“I copy, Da Nang Control! I am turning north now and will do my best. In the meantime, get those transport aircraft off and away now!”

“The first transport is now rolling down the runway, Lady Hawk. Our air defense assets are now ready to engage enemy intruders at will, over.”

“Understood, will call you back later, out!”

Her nose radar picked up the incoming enemy aircraft to the North at once, showing them to fly in two main waves of a dozen aircraft each, preceded by four more aircraft. The four nearest enemy aircraft were now reacting to her.

“Damn, these buggers have radar!” Said Ingrid to Julia as she planned quickly her attack. Time was however very short and she would have no choice but to start with a frontal pass, followed by a hook and a tail approach in order to fire her heat-seeking missiles.

“JULIA, YOU ARE FREE TO TARGET ENEMY PLANES AT WILL WITH YOUR THREE AIM-1B. FIRE WHEN READY!”

“UNDERSTOOD!...FIRING FIRST MISSILE NOW!”

The first radar-guided COBRA missile sped forward ahead of the trail of fire and smoke from its solid rocket motor and flew a thinly curved trajectory before exploding in the sky ahead of their YF-83A. Julia, not wasting time, then immediately fired her second missile. That missile also connected with its target, downing it, but by then the range had become too short to fire Julia’s third radar-guided missile. Flipping her armament selector switch to cannons, Ingrid grimly sped at the lead surviving enemy all-weather fighter, firing her cannons just before the enemy pilot did the same. The Soviet fighter missed her narrowly but she didn’t, putting its left jet engine on fire and then zooming past it on her way to the other Soviet planes following maybe a kilometer behind. The four fighters in the center of the first main wave stayed the course but the two groups of four fighters on the extremities broke off, starting to hook around to catch her into a double pincer. Ingrid steeled herself and bore down on the Soviet aircraft directly facing her.

“Being foxy today, aren’t you? Time to see who is the boss around here. Brace yourself for lots of Gs, Julia.”

15:56 (Indochina time)

Carrier USS MIDWAY

South China Sea, 110 miles East of Da Nang

“Damn, talk about a confusing ballet of fur balls!” Said Commander Elbert McCuskey, Commander Air Group, or CAG in short, as he watched the air radar plot. “How are our pilots doing?”

“Our first fighter squadron is fully engaged now, along with the F-83 from Da Nang, and the second squadron is about to join the fight. The Soviets are fighting hard and seem quite skilled, sir, judging from the remarks by our pilots on the radio.” Answered the air control officer. “We shot down six Soviet fighters up to now but have lost ourselves four more F9Fs on top of Rushmore and Cosgrove, with another F9F damaged and on its way back. Those Soviet fighters have some hard-hitting guns, sir.” A radio operator then shouted to McCuskey, urgency in his voice.

“SIR, DA NANG IS UNDER ATTACK FROM A SECOND ENEMY FORCE OF 29 AIRCRAFT THAT CAME LOW FROM THE NORTH. THE SOLE AIRFORCE FIGHTER AVAILABLE IN DA NANG IS ALREADY ENGAGED AND DA NANG WANTS HELP!”

“HELL!” Exclaimed McCuskey in frustration. “Our own fighters are already heavily engaged or about to be. Can’t their ground air defenses deal with those Soviets?”

The operator spoke in his microphone, then listened on for a few seconds before looking back up at McCuskey, who had approached him.

“Da Nang is receiving bombs right now and its anti-aircraft gunners are swamped. The Airforce F-83A based there is right now alone against 24 opponents and three Soviet jet fighters are chasing after two C-152 transports fleeing towards Saigon.”

“Christ! General Dows had been right after all to ask the TALUGA to delay its arrival in Da Nang harbor: it would have been a sitting duck right now.”

McCuskey was then silent for a few seconds while watched by the waiting radio operator. Washington would be most unhappy if Da Nang ended up badly damaged or destroyed. On the other hand, he was not ready to force his pilots to fight heavily

outnumbered just to lend help to Da Nang. He finally took what was the least painful decision.

“Tell Da Nang that we are sending help right now.”

“Yes sir!”

McCuskey then looked at his air controller.

“Tell our second F9F squadron to divert towards Da Nang at once, then scramble the F3D SKYNIGHT fighters now on catapult alert and have them support our first squadron.”

“But, sir, our SKYNIGHT fighters are too slow and not agile enough for that kind of fight against Migs.” Objected the air controller. “They will be useless in that fight.”

“They have guns, don’t they? They are supposed to be jet fighter aircraft, even if they are obsolete! Launch them!” Replied McCuskey in a tone that precluded arguments. As the chastised air controller obeyed him, McCuskey slammed his fist in frustration against a nearby partition, wondering how costly that day was going to be for his pilots.

15:59 (Indochina time)

Red Star One

Three kilometers north of Da Nang Airbase

Colonel Ivan Kozhedub grimly endured another crushing high speed turn as he tried to keep the demonic American pilot off his tail. Thankfully, his opponent was out of her hellish guided missiles, which had shot down four of the five MIG pilots he had lost in this engagement by now. As he reversed his turn and abruptly powered down his engines in an attempt to make the American overshoot him, Kozhedub had a glance at his fuel gage and swore: he, along with his remaining pilots, would soon have too little fuel left to return to base. In a voice made halting by the G-forces, he then spoke in his radio.

“All Red Star call signs, this is Red Star One: break off combat and return to base at once before running out of fuel. I say again, break off and return to base at once!”

While his warning probably saved many of his remaining pilots from crashing down into the sea later on, that moment of inattention cost him dearly, as a salvo of 76mm rockets bracketed his aircraft. One of them exploded against his tail, shearing off most of his

vertical rudder. With the ground closing in and his aircraft impossible to control, Kozhedub had no choice but to eject out of his doomed MIG-17.

Seeing that singularly tough opponent eject and the other MIG-17s break away and flee, probably for lack of fuel, Ingrid turned her YF-83A towards her airbase at once, mortally worried about her ground personnel. She could see at once that the airbase had not escaped the attack unscathed: the radar station on top of Monkey Mountain that overlooked the base had taken at least one direct bomb hit. A stream of tracers from the slopes of the mountain then forced her to bank her aircraft in a steep turn as she swore on her radio.

“DA NANG CONTROL, TELL THOSE GROUND GUNNERS TO LOOK AT WHOM THEY ARE SHOOTING, DAMMIT!”

“Sorry, Lady Hawk, will pass the word right away.” Replied the contrite voice of the air controller. “The enemy seems to have broken off all attacks at this time, according to visual reports. Our radar is down, however, and a number of installations have suffered bomb or gunfire hits. Are you intact, over?”

“As far as I can tell, yes! Thank God that Soviet jet aircraft have a poor combat autonomy! Did our two transport aircraft escape in time, over?”

“They did, by a hair, Lady Hawk. The navy seems to have lost a number of fighters in the engagement over the sea, over.”

“Advise them that the enemy over Da Nang has turned back towards China and thank them for their support on my behalf, Da Nang Control. Is the main runway operational, over?”

“Affirmative, Lady Hawk.”

“Then call our transports and tell them to return to base. I will fly cover for them in the meantime. Also warn our ground army and marine units to be on the lookout for Soviet pilots who ejected out. One of them ejected over Da Nang harbor. Lady Hawk, out!”

Her next preoccupation was about Julia, who had not spoken on the intercom for a good two minutes.

“Julia? HEY, JULIA?”

“Uuh?” Said weakly Julia after a couple of seconds. “Wha...what happened?”

"I think that you passed out from excessive G forces, Julia. The enemy has now turned back, probably being short on fuel, and we are going to fly cover for a few minutes in order to protect the return of our cargo aircraft. How do you feel?"

"Confused, to say the truth. I may need a minute or two to regain fully my wits."

"Take your time, Julia. I promise you to fly gently for the next minutes."

Ingrid then slowed down to 450 kilometers per hour and did a circuit over the airbase, checking visually for damage. While what she saw made her swear, the truth was that it could have been much worse. Instead of a few buildings hit by bombs and a number of vehicles burning after being strafed, the whole base could have been turned into rubbles if both Soviet attack forces could have freely bombed it. The limited time on target of the few Soviet aircraft to get to Da Nang and their small bomb loads had greatly diminished the punishment Da Nang had received. In this she owed a big one to the Navy fighter pilots. However, she was not going to land until she was positive that the Soviet air threat had disappeared for the moment. She still had two thirds of her internal fuel and of her cannon ammunition, plus maybe twelve 76mm rockets: enough to turn away a few Soviet aircraft if need be.

16:09 (Indochina Time)

South China Sea

Second Lieutenant Harry Cosgrove had been able to watch the ferocious air battle overhead as he floated on the sea atop his tiny inflatable raft. He had seen a good twenty planes fall from the sky, plus many parachutes deploy, without being able to say which ones were Soviet or American. The last parachute he had seen had actually fallen less than 300 meters away and he was now rowing hard with his hands to get close to it and help the other pilot. The thought that the said pilot may not be American did not cross his mind until he was able to see that pilot. His astonishment at seeing that it was a woman was replaced by caution on seeing her foreign uniform. After a moment of hesitation, he however decided to go help her anyway and resumed his rowing, but with his pistol held in his mouth, pirate-style. The young woman, floating on the surface with the help of her orange life vest, watched him approach with evident worry, something that Cosgrove could understand. Just before he got to her, Cosgrove stopped rowing for a moment and, grabbing his pistol, spoke to her in English.

"Can you understand me?"

"Yes!"

"Excellent! Look, I don't want to hurt you, miss. I already switched on my distress signal transmitter and an helicopter or ship should be coming to pick me up in a few hours at most. Resisting would be futile. Are you armed?"

"Yes!"

"Then, either give me your weapon or throw it in the sea, miss."

After a short hesitation, the young woman raised a pistol out of the water, showing it to Cosgrove before throwing it away and making it sink to the bottom. Now reassured, Cosgrove holstered back his own pistol and rowed to her, finally grabbing the handle at the back of the collar of her life vest and pulling her close.

"I am sorry, miss, but my raft is too small to support two persons. By the way, I am Second Lieutenant Harry Cosgrove."

"And I am Captain Lydia Litvyak."

Not knowing what to say to an enemy female pilot, Cosgrove finally decided to keep to mundane talk.

"I have a chocolate bar on me. Do you want it, Captain Litvyak?"

"Please!"

As the young blonde was savoring the chocolate bar, Cosgrove discreetly admired her. With her curly blond hair, her blue eyes and her high cheekbones, the Soviet woman had an exotic beauty to her. She didn't seem to be very tall, though.

"Just before this dogfight, me and my wingman were dreaming of going to the beach to admire girls there. I suppose that this is not exactly what I had in mind as a nice dip."

Litvyak smiled in amusement at that but didn't reply. One hour later, an helicopter from the USS MIDWAY showed up to fish them out of the water.

16:28 (Indochina time)

Da Nang Airbase

Senior Airman Denise Bateman was waiting with her jeep besides the aircraft revetment when Ingrid climbed down from the cockpit of her YF-83A with Julia. After collecting her gun camera film and giving a few directives to her ground crew, which had survived the air attack unscathed, Ingrid walked to Bateman and her jeep. Returning her salute, Ingrid then sat in the jeep with Julia and pointed a finger.

“We are going to the joint task force headquarters building.”

Bateman didn't reply, simply driving her jeep away from the revetment. Ingrid used the drive to the air ops building to inspect from up close the damage done to her airbase. Unfortunately, the damage had not been done only to buildings or equipment. An ambulance with sirens on sped past her jeep, heading towards the field hospital set up near the coast, south of the city of Da Nang. Ingrid also saw a team of soldiers pulling out bodies from a half destroyed barrack. Ingrid made Bateman stop her jeep, then reverse it back to the barrack to let her jump out once there. She quickly waved the soldiers to refrain from saluting her.

“Forget that stuff and keep pulling these poor buggers out! Are there any survivors from this bomb strike?”

The Air Force Corps of Engineers technical sergeant leading the rescue team shook his head sadly.

“We pulled out two wounded men out a few minutes ago, General. Those are already on their way to the hospital. After that, we found only bodies. We have seven dead men confirmed up to now, with maybe another four or five bodies still under the debris.”

Ingrid looked at the row of bodies lying a few yards away, then shook her head angrily.

“The air raid warning had been given well before the bombs started falling, Sergeant. Why were these men still inside that barrack instead of inside shelters or trenches?”

“We are not sure, General.” Replied hesitantly the sergeant. “They didn't have trenches dug near their barrack anyway.”

Ingrid gave a hard look at the engineer sergeant: the man wore the same shoulder patches than the dead men nearby.

“Were these your men in this barrack, Sergeant?”

“Uh, yes General.”

“AND YOU DIDN'T HAVE THEM DIG PROTECTIVE TRENCHES NEARBY, AS DIRECTED BY ME TO ALL ON THIS BASE? WHY?”

“General, we got no such directive from Colonel Evans.” Stuttered the NCO. That only made Ingrid angrier.

“And not getting directives was reason enough to let these men hide inside a wooden barrack during an air raid, Sergeant?” Shot back Ingrid. She then memorized the name of that NCO, reading it on his uniform's nametag.

“Resume your search for the moment, Sergeant Dexter. We will talk about this later.”

Getting back in her jeep, Ingrid signaled Bateman to drive on before speaking through clenched teeth.

“Up to twelve men dead because of stupidity and negligence! Damn!”

She didn't speak again during the rest of the trip to the headquarters building. Jumping out with Julia once the jeep was parked, Ingrid stormed inside the building and went directly to the ops center, where she found her staff at their post under the command of Mary Hiller. The chief of staff gave her a sad smile when she entered the ops center.

“Nice to see you alive and well, General. Colonel Richey should be landing back soon. I have compiled a preliminary list of losses and damage. It is by no means a definite one, however.”

Ingrid took the sheet of paper presented to her, then gave to Mary her gun camera film.

“Here is my latest gun camera film. Could you have it developed right away?”

“Will do, General!” Replied Hiller, who then walked away towards the air photo lab. Ingrid then took the time to read the list of casualties and losses: at least 21 of her people were dead, with another 26 wounded. Her long range radar was damaged and down and a number of barracks and hangars had been hit. One of the big fuel reservoirs of the base's fuel dump had been destroyed as well by a direct bomb hit but, being brand new and empty, no fire had resulted from that. If it had been full, her whole fuel depot could have been destroyed. That point made her scribble a note at the bottom of the report. She then went to the adjacent secure communications room and grabbed her signals officer, Major Jennifer Watson.

“Major, I will need you to send a few short but urgent messages. Get a message pad!”

“I'm ready to write them down.” Said Watson after grabbing a clipboard with a few message forms on it. “Go ahead, General.”

“First, I will need the navy tanker TALUGA to come to Da Nang harbor and start as soon as possible to transfer its cargo of aviation fuel into our fuel tank park. I believe that the enemy will not try an attack again until at least tomorrow morning. We should use that time wisely. Next is a formal and urgent request to ask the Pentagon to ship all the available AIM-1 COBRA air-to-air missiles in stock in the United States to Da Nang.

Third, inform the 99th Wing in Clark AFB that my main ground radar station is damaged and down and that I will need EC-200Rs to institute a round the clock radar aerial watch over Da Nang. Draft those messages and then bring them to me for review and approval.”

“Yes, General!”

Ingrid next grabbed a telephone set and called Colonel Victor Krulak, at the camp of the 1st Marine Brigade, located to the southwest of the airfield. She spent a few minutes informing him of what had happened in and over Da Nang and then asked for the help of his Marines in rounding up the Soviet pilots that had parachuted out in the area. Krulak was too happy to oblige her, as his men had not had a chance yet to see combat. Ingrid completed her call by telling Krulak to show up for a command meeting at eight in the evening. Once done with Krulak, Ingrid stuck her head out of the secure communications room long enough to shout at Mary Hiller, standing near the situation board in the ops room.

“COLONEL HILLER, ADVISE ALL THE HEADS OF JTF UNITS AND OF RESIDENT UNITS ON BASE THAT THERE WILL BE A COMMAND MEETING HERE AT EIGHT O’CLOCK TONIGHT. THE VARIOUS LIAISON OFFICERS AND THE PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICER WILL ALSO HAVE TO BE PRESENT.”

“I will pass the word, General.” Replied Hiller at once. She was already heading to a telephone when Ingrid closed the door of the communications room behind her and went to a work table. Grabbing a message forms pad, she then started writing a short but concise message to the units of her wing dispersed around the Pacific and waiting to join her in Da Nang. Putting the Pentagon as information addressee as well and labeling her message both ‘Secret’ and ‘Immediate’ and signing it, she then handed her message to Major Watson, for immediate encryption and sending. A mighty growl from Ingrid’s stomach as she gave her message to Watson made the signals officer smile.

“I believe that it is supper time, General.”

“Right! Please send this first, though, Major.”

“It will be out in less than thirty minutes, General.” Promised Watson. “Here are the drafts you wanted.”

“Excellent!”

Ingrid took the time to review the drafts, having to do only minor modifications to them before signing them and giving them back to Watson.

“You can now send them, Major. I will be at the Officers’ Mess, if someone asks for me.”

20:01 (Indochina time)

Conference room, Joint Task Force - Indochina headquarters building

Da Nang Airbase

“ROOM!”

“At ease, please.” Said Ingrid, entering the conference room of the headquarters building with a writing pad and a few files in her left hand. She had taken the time for a good shower and had changed into a summer dress uniform, with a black leather gun belt around her waist. Most of the other participants to the meeting were in combat or work dress uniform. Taking her seat at the head of the table, she looked around her, seeing who was or was not there. One officer notable by his absence was Colonel Evans, who had apparently sent a major to represent him. Hiding her irritation, Ingrid took a pen and her pad and looked first at Peter Shmelling.

“Let’s start with a review of the damages and losses to this base. Each group and unit commander will report in turn. Colonel Shmelling?”

Shmelling, who had been a very busy man in the last few hours, nodded once and read out loud from a sheet of paper, with Ingrid noting down the important points.

“In terms of personnel casualties to the base’s support group and resident units, we suffered three dead and two wounded, all except one from the radar squadron. The wounded are being treated at our field hospital. Our early warning long range radar is damaged and down for repairs. We however need to fly in some vital spares from the Philippines. Once we have them, the long range radar should be repaired in a day. I already radioed for the spares. Our hangar number two was heavily damaged and two barracks were also hit by bombs. One of our aviation fuel reservoirs was hit and destroyed but with no effective impact on us, since it was empty. Thankfully, our runways and taxiways were not touched and are still fully operational.”

Ingrid nodded, writing notes down, then looked at Lieutenant Colonel Sally Nolan.

“Wing Airfield Support Group?”

“My group suffered five people killed and eight others wounded from various bomb hits around the base. A total of nine ground service vehicles were destroyed and three more damaged. Fortunately, all of my units are still able to operate and provide

essential services. My civil engineering squadron will however be busy for a while replacing blown window panes around the base.”

“Windows will have to wait.” Replied Ingrid. “Apart from repairing the two barracks and the hangar that were bombed, I will need an alternate emergency fuel depot to be dug, so that we could store barrels of aviation and other fuel under some protection in case our main fuel depot is hit...again.”

“Noted, General.” Said the Texan woman. “When could we hope to have the USS TALUGA in port, so that we could get some aviation kerosene at last?”

“The TALUGA and its escorts should make port in about two hours, Colonel.” Answered Lieutenant Commander Jones, the Navy liaison officer. “Another two to three hours and it will be starting to pump kerosene in the base fuel reservoirs. Pumping out the whole cargo will however take more than a day.”

“We will give it all the protection we can.” Promised Ingrid. “Sally, I want our fuel specialists ready to pump out that fuel the minute that the TALUGA is moored at the pipeline terminal. They may have to work double shifts but we need that fuel quickly and we certainly don’t want that tanker ship to run unnecessary risks. For everybody’s information, I sent out before supper a message to the flying units of our wing, telling them what our situation was and ordering a few elements to fly in as soon as possible. Those elements will consist in a flight of YF-83A fighters, four KC-200 air tankers, two C-10 combat search and rescue transports and our air ambulance jet. Which brings me to our medical support group. Colonel Brooks...”

The task force’s chief surgeon nodded grimly, then read from a list on the table in front of him.

“My field hospital, the part that is operational that is, was not hit in the enemy air attack. We suffered no casualties or damage. We have received as at half an hour ago a total of 45 wounded, including one Soviet pilot that broke a leg after parachuting over the harbor area and landing hard on a concrete quay. Five of these wounded are still considered critical intensive care patients.”

Ingrid was as surprised as she was saddened by the number of wounded suffered.

“Wait a minute! Where did all those extra wounded come from?”

“They are our men, Colonel.” Cut in the major from the Air Force construction unit. “We lost a total of 21 soldiers killed and 33 more wounded during the attack. They, uh, were caught in their barracks during the enemy raid.”

The other officers around the table looked at the major with as much shock and incomprehension as Ingrid did.

“What the hell were they doing inside their barracks at that time of the afternoon and why didn’t they jump into protective trenches, Major?” Asked pointedly Peter Shmelling. “The directives concerning enemy air raids were sent by me to all the units on this base.”

“These men were junior ranks, many of them draftees.” Explained the major, none too sure of himself. “They had finished their day’s work and were washing and changing before going to eat supper when the air raid sirens sounded. There were no trenches near their barracks and, not knowing better, thought probably that they were as safe as anywhere else in their barracks. This was all unfortunate but...”

“Unfortunate?” Cut Ingrid in an icy voice. “How about criminally negligent, Major? Orders had been given to dig trenches near every occupied building on base. I earlier encountered a sergeant from your unit digging through the remains of a barrack and who told me that he and his men didn’t get my orders from his officers. We are talking here about men dying unnecessarily because of negligence. Can you tell me where Colonel Evans is, Major?”

“To be frank, I don’t know, Colonel. He told me to attend this meeting in his place and that’s what I did. I am sorry, Colonel, but Colonel Evans is not obliged to tell me what he is doing at any given time.”

Ingrid, now nearly livid with rage, shot up from her chair, staring down at the major from the construction unit.

“Maybe not, but he is obliged to explain this fiasco to me, Major. Those men died because someone either neglected or refused to pass on directives from me. Major Woolmak!”

“Yes, General?” Answered the commander of the security police squadron, a stern, no-nonsense officer.

“Once this meeting is over, I want you to start a formal investigation on this matter. I want to know who in the 209th Construction Battalion didn’t pass my directives about digging trenches and why. I also want you to find Colonel Evans and to then put him under arrest for dereliction of duty, criminal negligence, insubordination and for being absent without leave during combat.”

Still furious, Ingrid stared for a few more seconds at the major from the construction battalion, then looked around at the other officers sitting at the conference table.

"Today's enemy air raid should be proof enough to anyone that this base is part of the frontlines of a very real war. I will not tolerate that my directives be ignored by anyone on this base or from units of my joint task force."

She then sat down and looked at her chief surgeon.

"I will go visit our wounded at the hospital afterwards, Doctor. Do you have an armed guard watching that Soviet pilot?"

"Two armed policemen are staying with him at all times, Colonel. He has however shown no hostile intentions or resistance and is hardly in a state to escape."

"Alright, I will visit him as well. As soon as our air ambulance jet arrives, you will be free to evacuate the most seriously wounded cases to Clark Airbase in the Philippines."

"That will help, as my facilities are still limited, like my personnel."

"I will do my best to help you, Doctor. Colonel Krulak, did your unit or camp suffer any casualties or damages from the Soviet air raid?"

"None, General. My camp was not targeted at all by the Soviets."

"Thank God! And how did your hunt for downed Soviet pilots go?"

"It was actually very good training for my Marines, General, as some of those Soviet pilots tried to give us the slip by hiding in the jungle or in houses and huts around Da Nang. None of them were however stupid enough to resist once found. We captured a total of seven Soviet aviators, including a woman, while the Navy informed me that they fished out of the ocean two more Soviets, including one woman, while searching for its downed pilots. Those two Soviets will be flown in by helicopter from the USS MIDWAY tomorrow. The Soviets we have right now are under guard at my brigade's camp, except for that wounded Soviet in hospital."

Krulak's answer made Ingrid look back at Lieutenant Commander Jones, the Navy liaison officer.

"What was the cost of this air battle to the Navy, Commander Jones?"

"The latest info I got was that the MIDWAY lost seven F9F fighters in combat, plus had another two damaged. Six pilots are still missing and presumed killed in action, while another pilot was wounded and is being treated aboard the MIDWAY, General. This was a hard fight indeed."

"Indeed! The way those Soviets tricked us into an ambush via a diversionary attack shows us that they are no amateurs. Our worse mistake would be to underestimate them. May this be a lesson for all of us."

It took another fifteen minutes for Ingrid to finish collecting from the officers present the information needed for a consolidated situation report that could be sent later on to Washington. Looking briefly back at her notes, she then gave her guiding directives.

“Ladies and gentlemen, most of our aircraft may not be here yet but some will start arriving very soon. This base must be fully ready to accommodate and support them. With the fuel we will receive tonight and the aviation ordnance that will follow the next day, a big step will have been taken. However, I will not consider this base truly ready for war until certain deficiencies in defensive measures are corrected. All units who have not yet dug protective trenches near their installations or barracks will do so at once. If I find that anyone has refused or neglected to follow that order by tomorrow at five in the afternoon, then that someone will find himself or herself under arrest for insubordination in a time of war. I also asked yesterday to take the necessary measures to implement a base-wide blackout policy at night. I understand that time may have been short to implement this, so I will extend a grace period until tomorrow evening, so that corrective measures can be taken. Past that grace period, the base security police will start enforcing the blackout and will report the violations to me. All buildings must be darkened at night and the street lights will be kept off. The runway and taxiway lights will be on solely when needed. Vehicles will however be allowed to use their headlights in order to avoid accidents. The only buildings that will be allowed to use outside lights will be the entrance gates and the main perimeter bunkers, for reasons of security and defense against intruders and prowlers. As for personnel security, all personnel will routinely carry weapons around the base. Any personnel having to leave base for duty reasons WILL be armed. Those who leave base for personal relaxation purpose, like shopping or drinking trips to the town of Da Nang after duty hours, will have to register their names, unit and serial number with the policemen manning the main gates when leaving. They will then have to register back in on their return on base. Unexplained or unjustified absences of more than 24 hours will be investigated by the security police. I want all of you to explain clearly to your personnel that there is a very real and serious threat of Vietminh guerrilla activity around this base and this whole area of Vietnam, be it espionage, sabotage or assassination. This whole area of Central Vietnam has in fact been a Vietminh stronghold for quite a while. Don't let the apparent quiet around us fool you. Be courteous and polite with the local people but be on your guard and don't

answer questions concerning operational matters, however innocent the question may sound or beautiful the girl asking the question may be. Also, don't discuss classified or sensitive matters between yourselves in public: the walls HAVE ears around town. As for reporters, if asked questions by them, refer them to our public affairs officer, Major Marion Dietrich, who will be more than pleased to handle them."

All eyes temporarily went to Marion Dietrich, a brunette of great beauty with striking eyes and who had a degree in journalism but had also a passion for aviation. She used that opportunity to ask a question of her own.

"General, what am I allowed to say about our recent air operations? News of us striking deep in China are liable to create quite a sensation in the medias."

"Our operations inside China will not be disclosed...for the moment. You can give general details about our air operations over Indochina and about hostile enemy moves, like the attempted bombing of Haiphong and the attack against this base. You can also mention the fact that so-called volunteer Soviet pilots flying Soviet-made planes performed those attacks and that some of those Soviet pilots have been captured. If asked about the operational capabilities of either this base or of our planes, respond that these are classified matters. What you can say about my plane is that it is a F-83 EAGLE, is a supersonic fighter and is armed with guns and missiles."

"What about answers concerning you or your air victory score, General?"

"You can use my official résumé concerning me, Major. As for my score, can the wing air ops confirm what the official verdict was on today's air combat?"

Lieutenant Colonel Elizabeth Whitlow nodded her head once and looked at her notepad.

"We can, General. While you claimed eight aircraft destroyed and one damaged, we could confirm on the strength of your gun camera six of them as destroyed, with three others damaged. Once we find and account for the Soviet wrecks, that score may go up. The base air gunners have also shot down one confirmed Soviet Mig fighter and one Ilyushin 28 medium bomber. The Navy has on its part claimed twelve Migs destroyed in air combat."

Ingrid nodded at that and returned her gaze on her PAO.

"Major Dietrich, you may tell reporters that we suffered casualties during today's attack, along with some damage, but do not disclose the exact numbers nor the units the casualties belong to. Do not, and I say again, do not disclose the fact that our ground radar is down. If anyone leaks that out, I will have him or her court-martialed!"

"Understood, General."

“Well, if there are no more questions, I will declare this meeting over.” Said Ingrid while getting up. “Please make sure that all of your personnel are informed of the points concerning security. Have a good evening, ladies and gentlemen.”

The officers got up and stood at attention while Ingrid walked out of the room, then started to leave themselves while exchanging comments and information.

Once out of the conference room, Ingrid went to her office, where Senior Airman Denise Bateman was waiting for her, finding her reading with great interest the book on Nancy Laplante that Ingrid had written years ago along with her own biography as a female fighter pilot during World War Two. Bateman looked up from the book when Ingrid entered the office and smiled to her.

“That book is really fascinating, General. Can I borrow it?”

“Sure! I have a few extra copies with me anyway...which makes me think...”

Searching in a drawer of her work desk, Ingrid took out an extra copy of the book Bateman held, plus a copy of her autobiography as a fighter pilot. Armed with both books, she then signaled her driver to follow her.

“Time to visit our wounded at the field hospital, Senior Airman.”

“Yes, General!”

Bringing her new book with her, Bateman walked out with Ingrid to her jeep and jumped behind the wheel. She knew better by now than to open Ingrid’s door for her, having been told by Ingrid that she could manage that quite by herself despite what protocol said. Taking the main base street southward, she drove to the base’s south gate, stopping there long enough for Ingrid to tell the Air Force policemen on duty where she was going. They then drove across the bridge over the Cau Do River, turning left once on the other side and driving towards the nearby coast. They crossed over two more small bridges before arriving at the 405th Field Hospital. The Marines guarding the main perimeter gate of the hospital quickly let them in and Bateman soon parked her jeep near the reception tent of the hospital complex. Ingrid jumped out at once and, followed by her driver, entered the reception tent. The duty nurse manning the reception table inside quickly got up on seeing Ingrid. The latter preempted the nurse before she could speak.

“I am here to visit our wounded, Lieutenant, quietly. No need for any protocol: I am sure that the doctors and nurses are busy enough as it is.”

“Uh, as you wish, General.”

Passing by the reception table and going through the triage area, which was deserted at the time, Ingrid ended up in a long, narrow modular tent that served as a kind of circulation hub for the field hospital. Luckily, there were signs prominently displayed indicating where the various sections of the hospital were. Passing by the treatment and dressing rooms, Ingrid then entered the first patients ward she encountered, which was reserved for female patients. They found five female patients in that ward, one of which had lost a leg. Seeing that the unfortunate woman, who seemed to have also received extensive burns, was unconscious, Ingrid simply stood by her bed for a few seconds. She read her name and rank on the treatment chart hooked to the foot of her bed.

“Senior Airman Janice Hoover...”

Ingrid felt sorrow for the young woman, who was probably going to end up covered with ugly scars for the rest of her life. Denise Bateman became confused when she saw Ingrid look at her hands before looking up, as if doing a silent prayer. She could not however hear the powerful voice that resonated then inside Ingrid’s head, nor could others nearby do.

“THE TIME HAS NOT COME TO SHOW YOURSELF AS A CHOSEN, AMDIRA. YOUR TRUE DESTINY IS STILL MANY YEARS IN THE FUTURE.”

“But,” thought Ingrid in response to The One, “I could stop so much suffering right now.”

“THE SUFFERING YOU SEE NOW IS NOTHING COMPARED TO THE ONE THAT YOU WILL LATER BE ABLE TO PREVENT BY FOLLOWING YOUR DESTINY. THIS IS UNFORTUNATELY NOT THE FIRST NOR THE LAST WAR TO AFFLICT HUMANITY. YOU WILL HAVE TO KILL AGAIN MANY TIMES, BY NECESSITY OR WHILE DOING YOUR DUTY. IN THIS YOU ARE FORGIVEN IN ADVANCE. IF YOU WANT TO USE YOUR POWERS, THEN DO IT DISCREETLY, IN A MANNER THAT WILL NOT DERAIL YOUR DESTINY.”

“I...I understand, Great One.” Replied Ingrid mentally, tears on her cheeks.

Leaving the female ward, Ingrid moved to the next ward, which was occupied to capacity by male patients. She intercepted a male orderly coming out of the ward then.

“Excuse me, Corporal. Could you quickly check inside the ward if the patients are decent enough for me to walk in for a visit?”

“Right away, General.” Said quietly the orderly before disappearing inside for a minute. He then returned and held the swinging door open for her.

“You may go in, General.”

“Thank you, Corporal.” Said Ingrid, who then entered the ward, still followed by Bateman. The 24 beds inside the ward were all occupied, with some patients asleep or unconscious while most others were awake. Many were obviously in great pain and quite a few had one or more limbs amputated. Six nurses and two doctors were busy at the time taking care of the wounded. Bateman paled at that sight.

“Dear God!” She whispered. Ingrid walked slowly between the two rows of beds, examining each patient in turn and trying to encourage them with a kind smile and a few soft words.

Finishing the tour of that ward, they then moved to another ward next door. That one was nearly full as well. Ingrid took a good twenty minutes touring it, speaking with the wounded that were conscious and doing her best to raise their spirits. She was about to leave that ward with Bateman when she nearly collided with a small nurse wearing the ranks of an army major entering the ward at that time. Both women stared at each other for a second, then squealed with delight and threw themselves in each other’s arms, watched by a surprised Denise Bateman.

“Juanita! My God, I didn’t know that you were here!”

“I have been here for a week now, Ingrid. Hell, it’s nice to see you again!”

Ingrid then looked at Bateman to explain herself.

“Senior Airman, this is Major Juanita Redmond, a nurse I met in the Philippines in 1941. I met her again in Korea.”

“And she saved my bacon there!” Added Juanita, a beautiful Latino woman in her early thirties. “Saved me and another nurse from a bunch of North Korean soldiers who had captured us.”

“Do you know where Eunice Hatchitt went after the Korean War, Juanita?”

“I sure do.” Replied Redmond, a wide grin on her face. “She’s here with me. Got her major’s bars too in the meantime.”

“Oooh, you must show me to her!” Said Ingrid enthusiastically, happy at meeting old friends.

“She’s taking care of a Soviet pilot in a separate ward. I will show you to her.”

Ingrid eagerly followed Juanita out of the ward and into the next ward, which was empty except for one of the beds. A man in his mid thirties wearing a big cast on his right leg and a bandage on his head lay in that bed, attended by a tall nurse and watched closely

by two armed policemen. On seeing Ingrid, the nurse jumped out of her chair and ran to her, hugging her.

“Ingrid, I’m so happy to see you! How are you?”

“I’m still the top ace in the Air Force and I still fly, so everything is just spiffy, Eunice. And you? Are you married?”

“Not yet.” Answered the athletic nurse, who stood as tall as Ingrid. “Your example pushed me into soldiering on. Now, I am in my third war, like you and Juanita.”

“Damn, we will have to celebrate this reunion sometimes soon.” Said Ingrid, smiling to both Eunice and Juanita. She then regained her seriousness and looked at the enemy pilot, who was watching them with curiosity. “How is our prisoner doing?”

“Broken right leg and a bad bump to the head.” Answered Eunice. “Communicating with him is not very easy: he doesn’t speak any English. He is however cooperative enough when it comes to behaving.”

“Do we have his name and rank?”

“That we got: an orderly who speaks French was able to ask him that. He is supposedly a colonel and his name is Kozhedub, Ivan Kozhedub.”

“KOZHEDUB? IVAN THE TERRIBLE?” Nearly shouted Ingrid from the surprise, making the prisoner snap his head at her. “Hell, he’s the top Soviet air ace of World War Two! No wonder I had a tough time shooting him down. Is he in good shape enough to speak at length? I would like to talk with him?”

Hatchitt gave her a funny look then.

“Well, he is able to keep a conversation, but how are you going to talk to him? He doesn’t speak English and speaks only a very limited French.”

“That’s not a problem, Eunice. If you will excuse me, I will go talk shop with my opposite number.”

Watched by the two curious nurses, Ingrid approached Kozhedub’s bed, stopping just besides it, and offered her hand as she spoke in fluent Russian.

“Good evening, Colonel Kozhedub. I am Major General Ingrid Dows, commander of the United States Joint Task Force - Indochina. I believe that we met earlier today, in the air.”

Kozhedub smiled and shook her hand with little hesitation.

“You speak a very good Russian, General.”

Ingrid sat down beside him as the two Air Force policemen present looked at each other with a mix of surprise and confusion.

"You proved to be a tough opponent in the air, Colonel."

"I could say the same about you, General." Replied Kozhedub, disarmed by her warmth. "To be frank, I thought that your reputation as a fighter pilot was overblown but I have to recognize that you amply proved your skill in air combat today. Mind you, yours must be the Devil's plane, truly."

"I consider it the finest fighter aircraft in service right now, Colonel, without exaggeration. I must say that your own new Mig is quite a good machine, with hard-hitting cannons and good agility. A radar would improve it a lot, though."

"True!" Said cautiously Kozhedub, not wanting to give away secrets through careless talking. He then tried in his own way to get information from her. "How did you manage to turn so tight, though? I nearly passed out from the G-forces during our dogfight."

Ingrid bent over him and answered in a near whisper, her smiling face close to his face.

"Would you believe it if I said that medical tests showed us that women have a higher resistance to G-forces than men do?"

"You're pulling my leg!" Protested Kozhedub, expecting everything but that answer.

"I'm serious! Do you think that the old chauvinists in the Pentagon accepted the results of those tests easily? On the other hand, your country at least had the merit of recognizing earlier than us that women could participate in combat. You have no ideas how many ridiculous regulations and preconceived opinions I had to battle as a woman to become and then stay a fighter pilot."

Their conversation went on in a friendly matter for a few more minutes, centered mainly about flying in general and the joy of piloting in particular. Ingrid finally shook hands again with Kozhedub while getting up from her chair.

"Well, I have to leave now, as I am a busy person. You will probably be evacuated on a medical flight soon. Don't worry about being brutalized: we don't do that sort of things. Besides, I wouldn't condone such acts."

"You are certainly an adversary that I can respect, General." Said Kozhedub, sincere. "What will be my official status, though? Our two countries are not officially at war right now, so I can't be truly called a prisoner of war."

Ingrid nodded her head slowly, realizing that Kozhedub was right.

“Colonel Kozhedub, you fought openly while wearing a military uniform and you didn’t commit any war crime. You are thus fully entitled to the protection of the Geneva Conventions, regardless of what you may be called. I just hope that your own people will return the favor to me if I or one of my pilots ever get shot down and captured.”

“I hope that too, General.” Said quietly Kozhedub, not wanting to think of what treatment that beautiful young woman would probably get if captured during this conflict.

Leaving Kozhedub alone with his guards, Ingrid then returned to Denise Bateman, who had been watching the friendly conversation with growing bemusement. Ingrid saw her expression and eyed her squarely.

“Senior Airman Bateman, if there is something I learned during my previous wars, it was that every bit of humanity you could encourage in a war is priceless. We may have been shooting at each other hours ago but that doesn’t make that man a monster.”

“But, General, we just visited all the young men the Soviets wounded and maimed today, Soviets led by that man.”

Ingrid sighed and lowered her eyes, sadness on her face, while putting a hand on Bateman’s shoulder.

“Denise, I myself maimed or killed hundreds of Soviet airmen and ground crews early this morning, when I struck Kunming Airfield. Does it make a monster out of me? No! I am a soldier and so is Colonel Kozhedub. We both do our duty to our respective countries. The ones who should be called monsters are the politicians who cause the wars by their ambitions.”

It was Bateman’s turn to lower her eyes.

“I...I never thought of this in those terms, General. I’m sorry if I thought bad of you for a moment.”

“Forget it, Denise.” Said softly Ingrid. “You are new at this game but the reality will sink in fast enough. Just do your job the best you can and pray for a quick end to the war. Let’s go back to base now: I need to go to my quarters and get some sleep.”

09:28 (Indochina Time)

Monday, December 22, 1952 ‘C’

Joint Task Force – Indochina operations center

Da Nang AFB

Ingrid, having been relieved by Helen Richey from her cockpit alert status after sitting her first four hours of the day inside her plane with Julia, entered the operations center only to see Jenny Kawena come to her with a document in her hands and a preoccupied look on her face.

"General, I believe that our EC-200R orbiting over us since last night has detected something serious."

Ingrid immediately gave Jenny her full attention: the Japanese-Hawaiian was a very competent intelligence officer with a lot of combat experience. If something worried her, then it was prudent to listen to her.

"I'm all ears, Jenny."

"Well, even if the air activity over Indochina was very sparse after yesterday's Soviet attack on our base, the electronic warfare operators aboard our EC-200R have detected and triangulated by radio what appears to be a number of enemy communications nets active during the night. Two of these nets, along with a number of subordinate stations which spoke in Vietnamese, were possibly Vietminh radio stations and were located inside Vietnam. Our operators are presently analyzing the recordings of those intercepts."

"This is quite interesting, Jenny. Keep me posted on those Vietminh nets. What else?"

"Something possibly a lot more sinister, General. I will show you what we got on the tactical map."

Ingrid followed Jenny to the large map of Indochina and its various borders, on which a number of red symbols had been added. Jenny pointed in succession four different locations, all widely separate but also all inside China, close to the Vietnamese border. Each location was marked with three red symbols and was situated along one of the rare roads in China that entered Northern Vietnam.

"Each of those four locations seem to shelter both Soviet and Chinese units, each nationality using a distinct radio net. According to the types of radios used and their call signs, these nets are probably of high level, either brigade, division or even army corps level. The radar symbols denote the presence in these four locations of anti-aircraft units equipped with FIRE CAN fire control radars. We are thus looking at guns with calibers of 37mm, 57mm or 85mm defending those locations."

Ingrid looked at Jenny with gravity, now very worried.

"Such groupings of Soviet and Chinese units in locations so close to the Vietnamese border and protected by anti-aircraft batteries can only mean one thing, Jenny."

"A combined Sino-Soviet invasion force ready to enter Vietnam, General." Completed Jenny. "For the moment, this is only conjectures based on unconfirmed information, but I could swear that this is what we are looking at."

"That would certainly explain why the Soviet Air Force has started four days ago an intensive air campaign against the French forces in Vietnam. The Soviets probably want to soften up the French forces before those invasion units go on the move."

"And Christmas is in three days, General: a perfect timing to catch the French off balance."

Ingrid swore on hearing that.

"Fuck! You're right! That won't bother the Soviets, though: their Christmas fall on January the sixth according to the Christian Orthodox calendar. Jenny, we will need to do some serious but discreet reconnaissance of those four locations, and quickly! Have medium altitude flight profiles for photo-reconnaissance runs planned for me. Make sure as well that we can cover wide areas, in order not to miss anything."

Ingrid then turned towards Elizabeth Whitlow, her air operations officer.

"COLONEL WHITLOW, HAVE MY PLANE FITTED WITH A PHOTO-RECONNAISSANCE POD IMMEDIATELY. I WILL TAKE ONLY MY GUNS, ROCKETS AND FOUR AIM-1As AS ARMAMENT."

"UNDERSTOOD, GENERAL!"

Ingrid then returned her attention to Jenny.

"Jenny, advise our EC-200R that I am going to take air photos of those four location from medium altitude. Have it ready to jam the enemy radars but also to intercept and triangulate any new enemy transmissions that my flight may trigger. With luck, this could help us complete our findings about those radio nets. In the meantime, I will go get Julia, so that we could both study the maps of those four areas."

"My specialists will be ready, General." Promised Jenny.

10:22 (Indochina Time)

Main tarmac, Da Nang AFB

Two big, solid Air Force police women took charge of Lydia Litvyak as soon as she stepped out of the Navy helicopter that had brought her from the carrier USS MIDWAY, while two policemen grabbed the male Soviet pilot that had traveled with Lydia. The latter was put in the back of a separate jeep from that of the Soviet man, with her hands cuffed in her back and with one female MP sitting beside her and keeping a close watch on her. As the jeep started to roll and take speed, Lydia contemplated her future, which was now quite bleak for many reasons. She was not expecting to be brutalized by the Americans, but she loved freedom and wide spaces, something that flying provided her aplenty. What worried her the most, however, was what would happen to her once this war was over and she would be returned to the USSR. She had seen what had happened to the pilots unlucky enough to have been captured by the Americans during the Korean War. Those pilots had been accused of defeatism, or even of treason, by the NKVD, the Soviet secret police. Most had been sent to work camps in Siberia, while a few had been executed, supposedly to motivate the other pilots to fight to the end in the next war. At the least, her career as a pilot was probably finished in the USSR. Lydia could nearly cry tears of impotence and frustration right now at her bad luck.

The noise of powerful jet engines approaching in the sky made Lydia look up, while the MP driver slowed down and pulled off the road to stop and look up as well with the other MPs. Expecting to see the devilish secret fighter-bomber that had murdered her squadron in the air and had shot her down with one of its guided missiles, Lydia was shocked to see not one, but about thirty of the new American fighter, approaching at medium altitude and escorting thirty more planes of various types, each one more fantastic than the other. Her stunned expression as she watched the powerful American air armada prepare to land made the female MP guarding her smile.

“If you commies thought that you had problems with General Dows, then you should get the hell out and return home as fast as possible...before you get your asses booted all the way back to Moscow.”

Lydia was tempted to reply to the MP but didn't, for the good reason that she had been right.

In the town of Da Nang, young Dinh Thi Hoa, who had no customers at this hour, watched the air armada land from the balcony of her room in the bordello, noting

discreetly on a piece of paper the number of planes and their general type and shape. Justly convinced that this constituted prime information that had to be sent as quickly as possible, she then went to see her madam, who in turn sent her talk to the radio operator of their clandestine transmitter, a man that was officially an assistant cook. One hour later, the radio operator discreetly told Hoa that a message had been sent to the highest echelon of the Vietminh command, and that the preliminary reply had said to keep a close watch on the movements of the American planes in Da Nang. Proud of herself, Hoa returned to her room, promising herself to be especially zealous with the new pilots that had just arrived and would eventually visit her bordello. Hoa would have been surprised and disappointed however to learn that about all the pilots that had arrived were women. She would also have been furious if she would have learned that indiscreet electronic ears had listened to her message and to the answer that had come from Cao Bang, near the Chinese border.

12:04 (Indochina Time)

Aircraft revetment # 06, Da Nang AFB

Ingrid and Julia were expecting to see their usual team of mechanics, along with photo technicians sent by Lieutenant Meyer, when their YF-83A arrived in front of its reserved revetment after landing back from their photo-reconnaissance mission. Instead, they found a crowd of over a hundred female pilots waving enthusiastically at them. Ingrid was elated on seeing that, those women being like sisters to her and with most of them having enlisted in her original air group in 1942 and 1943. Shutting down her reactors, she slid open her canopy and returned the salutes of the aviatrix while a tractor pushed her plane tail first inside the revetment. Climbing down to the ground with Julia, she happily exchanged hugs with her comrades. Once the greetings were done, she signaled the group to make silence and spoke up to be heard by all.

"Girls, I am truly happy to see you again. Unfortunately, we will have to fight again together, very soon. What me and Julia just saw along the border with China showed us that we can expect soon a massive invasion of Vietnam by Chinese and Soviet armies, including hundreds of T-34 tanks and artillery guns. My intention is to launch attack missions as soon as possible against these concentrations of ground forces, before the enemy can launch its invasion. Use well the next hour to finish installing yourself in your new quarters, as you will have to fly combat missions soon,

possibly today. I will now speak with Brigadier General James and Colonels Richey, Meserve, Straughan, Bernheim, Buchner and Whitlow.”

Ingrid waited that most of the aviatrix had left in a convoy of trucks and jeeps, using that time to give directives to the technicians who were taking out of her reconnaissance pod the precious film cassettes, then faced her female subalterns.

“Did you bring full loads of bombs, napalm canisters and rockets with you from the Philippines, as asked?”

Teresa James, the commander of the 99th Wing, nodded her head.

“We did, Ingrid. Each of the YF-83s of the ‘Witches’ brought eight tons of ordnance, plus four AIM-1 missiles, while the YF-83s of the ‘Foxes’ brought six tons of ordnance, four AIM-1s, three AGM-1Rs and a photo-reconnaissance pod. Each YF-10 of the ‘Walkyries’ brought four and a half tons of ordnance, plus four AIM-1 missiles, while the A-3s of the ‘Hell Raisers’ each brought ten tons of ordnance and two AIM-1s. As for the YA-5s of the ‘Hells Angels, they each have four tons of bombs and four AIM-1s. With the four YB-50As of the ‘Dragon Ladies’ each bringing sixty tons of bombs, this makes for a total of 860 tons of conventional ordnance, plus a few thousand unguided rockets and a shitload of 30mm and 20mm cannon shells. That should be enough to shake the enemy seriously. And if you have a really special target, each of our four AC-142GTs brought two five-ton fuel air explosives bombs.”

Ingrid smiled at that while glancing at the four YB-50A heavy supersonic bombers operated by the 118th Special Support Squadron, the Dragon Ladies, along with four AC-142GT heavy gunships. She had a hard fight in the United States to argue against the objections of General Curtiss LeMay, the commander of the Strategic Air Command, who wanted all the B-50s to go exclusively to his command. She had been able to convince both LeMay and General Vandenberg that someone had to test the YB-50 in the conventional bombing role, something LeMay had considered at first as a pure waste of time. Ingrid had to make him read some of the ATHENA files concerning the future wars fought by the United States in Nancy’s history to finally win the argument. She then looked at Lieutenant Colonel Jane Straughan, the commander of the 77th Bomber Group.

“Well, the ‘Hell Hounds’ should be happy to learn that the men of the VMFA-232, the ‘Red Devils’ of the Marine Air Group 16, will join us this afternoon with their fourteen new A-3Ns, along with the helicopters of the MAG 16. You may then recognize a few

old faces from our time in Guadalcanal, on top of seeing the dog faces of the 4th Marine Regiment.”

“Yes!” Said happily Gertrude Meserve, the commander of the 17th Fighter Group, the ‘Harpies’. “It will be nice to work again with Marines.”

Jane Plant, the commander of the 171st Reconnaissance Squadron, the ‘Foxes’, looked with apprehension at Ingrid.

“What did you find exactly along the Chinese border, Ingrid, to need so much firepower?”

“The equivalent of at least ten divisions, camped and camouflaged in assembly areas less than ten miles from the border with Vietnam. If we don’t react before the enemy can launch its invasion, then the French will be simply pushed aside.”

“Ten divisions?” Exclaimed Gertrude Meserve. “But, that’s a second Korean War that the Communists want to start here.”

Ingrid gave Gertrude a somber look, measuring her words.

“Gertrude, the war already started a few days ago. Washington and Paris don’t realize it yet, but I intend to send the alert up as soon as my air photos are developed and analyzed. In the meantime, keep eight of your YF-10s in interceptor configuration, to defend Da Nang and our EC-200R orbiting over Vietnam against more Soviet air attacks. Load the rest of your fighter-bombers with a maximum load of general purpose bombs, except for the ‘Foxes’, who will carry napalm canisters. The ‘Hell Hounds’ will carry a mixed load of general purpose bombs and napalm canisters, except for its YB-50s, which will load up exclusively with general purpose bombs. As for extra bombs for follow-on strikes, the USS VESUVIUS is supposed to arrive this evening with a load of aircraft ordnance. I will now have to leave you in the good hands of Elizabeth Whitlow, who will square you away while I go write an urgent message for Washington and make a few phone calls.”

Jumping in her jeep with Julia Miller, Ingrid told Denise Bateman to drive to the joint task force headquarters and stayed quiet during the trip, thinking how she would word her message to Washington. In truth, the situation in and around Indochina could easily go out of control and become a generalized war with the USSR and Communist China. While the United States was already technically at war with China, and this since 1948, a war with the Soviet Union could turn nuclear if someone panicked or miscalculated. Ingrid was fully conscious of that and was thus thinking hard in finding a

way to avoid such a war. Unfortunately, both the Soviets and the Chinese were very much playing hardball, while being rather hypocritical about their involvement in Indochina, and Ingrid had no choice but to stop their invasion plans. If she did not react, or if she failed to stop this imminent invasion, then another country would fall into Communist Chinese hands and the United States would lose face...again. Neither President Dewey nor the American people would accept that outcome, something that would raise the possibility that the use of nuclear weapons would become tempting to many in Washington. There was also the problem of the French, stuck in the middle and caught in a problem of their own making. Convincing them to let go Indochina and to give the locals their independence would be no easy feat. However, as Ingrid had learned from Nancy Laplante and was preaching herself to others, there was always a political root cause to any military conflict and any durable solution also had to contain a political component.

Once at her headquarters, Ingrid let Julia resume to Mary Hiller and Jenny Kawena what they had seen inside China and walked towards the communications section. Seeing Commandant Pierre Larose pass by, she abruptly stopped and signaled him to follow her to her office. Once her door was closed behind her, she eyed somberly the French officer.

“Commandant Larose, you and your superiors may think that I am somehow working against France’s interests in Indochina, but believe me when I say that I only have the interests of all in mind. I just flew a reconnaissance flight over various locations around the border with China and what I saw could mean that France could lose Indochina even faster than I predicted.”

Ingrid then spent a minute to tell Larose what she had seen, attracting a stunned look on the Frenchman’s face.

“Ten mechanized divisions? But, we will never be able to repulse or even contain such a force, especially if the Vietminh actively support those invasion troops by attacking us at the same time.”

“I actually believe that we could stop and contain these divisions, but we will have to work tightly together to achieve this. There will also be a political price for defeating the Communists, as part of the solution will be to split open the Vietminh into its communist and purely nationalist factions. That can only be done by offering true independence to the Vietnamese within a short timeframe, and I am thinking here of

months at the most. This crisis should now make evident to even the most hard-headed ones in your high command and government that trying to keep Indochina will only bring disaster and grief to France.”

Larose eyed her with a mix of bitterness and resignation before replying.

“Maybe you’re right, General, but the notion of leaving Indochina will not be an easy one to swallow for many in Paris.”

“Would seeing your citizens in Indochina massacred or taken to Chinese work camps in Manchuria be easier for them to swallow, Commandant?” Shot back Ingrid in a hard tone.

“Couldn’t the United States dissuade the Chinese and Soviets to invade by threatening the use of the atomic bomb?”

That display of obtuseness nearly enraged Ingrid, who then took the gloves off.

“Do you really think that President Dewey would risk nuclear war with the Soviets just to save your dying colonial empire for a few more years? Has your government misread so badly my government? President Dewey wants France to give independence to the local people in Indochina and to then leave this region. How hard is it to understand? Right now, Commandant Larose, you are tempting me to ask permission to President Dewey to withdraw my task force from Indochina and let your government pay for the mess it created here just to keep a few thousands of indolent colonists, drug-trafficking officials and nostalgic generals and admirals content. I now see that I can’t rely on you to pass fully my message to your superiors in Saigon, so I will go myself to Saigon, even though my time would be much better spent here, preparing our response to that invasion force. You’re dismissed, Commandant!”

Thoroughly shaken by now, Larose left her office without a word, leaving Ingrid alone and fuming. She really didn’t want to go waste her time in Saigon, but she now had little choice if she wanted to attain a viable long term solution to this conflict. Thinking about it, she realized that maybe there would be another, more rewarding reason to go to Saigon after all. Her mind made, she then went to the communications section to write her message for Washington. However, she also wrote a second message, this time for President Dewey’s eyes only.

She was hurrying out of the headquarters building, her two messages drafted and being in the process of being encrypted, with the intent to go eat lunch at the nearby officers’ mess before it was too late for lunch service, when she saw two big YC-200

troop transports in the process of landing. That sight brought some good humor back to her: her deputy commander, Brigadier General Lewis Puller, was arriving, along with the men of the 1st Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group. Looking at her watch, she decided to go eat first before going to greet the new arrivals: at the worst, she could always serve herself at the salad bar in order to eat faster.

13:09 (Indochina Time)

Passenger terminal, Da Nang AFB

“INGRID! IT’S TRULY NICE TO SEE YOU AGAIN!”

Ingrid returned happily the very unceremonious hug from Lewis ‘Chesty’ Puller as hundreds of Army special forces soldiers looked on.

“It is also nice for me to see you again, Chesty. Unfortunately, it seems that I attracted you into quite a shit pit here in Indochina.”

Puller, a barrel-chested man with a rather ugly face and a gruff attitude, smiled as he stepped back from her to contemplate her.

“Well, shit pits are made to be cleaned up, Ingrid. My, you have grown into a full-fledged woman since I last saw you in the Pacific, in 1943. Let me present you Colonel Aaron Bank, the founder of the new Army Special Forces Groups, who came to watch over the first combat deployment of his special forces soldiers.”

Ingrid eyed Bank, noting approvingly his obvious top physical conditioning and his resolute expression. From what she knew of him, the special forces officer and ex-OSS operative was much more than just a tough soldier. Bank was also an officer accustomed to think outside the box and ready to try new solutions. He also happened to speak fluent French, which he had learned while leading French Resistance fighters inside occupied France before the Allied landings, and had done clandestine work inside Indochina during the Japanese occupation. All that made him an ideal subordinate for Ingrid, who grinned and shook vigorously his hand, surprising Bank with her strength.

“Welcome to Da Nang, Colonel Bank.”

“Gee, General, you’ve got quite a hand grip!”

Ingrid, who could have easily crushed his hand and had actually controlled her strength, which could equal that of five gorillas, smiled with malice.

“I regularly work out on weight-lifting: a fighter pilot must be strong enough to handle his or her control stick through a long dogfight. Well, I will lead you both to your

quarters, which are close to my own quarters: that will simplify late strategy meetings between us. And don't believe my reputation as a man eater: I don't touch married men."

That made both Puller and Bank laugh. They then grabbed their kit and followed her outside to Denise Bateman's jeep, which was followed by a light truck in which the two newcomers put their luggage before sitting in the jeep with Ingrid. Bank noted with approbation the fact that Ingrid was armed with both a pistol and a carbine.

"You certainly look like your reputation as a fighting commander, General."

"Generals who can't fight shouldn't be generals, period, Colonel." Replied, attracting an amused smile on Puller's face.

"That's the Ingrid I like! So, how bad is the situation here? We heard about your first combat missions over Haiphong and Kunming. The Soviets really want to play hardball here."

"Even more than you thought, Chesty." Replied Ingrid before telling him and Bank about what she had found along the Chinese border. That quickly erased the smiles on their faces, with Bank nodding his head at the end.

"Ten mechanized divisions... The French will never be able to handle that but will probably refuse to recognize it. They are proud soldiers, but they too often are blinded by their past military grandeur."

"Tell me about it! The worst part is that they will most probably refuse to drop their colonial rule over Indochina, even though they are condemned to lose it one way or the other in the next few years. There are truly no worst blind men than the ones who refuse to see."

"So," asked cautiously Lewis Puller, "what do you intend to do, Ingrid?"

"What I want to do is simple enough: blast those Chinese and Soviet invasion forces to bits with my planes, then do my best to split the Vietminh in two by promoting pure nationalism over communism. I may have to kill the top Vietminh leadership via an airstrike to do that, even though I would much prefer to use dialogue and persuasion in order to convince the Vietminh to stop fighting. The hardest part will however be to convince the French to leave Indochina."

"That's quite a program, General." Said Aaron Bank, making Ingrid nod.

"I know! You met Ho Chi Minh in the past, Colonel. Do you think that he could become reasonable and listen to us?"

Bank was thoughtful for a moment before answering her.

“Uh, five or six years ago, probably. However, our government refused to even listen to him then or to consider him relevant when he tried to contact us after the Japanese occupation. He probably would accept to at least have a meeting with me, though.”

“Good! I was counting on that.” Said Ingrid, who could now fit another piece to her puzzle.

17:33 (Indochina Time)

American Embassy compound, Saigon

Ingrid, wearing her blue Air Force dress uniform and her general officer’s service cap, returned the salute from the Marine Corps captain who greeted her on stepping out of the jeep that had brought her from the Tan Son Nhut Airport.

“At ease, Captain! I believe that you got the telephone call from General Puller about me needing a temporary room here for the night?”

“I have, General! Captain James Flaherty, commanding officer of the Marine Embassy Guard Detachment Saigon, at your service.”

Ingrid eyed briefly with hidden appreciation the young, fit Marine officer in Dress Blues Marine Corps uniform: she would indeed not mind one bit having the handsome captain at her service.

“Then, let me get my kit and I will follow you to the room you have for me, Captain.”

She was going to pull the suitcase and briefcase stuffed in the back of the jeep when Flaherty quickly stepped forward.

“Please, General: let me take care of that.”

Ingrid smiled warmly to him, but grabbed her things nonetheless.

“Thank you for offering your help, Captain, but I always believed in the saying of ‘one man, one kit’. Just show me the way.”

“Uh, very well, General.” Said the young captain, who had received very specific instructions by telephone from Brigadier General Puller concerning Ingrid. For a young Marine officer like him, anything that the Marine legend that was Lewis ‘Chesty’ Puller said was about equal to God’s word. He thus let Ingrid carry her two pieces of luggage and led her inside the annex of the embassy housing the Marine guard detachment, finally opening the door of a second-level room for her.

"Here you are, General. You have a bedroom with adjoining bathroom. It isn't exactly general officer's quarters standards but I was told by General Puller to keep it simple...and discreet."

"Good man! I would have been content with a simple tent if need be, Captain. I have things to do in town tonight and will change into civilian clothes, then will leave by myself. Can you secure my briefcase for me for the night, Captain?"

"I will put it in our weapons vault, General."

Ingrid nodded, but held on for a second to her briefcase as Flaherty was about to take it from her.

"Captain, nobody but me, and I really mean only me, can gain access to that briefcase. Not even the ambassador is to touch it, and Colonel Lansdale is the last one I want to see put his hands on it. If someone pretends that he is sent by me to get it, then refuse him access to my briefcase. Am I clear, Captain?"

The young officer, intrigued, nonetheless nodded his head. Colonel Edward Lansdale was nominally an Air Force officer but was known by the Marine guards to be working in reality for the CIA and to be mixed in many unsavory activities, even though he was officially only a military advisor to the ambassador.

"Very clear, General! I will brief thoroughly my Marines about this. May I advise you that the security situation in town is not exactly stable, General? There have been quite a few terrorist bombings and assassinations by the Vietminh in Saigon lately."

"I know, Captain. Thank you anyway for the warning. If it may make you feel better, know that I will be armed during my trip in town."

"Always a good precaution here, General." Said Flaherty in an approving tone. "Have a safe trip in town, General."

"Thank you, Captain."

As Flaherty left with her briefcase, Ingrid closed the door of her room behind her and quickly emptied her suitcase, suspending her spare uniforms and stowing away her various other items before changing from her dress uniform into the beautiful white and gold embroidered silk Chinese dress she had bought in the Cholon District of Saigon during her February visit. She then went to her bathroom to take time to comb her hair carefully and apply a bit of makeup and perfume.

When she walked out of the Marine annex in her Chinese silk dress and with a matching silk purse that contained her compact GLOCK 39 pistol, she made the Marine

guards at the entrance of the annex and at the main gate of the embassy compound suck air in as they admired her youthful beauty and sexiness. Chosen of The One or not, she still valued the effect she made on men, something that was useful for more than just attracting bed partners. The Sun was quite low by now but her keen eyes still caught sight of two men sitting in a car parked about thirty meters from the main gate. One of the men inside the car then discreetly pointed her to his companion, but not discreetly enough for Ingrid not to notice. Recording their faces and the car's make and plate number in her mind, Ingrid flagged down a cyclo, as bicycle-taxis were called in Vietnam, and took place in it, speaking briefly in Vietnamese to the driver.

"Cholon District Central Market, please!"

As the cyclo started rolling, Ingrid used the bicycle's rear-view mirrors to see if the suspect car she had noticed would follow her. It effectively did, but she also saw something else: the passenger raising to one ear a small, transistorized hand-held radio of the kind only the American military used. Those men could not thus be Vietminh agents. Ingrid however quickly deduced who those men worked for and sat back and relaxed in her cyclo seat: she would have to handle one thing at a time tonight. Twenty minutes later, the driver of the cyclo dropped her in the main market square of Cholon, where she paid him generously before hunting for a good place to eat.

The conversations and shouts in Vietnamese and Chinese and the bustling atmosphere of the market quickly put Ingrid at ease. Her past lives as a Vietnamese peasant and as a Chinese emperor made her long for such a place, where she could forget about the war, with its procession of dead and wounded, for a few precious hours. Letting odors guide her, she soon found a promising small restaurant where she took place at a sidewalk table and ordered a number of Vietnamese and Chinese dishes, along with a pot of green tea. She took her time to eat supper, watching happily the life in the market around her that brought back so many old souvenirs to her. As an obviously Caucasian woman alone in Cholon after dark, Ingrid attracted in turn more than a few curious stares and whispered comments, something accentuated by her demonstrated fluency in both Vietnamese and Chinese. Ingrid ignored the stares and whispers, not wanting them to spoil this chance to return to her past sources, and kept eating slowly.

More than an hour later she was still sitting at her table, having paid her bill but taking the time to finish a second pot of tea. By now night had long fallen on the city, with only the street lights and the lamps of the surrounding shops and houses to illuminate the market square. Ingrid noticed then that she was literally the only non-Asian left in evidence around the market square. That was however what she had been striving for: you needed honey to attract bees to you. The trick was not to get stung in the process. Once she had finished her tea, she went on a slow stroll around the market area, exploring various shops and even going inside a nightclub to watch and listen for a while a group of young women performing traditional dances and songs. Again, she found herself the only non-Asian in the place, with many of the local men watching and admiring her, some not too discreetly. After an half hour of watching the girls perform on the stage while she sipped slowly on a drink, Ingrid decided to finally go back to her hotel. She left the nightclub at a relaxed pace and started to look for a taxi or a cyclo while still enjoying the nightlife around her.

She was still looking for a ride back to her hotel when a young Vietnamese woman, a teenager actually, approached her with a warm smile and a polite bow before speaking in fair French.

“Would the lady be interested in examining some fine embroidered silk? We have the best imported Chinese silk in Cholon.”

Ingrid eyed the girl cautiously while doing a discreet telepathic scan of the teenager’s thoughts: she had found what she had been looking for. She thus answered her politely in Vietnamese.

“I may be interested in some nice silk, yes. Is your shop far from here?”

“It is only a small distance down that side street to our front and left, miss. Please follow me.”

Ingrid did so, walking one pace behind the girl towards the side street pointed to her. As soon as she was in that street she found that it was much darker than the main street she had just turned off and also was nearly deserted. Now fully alert and ready for trouble, Ingrid slowed down her pace, making the girl turn around to look at her with an encouraging smile.

“It is not far, miss. Do not worry.”

“How many doors down is your shop, still?” Asked Ingrid, slowing down further. Before the girl could answer her, a pair of arms went around her from behind, one hand

clamping shut her mouth while an arm wrapped around her waist, dragging her forcefully backward inside a dark and narrow alley between two houses. Despite the fear that came over her at once, the training she had received periodically from Nancy Laplante during her secret vacation periods in timeline 'B' kicked in instinctively. As another man hiding in the alley grabbed solidly her right arm, Ingrid swung her left leg upward and backward, kicking in the groin the man covering her mouth and holding her waist. The man let go his hold at once while collapsing to his knees and moaning with pain. The man who had grabbed Ingrid's right arm then twisted it brutally, making her shout in pain and forcing her to bend down. She however countered with an upward kick of her left foot to his jaw, making him lose his hold and sending him staggering backward against a wall of the alley. She followed with a chopping blow with the edge of her right hand to his throat, making the man gurgle and search for air. While that attacker was neutralized for a few seconds, Ingrid pivoted around and delivered a side-swiping kick to the head of her first assailant, sending him down on the pavement. Ingrid then took that chance to go for her pistol. She had grabbed her purse, slung across her torso, and had her right hand in it and around the grip of her pistol when she heard from deeper inside the alley the metallic noise of a pistol round being chambered. She pivoted and crouched down at once in a long practiced move while extracting her pistol from her purse and pointing it. She saw the silhouette of a man holding up a gun just before that man fired once at her. The bullet, a small caliber one from the noise of the shot, cracked past her head, missing her by a few centimeters. Activating the laser dot sight unit attached under the receiver frame of her pistol with one finger of her left hand, Ingrid then pointed and fired one shot at the same time that the man shot again. The man's second shot was even less accurate than the first, probably denoting poor pistol training. Ingrid's slug however, her aim assisted by the red dot now dancing on the man's chest, hit squarely her attacker, with the heavy .45 caliber bullet projecting the man back against a wall. Ingrid then fired a second time, this time aiming for the head. As the man slid down, dead, Ingrid pivoted around to face her two other attackers. The one she had kicked in the head was still down on the pavement and not moving. The other was however pulling a revolver out of his belt while staring at her with hatred. She double-tapped him in the chest, piercing his heart and left lung and killing him nearly instantly. Scanning nervously around her, Ingrid didn't see any other assailant, except for the teenage girl who had said she wanted to show her some fine silk. The Vietnamese teenager was still standing at the entrance of the alley with her mouth open wide while staring at the three

men lying down in the alley. The shrill noise of whistles being blown could be heard from two directions by now. Straightening back up while trying to calm down the rush of adrenaline in her blood, Ingrid looked at the girl, who seemingly couldn't believe her eyes.

"Stay where you are, girl." She ordered in Vietnamese. "I need to talk to you."

The teenager seemed to come out of her trance then and fled at a run down the side street. Ingrid couldn't resolve herself to fire at the girl and let her go, instead looking down at her three male attackers while still holding her pistol at the ready. A whistle blow nearby then made her turn around in time to see four Vietnamese city policemen turn inside the alley at a run with revolvers in their hands. They screeched to a halt at once on seeing her and her pistol and pointed their revolvers at her, shouting excitedly in Vietnamese all at the same time.

"DROP YOUR GUN! HANDS UP!"

Ingrid didn't drop her pistol, instead staying very still while speaking out loud in Vietnamese in a calm voice.

"Hold your fire: I am an American officer and those men tried to grab me."

The nervous policemen didn't know what to do at first. One of them was however perceptive enough despite his nervousness to notice her reddish-brown hair and her distinctly Caucasian features. He thus switched to French but kept his revolver pointed at her.

"You are American? Can you prove it?"

"Yes, I can." Replied Ingrid, also in French. "I am going to reach slowly inside my purse with my left hand to take out my military identity card. Tell your friends to calm down."

The policeman looked around at his colleague and nodded his head.

"She is going to show me her identity card. Cover me but hold your fire while I check her out."

He then advanced slowly a few steps close enough to grab the card Ingrid pulled out very slowly out of her purse. Examining it, he saw at once that it was in English, with her picture pasted on the card. He could however read at least one word, which was the same on in English and French: defense. Ingrid then spoke again, in Vietnamese.

"I am Major General Ingrid Dows, from the United States Air Force. I was lured into this alley, where these three men attacked me. At least two of them had handguns and I had to defend myself. Can I put my pistol back in my purse, now?"

The policemen saw quickly enough that she was right about the men being armed and started lowering her revolvers as four more policemen came in the alley at a run with a European man in a civilian suit. The European spoke loudly at once in French, authority in his voice.

“What happened here?”

“Those three men attacked me and tried to drag me inside this alley. I defended myself. I am Major General Ingrid Dows, of the United States Air Force. Your policeman there is holding my military identity card.”

The French police detective took Ingrid’s identity card from the Vietnamese policeman and examined it for a few seconds before giving it back to Ingrid and giving short but sharp orders in Vietnamese to the policemen.

“Lower your guns: she is an American officer. Take away those three men!”

“Those two are probably dead but I only knocked out this one, mister.”
Volunteered Ingrid, making the Frenchman nod.

“Excellent! We will have at least one suspect to interrogate. Are you alright...General?”

Ingrid didn’t miss the incredulity in his tone when pronouncing the word ‘General’. She however had grown accustomed to that, her youth effectively making her rank being questioned often enough.

“I am fine, except for a temporary fright. Thank you for intervening so quickly, mister.”

“You were actually lucky, General: me and my men were passing by when we heard the pistol shots. Normally, you would have had a hard time encountering any policeman in this area so late in the evening. By the way, I am Inspector Dumoulin, from the Sureté Générale. While you are obviously guilty of no crime, I will have to ask you to accompany me to the police station to fill a deposition. In view of you being a military officer, those men could very well have been Vietminh terrorists bent on kidnapping you.”

“You believe so, Inspector?”

“It is a distinct possibility, General. We will however know soon enough. If you could please follow me to my car.”

Ingrid, finally able to safely put away her pistol back in her purse, obeyed him with good grace and went with him to an unmarked sedan car parked in the main street, a civilian man at the wheel. Two military light trucks were parked behind it, with three policemen

armed with rifles watching them. As Ingrid's three attackers were being dragged to the first truck, she got in the car with Dumoulin, with the sedan then speeding away towards downtown Saigon.

The trip along the poorly lit streets of Saigon went on for fifteen minutes, time enough for Ingrid to regret having to have killed those two Vietminh agents and thus ruin her opportunity to contact someone of significance in the Vietminh apparatus. The sedan finally pulled inside a heavily guarded and fortified compound. Dumoulin gallantly opened the door for Ingrid after the car stopped in front of the main entrance of a colonial style building, then escorted her inside, leading her to a small office that stank of cigarette smoke. Wrinkling her nose at the strong smell of French tobacco, Ingrid nonetheless sat down with Dumoulin to fill her deposition. She answered his questions as concisely as she could but said nothing about the teenage girl, still hoping to find her again later. By the time her deposition had been typed and was presented to her for her signature, a good hour had passed. Ingrid had just signed the deposition when a Vietnamese policeman knocked on the door and entered after being invited in by Dumoulin. He then whispered something in the ear of the Frenchmen, who nodded and then looked at Ingrid.

"While we are finished with your deposition, there is one last thing that I would ask from you, General. We would like you to formally confront your surviving attacker, in order to check if he is telling us the truth and to make sure that you never saw him before tonight."

Ingrid suddenly had an awful feeling about that. She however would have difficulties to justify denying Dumoulin's request, who could anyway turn his request into an order quickly enough.

"I am ready to help your investigation, Inspector. Show me the way."

Dumoulin nodded again, satisfied, and got up from behind his desk, leading Ingrid outside and down the main hallway to a staircase leading to the basement. They soon arrived at a steel door guarded by two armed policemen. The guards opened the door for them and Ingrid found herself going down further to a subterranean level. Another guarded door was at the bottom of the staircase. As it was opened, a horrible scream reverberating through the basement froze Ingrid in place. She then looked hard at Dumoulin.

“Inspector, I understand that this country is at war but I am personally opposed to torture, whatever the reasons for its use.”

The until then affable Dumoulin then showed his true nature, staring back at Ingrid and speaking with little sympathy in his voice.

“General, this is not only war: it is a war against guerrillas who use terror, assassination and also torture whenever it suits them. They don’t believe in any military code of conduct and they routinely place bombs that kill innocents indiscriminately. This way please!”

Mentally cursing Dumoulin, Ingrid followed him past a few steel doors until he opened one door and invited her to enter ahead of him. Now apprehensive, Ingrid entered a relatively small room with masonry walls and ceiling devoid of furniture except for a chair and a small table. The chair stood in the middle of the bare room and the man Ingrid had knocked out was tied to it, completely naked and with his face bloody and bruised. Dumoulin approached the man, then roughly pulled his hair to make him raise his head towards Ingrid.

“This is the man you knocked out, General?”

Holding in her rage as best she could, she nodded once.

“It is him alright. I never saw him before in my life.”

To her hidden relief, Dumoulin didn’t hit the prisoner, nor did he ask the two sweaty policemen present in the room to do so. Instead, he simply nodded his head.

“I believe you, General. Follow me.”

Instead of going towards the staircase after exiting the interrogation room, Dumoulin turned right, going two doors down. Before opening that door, he looked impassively at Ingrid.

“We caught what we think is another Vietminh suspect in this affair soon after we picked you up, Colonel. We will need you to identify her.”

Ingrid’s heart skipped a beat at the word ‘her’. Steeling herself, she entered an interrogation room similar to the one she had just visited. There were also two policemen inside but the chair in the middle of the room was this time occupied by a naked teenage girl. Ingrid recognized quickly enough the girl as being the one who had wanted to supposedly show her some fine silk. A policeman then turned quickly the hand crank of a field telephone, sending electricity via two wires connected to the girl’s genitals, making the teenager scream horribly. Horrified by this turn of events and

feeling awful at being even indirectly the cause of such atrocities, Ingrid shouted out loud in French.

“STOP THIS AT ONCE! THAT GIRL HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH MY ATTACKERS.”

Clearly skeptical, Dumoulin approached the girl and forced her head up. The teenager’s face was swollen and she had one eye shut by blows.

“This girl was caught running away from the alley where you had been ambushed, General. Are you sure that she was not implicated in the attack against you?”

Ingrid hurried to answer him.

“Yes! She was simply passing by at the time. I yelled at her to run for her safety when I was attacked, thinking that my attackers were either thieves or rapists.”

Dumoulin gave her a skeptical look.

“You didn’t tell me that earlier on, when you made your deposition, General.”

“I’m sorry but it went out of my mind at the time: I reacted purely instinctively and forgot about it afterwards. Please, release her! I swear that she had nothing to do with the attack on me.”

Dumoulin hesitated for a moment, then relented: he simply could not see why an American officer would possibly protect a girl who had tried to have her kidnapped, even if that officer was squeamish about torture.

“Alright, release her and give her back her things.” He ordered the nearest interrogator, who appeared disappointed by his decision but didn’t object verbally. Dumoulin then looked at Ingrid.

“If you will follow me, General, I will get you a car that will drive you to your hotel.”

“Thanks but no, Inspector.” Replied firmly Ingrid, surprising Dumoulin. “I am staying with this girl and will escort her back to her home. I indirectly put her in trouble and the least I can do is to give her my protection until she is safely in her house.”

“I won’t be able to guarantee your safety if you return in the Cholon District tonight, General.”

“As you saw earlier in Cholon, I can defend myself, Inspector.”

“True!” Said Dumoulin, still looking skeptically at her. “In that case, I will let you with that girl: I have another fish to fry.”

He then left, followed soon by the two interrogators after one of them untied the girl and showed to Ingrid a box containing some clothes and personal items in a corner. Finding

this all too easy, Ingrid hurried to the teenager and put a finger across her swollen lips before she could say a word.

“Don’t speak!” She gently urged in Vietnamese. “Save your strength. You can thank me later.”

She then winked once to the teenager. The terrorized girl, not understanding her reasons to act like this but wanting very much to leave this dreadful place, obeyed her and slowly put back on her clothes, which Ingrid brought to her. The minutes that this gave to Ingrid to examine the girl’s body pained her to no small degree: the teenager had been beaten over most of her body and was covered with bruises, while cigarette burns were visible on her breasts. Feeling awful and bordering on tears, Ingrid helped the girl up once she was dressed and had taken back her papers and money, then supported her as she slowly and painfully walked out of the interrogation room. Ingrid shot a hateful look at the interrogator that unlocked the door to the staircase for her but didn’t say a word to him.

It took the girl a good ten minutes to walk out of the police fortified compound with the help of Ingrid. She finally spoke in a near whisper, her voice still trembling with fear and pain, as Ingrid was flagging down a taxi.

“Why? Why did you help me?”

“Shhh! Let’s get away from this place first.”

Once they were both in the taxi and she had ordered the driver to go to the main market square in the Cholon district, Ingrid whispered in her ear.

“My adoptive mother died in a torture chamber when I was fifteen. Nothing will ever justify torture for me, on anyone or for any reason. Wait until we are out of this taxi to speak further.”

The teenager stared with disbelief for a moment at Ingrid, then broke out in quiet sobs, prompting Ingrid into gently holding her. Ingrid fully realized that she was holding an enemy who had tried to lead her into a possibly deadly trap. Right now, however, she only saw a tortured and terrorized human being. It was bad enough that another being had to be left to suffer in the police complex but she had been unfortunately in the impossibility to help that man, as he had been arrested on the scene of the attack against her. Ingrid thought bitterly about the moral implications of the night’s events as it applied to her. Here she was, supporting the French and the local government against the Vietminh and their foreign supporters, supposedly to prevent the Vietnamese people

from falling under a communist dictatorship. Yet, the ones the United States were supporting in Indochina had just proved to Ingrid that they used methods as despicable as any the communists could use. What did all that make her then? The only answer she could come up with that she could also accept was that she was a soldier doing her duty as ordered to by her country. While she could not and would not agree to blindly obey orders that were blatantly criminal, she would have to accept that this war could not be a simple black and white affair. No war ever had been or ever would be anyway.

She was still thinking over that moral dilemma when the taxi stopped at the entrance of the main market square of Cholon. Surprising the driver by paying without discussion the inflated fare he was asking, Ingrid then got out of the taxi with the teenager. As the taxi sped away, leaving her alone with the girl in a dark section of the market, Ingrid realized that she didn't even know the girl's name. Seeing that the teenager still had difficulty walking, Ingrid did not hesitate and lifted her into her arms effortlessly, surprising the teenager with her strength. She then smiled to the girl as the taxi was rolling away.

"What is your name, girl?"

"Mai!"

"Then, Mai, tell me where to go and I will carry you there."

"You...you really are ready to trust me, after what happened?"

"And you, Mai, are you ready to trust me? Know that I came to Cholon tonight with the hope of attracting the attention of the Vietminh, so that I could pass a message to your leaders."

The teenager looked at her with incredulity on hearing that.

"You risked a kidnapping or even an assassination to pass a message to us?"

"Somebody had to take some risks to try to put an end to this damn war, no? Where should I go?"

Mai grimaced with pain as she turned her head to look around her. She then pointed a nearby shop that appeared to be a medicinal herbs boutique.

"Let's go inside this shop: we will probably find a balm for my wounds there."

Ingrid started to walk to the boutique but then hesitated and stopped, concentrating for a moment.

"Mai, I will have to put you down for a moment: somebody is trailing us and I must take care of him before leading you to safety. Sit down on that bench and wait here."

"Somebody is following us? Who? Where?" Asked the teenager, becoming fearful again. Ingrid put her index across her lips to shut her up.

"Don't speak and wait here. I won't be long."

Gently putting down Mai, Ingrid then turned around and retraced her steps along the sidewalk. As she was passing in front of a narrow, dark space between two shops, Ingrid suddenly extended one arm and brutally grabbed the front of the shirt of an Asian man, pulling him out of his hiding place with a strength that surprised the man. Holding the man with her right hand, she caught his right wrist with her left hand before the man could grab the revolver at his belt, crushing his wrist with superhuman strength. She then raised the man clear off the ground with her sole right arm, terrifying him, before speaking in Tagalog to him: she had found via his thoughts that he was a Filipino.

"Who sent you? Speak, or I will kill you!"

The man did not answer, trying instead to break free, but Ingrid further squeezed his wrist, making him grimace with pain.

"You want me to crush your wrist to dust?"

The thoughts of the man then betrayed him, making Ingrid smile diabolically.

"Edward Lansdale, eh? That doesn't surprise me much. Who else is with you? I am sure that you didn't come alone in Cholon tonight."

Again, the man's thoughts betrayed him. Now knowing what she needed to know, Ingrid looked the man into his eyes, imagining the blood circulation in his brain and creating a blood clot that silently killed the Filipino in a few seconds. She threw back the now limp body inside the dark space and resumed her walk, heading for the next street corner. Turning into that side street, she saw the same car that had been parked near the embassy, parked with two men inside. Adopting a slow walk, Ingrid concentrated on the driver, mentally inducing a blood clot in his head and killing him without the passenger noticing anything, being busy watching Ingrid approach. The passenger was next to die. Ingrid, who was now near the car, went to the front passenger door and opened it to search the passenger. She found on him a Colt 1911 pistol, a well-padded wallet, a key ring and a small notebook and a pen. She found as well at his feet an American hand-held radio transceiver that was on. She grab the lot and next went to search the driver, taking his pistol, wallet and key ring, plus the car's ignition key. Searching the car, she

found in the back a large canvas bag full of grenades, ammunitions and two M3A1 submachine guns. Stuffing in the bag what she had found on the dead men, save for the notebook and the key rings, Ingrid slung the bag across her shoulder and locked the doors of the car, leaving the two dead men inside, before returning to Mai. The teenager, who had seen her confrontation with her first follower, looked at her with incredulity.

“You killed that man over there? How...”

“Mai, the least you will know about that, the better.” Cut Ingrid before taking again the teenager in her arms. She carried her to the door of the medicinal herbs shop and knocked on it three times, attracting a man’s voice speaking in Vietnamese.

“It is late. My shop is closed.”

Mai then took on her to speak, anxious to find safety in the boutique.

“It is me, Mai, Bac Tien! I need some medical help.”

The noise of a locking bolt being pulled was heard after a few seconds and the door opened, revealing a thin old man with a graying short beard. Ingrid entered at once and passed in front of the stunned man, going to a small bench in a corner near the service counter and putting Mai down on it. Straightening up, she smiled to the old man, who had just locked back his door, and bowed politely to him while speaking in Vietnamese.

“I am sorry for this late intrusion, sir, but my friend here is suffering a lot and needs some urgent treatment.”

“Your friend?” Said the man, incredulous, looking alternatively at Ingrid and Mai. The latter, still obviously in pain, nodded her head.

“She lied to the police in order to save me from their tortures, Bac Tien. She told me that she wants to pass a discreet message to us.”

As the old man looked at her with suspicion, Ingrid pointed the shelves behind the counter, which held dozens of pots of varied size and shape.

“Before anything else, Mai needs to be treated. She was unfortunately cruelly tortured before I could intervene. Do you have a balm against pain made with opium grains: it was very popular in the Mekong Delta.”

“Uh, yes, I do have such a balm.” Replied Duong Manh Tien, surprised by her knowledge of medicinal herbs as well as by her attitude. “I have a bed in the back of my store. We will be more at ease there to treat that poor girl. I will get the balm in the meantime.”

“Thank you, Bac Tien.” Replied Ingrid before helping Mai up and supporting her while she slowly walked to the rear boutique, separated from the front store by a curtain. Once close to the bed, Ingrid undressed Mai cautiously, then gently put her down on the bed. Tears came to Ingrid’s eyes as she examined with sadness the wounds of the teenager. Tien, the pot of balm in one hand, saw her tears, which only confused him more. He however didn’t dare ask questions to Mai, not knowing if Ingrid was laying a trap for him. Kneeling besides the bed, he reviewed with sincere sadness the bruised body of the naked teenager.

“Those who did this indeed showed great cruelty.”

Ingrid nodded her head, a hard expression coming to her face.

“The French Sureté effectively disappointed and disgusted me greatly tonight, Bac Tien. I know that Mai and the one accomplice that survived the attack against me wanted to kidnap me, but they didn’t deserve to be tortured. Nobody deserves to be tortured.”

Putting down on the ground besides her the canvas bag she was carrying, she opened it and took out the wallets of her three followers, extracting the cash money in them and giving most of it to Tien, while keeping a small part for herself.

“I will keep a bit of that money to pay for my cab fare later on. Take the rest as payment for the balm, Bac Tien: it was already quite expensive in Gia Rai in my time and I doubt that the price went down since.”

Ingrid realized too late that she had made a mistake by speaking as if she was Tran Qui Khiem, her past incarnation as a Vietnamese peasant. Tien and Mai were now fixing her with incredulity, with Tien also glancing at the wallets and the bag full of weapons.

“Gia Rai? But, that’s a small village in the Bac Lieu Province, which is controlled by the Vietminh. You don’t seem to be of mixed blood, miss, even though you speak a perfect Vietnamese with an accent from the Mekong Delta.”

Ingrid stayed silent for a moment, realizing that she was in a way helping her enemies, even if it was to show some humanity. However, she was not sure anymore what to consider the French and their Vietnamese puppets. From the history of Vietnam taught to her by Nancy, the future puppets of the United States here would be no better or even worse. Ingrid looked down at Mai, who was still staring at her while lying naked on the cot.

“Mai, tell me frankly, without fear. Did those men that attacked me wanted to kill me or to kidnap me? If they wanted to kidnap me, were they going to torture me for information?”

Young Mai, with the limited wisdom of her seventeen years, didn't know how to answer that enemy turned savior and searched discreetly for the advice of one much wiser than her, looking at Tien, then broke out in sobs as she answered Ingrid.

“They were going to torture you for information about your new plane. Please forgive me, miss, for you saved me from what I was ready to condemn you to. Will you have me rearrested now?”

Ingrid bowed her head, her heart heavy, and gently put one hand on Mai's head.

“No! I could never cause you to be tortured again. Do not consider me your enemy anymore. You probably joined the Vietminh out of plain patriotism, like most rank and file Vietminh, rather than out of communist ideological belief. I can understand your patriotism in resisting what you see as foreign invaders and exploiters, Mai. I was myself a Vietnamese in a previous life, a man proud of his country and of his culture. You will excuse me for not giving you my ancient name, as I do not wish the Vietminh to be able to hunt down my descendants presently living in the Mekong Delta.”

“You can remember a past incarnation, miss?” Asked Tien, disbelief in his voice. “It is a very rare gift, if it ever was possible to have such memories.”

Ingrid nodded silently, then went on after a few seconds.

“I can remember all of my past incarnations, spread over 7,000 years, Bac Tien. I am probably unique in that aspect with my adoptive mother, who died under German tortures in 1941. That was one of the reasons why I helped poor Mai. My past life experiences however only add to my present depth of experience and I am first and foremost an American officer in this present life. I may feel deeply for the Vietnamese people but I will still fulfill my military duties to my present country in an honorable way. I personally believe that all the sides in this war are committing grave mistakes, but that it is still possible to put a quick end to this war in a way that would satisfy the Vietnamese people.”

“What mistakes? How exactly do you propose to end this conflict?”

“The French overestimate their military capacity to win this conflict, while their colonial policies only increase the resentment of the Vietnamese people towards them. Most politicians and military leaders in Washington are in turn viewing this conflict in a simplistic way, considering that the Vietminh simply want to put Indochina under

communist control with the help of the Chinese and the Soviets. In that, they mostly ignore the simple desire for independence of the Vietnamese people. On its part, the Bao Dai government has done nothing to stop the corruption and the abuses by the rich class against the small peasants and merchants, while Ho chi Minh has generated anger in the United States by allying himself with the Chinese and the Soviets. Even as a major general, I cannot officially change the policies of the United States by myself. However, as a special advisor to President Dewey, I can try to influence him into changing those policies, if certain factors support me. Please tell your superiors to pass urgently the following to Ho Chi Minh: he will soon be unable to rely on his Chinese and Soviet allies to evict the French from Indochina. He needs to review with care his policies, especially concerning his bloody, excessive internal purges. More importantly, he should propose a ceasefire, followed by sincere political negotiations with Bao Dai in order to form eventually a government of national salvation, without forcing a dominance of the Communist Party over that coalition government. I will do my best in the meantime to encourage my government to support such negotiations. If Ho Chi Minh persists in continuing this war, then he will risk finding himself without allies, and with the full might of the United States against him. My planes have up to date only struck at Soviet targets inside China and I am doing my best to avoid striking Vietminh targets for the moment, but I can't guarantee that I will be able to show such restraint for long. Tell Bac Ho to propose a peace, before he finds himself forced to ask for one. This will avoid tens of thousands of unnecessary deaths on all sides."

Seriously shaken by Ingrid's words, Tien glanced at Mai, who nodded her head.

"She killed a man outside that was following us. The man was not a Vietminh."

"True!" Cut in Ingrid in a calm tone. "I also killed two more men in a car parked in a side street. Here are the keys to that car. You may want to make those three dead men and their car disappear before the police can find them in the morning. That would help me avoid a few embarrassing questions from my own government. Those men were following me, and not Mai."

"Your government has you followed?" Asked Tien, incredulous. "But, you are one of their most decorated officers."

"Not my government as such, Bac Tien, only a certain faction that espouses a hard anti-communist line. Don't talk about that if you send radio messages to your leaders: my government could hear them and then come to ask me questions. Believe me when I tell you that I am risking a lot by acting like this out of my own initiative. Tell

Ho Chi Minh to consider carefully my proposals before taking a decision. Now, to return to poor Mai, just show me where your pain killing herb is and I will prepare an infusion of it while you apply the balm on Mai.”

“Uh, as you wish, miss.” Replied the shop owner, getting up slowly and then leading Ingrid to one of the shelves in his store. He took a few leaves from a jar and gave them to Ingrid, then pointed at the backroom.

“Those leaves boiled into one pot of water should greatly diminish Mai’s pain. I have a small stove and pots and cups in the back.”

“I’m on it.”

While Ingrid got busy boiling a pot of water on Tien’s small propane stove, the old man knelt back besides Mai and started gently applying balm on her swollen face. He used that opportunity when both of their heads were close and while Ingrid was not near to speak in a whisper to his young operative.

“What happened to the three others?”

“She killed Loc and Thao with a pistol she hides in her purse and knocked out Van. She was incredibly skilled at unarmed combat and took our men out easily. Van is now in the hands of the police and is being tortured at the central offices of the Sureté Générale.”

Tien quietly swore at that: if Van talked, he could very well be next to be arrested. Van was however a tough and brave young man and a true patriot. He would probably resist whatever the police would do to him. Still, losing such good men was painful to Tien.

“What about that American? Did she really help you out or was she just trying to trick you into giving her information by appearing kind to you?”

“I believe her to be sincere, Bac Tien. She lied outright to the police about me and seemed genuinely horrified at seeing me being tortured. She told me later in the taxi bringing us back to Cholon that her adoptive mother had died in a torture chamber years ago and that, because of that, she would never accept that others be tortured in front of her.”

“I know about her adoptive mother, Mai: she was the famous time traveler, Nancy Laplante. I thus tend to believe that she acted towards you out of sincere compassion and concern. I think that we can be confident that she will not betray you to the police. Now, relax and let me treat your wounds.”

“What about her story about remembering her incarnations? Could such a thing be possible?”

“Frankly, I never heard of such a case before, Mai. We however have too little information to make a definite judgment on that. Now, rest.”

Tien was nearly finished applying the balm when Ingrid came to him and Mai with a steaming cup in her right hand. She knelt besides Mai's head and delicately helped her head up while presenting the cup to her.

“Drink this, Mai: it will help relieve some of your pain. I put some honey in it to make it less bitter tasting.”

She made Mai drink slowly her cup, then looked at Tien.

“Should I give her a second cup right away?”

“Yes, please. It will help put her to sleep and forget her pain. I must thank you for helping that poor girl. It was most generous and forgiving from you, miss.”

“It was the least I could do to prevent such atrocities.” She replied softly before going to refill the cup of infusion. She was back as Tien was pulling back up Mai's panties and trousers. She made the teenager drink the second cup and went back in the kitchen corner to put away the empty cup. She was holding two books when she came back besides Tien and Mai. The shop owner recognized with a jump of his heart the copies of the two books she had authored and that he had requested and got from young Cam. The American would need to be dumb not to realize now that he was part of the Vietminh. She saw the momentary flash of fear in his eyes and smiled to him, speaking this time in impeccable Mandarin Chinese as her left hand went inside the purse she wore slung across her torso.

“I saw those two books on a shelf of your kitchen corner, along with books in Chinese. I am flattered to see that I have fans even here in Vietnam.”

To Tien's secret relief, she pulled a pen instead of a gun out of her purse and proceeded in autographing both books, a malicious smile on her face. She then gave both books to Tien.

“Thank you for helping me with poor Mai. I will now return to the American embassy.”

Ingrid went to Mai and caressed gently her hair.

“Get well, Mai.” She said softly to the teenager. She then left the shop with the bag full of weapons and grenades, closing carefully the door behind her. Tien, still

having a hard time believing all that happened tonight, shook his head as he returned near Mai.

“My superiors in the North will never believe this, but I still must report this whole affair, even if it is only to make them reconsider their policy towards her.”

“What did she write in those two books, Bac Tien?” Asked Mai, not having understood Ingrid when she had spoken in Chinese. Tien reflexively opened the top book to its inside cover page as he answered her.

“She authored those books and autographed them for...”

Surprise then cut Tien’s explanation short and made him sit down abruptly on the floor. That prompted a worried question from Mai.

“What is it, Bac Tien? Is something wrong?”

Tien passed a trembling hand on his forehead.

“She...she signed in Chinese. She signed as Emperor Wou-Ti, of the Han Dynasty.”

CHAPTER 16 – CLASH OF TITANS

05:11 (Vietnam Time)

Tuesday, December 23, 1952 'C'

Luxury bordello, downtown Da Nang

Annam, Vietnam

The madam in charge of the bordello where young Dhin Thi Hoa worked watched from her balcony the lights of the four big propeller-driven aircraft that had just taken off from the American airfield disappear northward in the sky while climbing. She then went back inside and, a robe thrown on her, went down the stairs to the kitchen of the bordello. There, she went to a small, adjacent cubicle with a small window where the assistant cook slept. Waking up the man, who was in reality the radio operator for their clandestine transceiver, she gave him a curt order.

“Four big American aircraft just took off and flew north. I need you to pass on that information up at once.”

“Uh, yes, Madam Vuh.” Said the man, still half asleep. Rubbing his eyes, he then got up from his cot and went to a pile of empty fruit crates in a corner of the kitchen and pushed it aside, revealing a hidden floor trap. Opening the trap cover, he climbed down the ladder fixed to the edge, setting foot in a small basement room in which a pile of weapons and ammunition crates sat against one wall. Switching on the single overhead electrical light bulb, the radio operator sat at the table supporting a big, long range HF radio transceiver, and grabbed the code books hidden behind the radio. Noting the hour on his watch, he then encoded a two-liner message and started sending it in Morse code to the Vietminh field headquarters near Cao Bang. It took only a minute before he received a brief acknowledgement from Cao Bang. Satisfied, the radio operator shut down his set and climbed back up to the kitchen.

Alerted by Major Jennifer Watson, the signals officer, Jenny Kawena hurried to the triangulation plot of the operations center of the joint task force and looked down as an operator finished tracing a third line in red on a map of Da Nang. She smiled in

triumph when she saw that the three lines drawn out from three separate radio listening stations intersected exactly where she had expected.

“The ‘Annam’s Delights’ bordello. I knew it! Pass the word to Major Woolmack: the transmitter is in the luxury bordello we were watching. He may now take it and search for the clandestine radio set.”

“Yes, Colonel!”

Having been deployed discreetly at night in advance in the city district where the bordello was situated, a force of 21 male and female Air Force Police backed up by a platoon of special forces soldiers rushed simultaneously the front and rear entrances of the bordello, surprising the two thugs guarding the front entrance and irrupting inside the bordello, weapons at the ready. Spreading quickly through the three levels of the establishment, they found a mixture of support staffs, prostitutes and customers, nearly all still asleep when they entered. The head of the Base Air Force Police, Major Edward Woolmack, grinned with satisfaction as all those people were being brought down to the main lounge of the bordello and were made to sit down in silence. Woolmack was what many would call a puritanical man, believing in family values and quite unforgiving of what he considered to be vices. Prostitution and the using of prostitutes were certainly vices for him and he looked severely at two American officers that where brought down despite their protests, wearing only their boxer shorts. He took down the names of those two officers, whom he knew to be married, then concentrated on a Frenchman who had been protesting loudly for a minute. Using a soldier who spoke French, Woolmack was told that the man was actually the assistant prefect for Da Nang. Giving the man a black look, Woolmack took down his name as well before letting him go. That was when a male MP came to him with a grin on his face.

“Sir, we found the clandestine radio in an hidden basement room that also contained a large quantity of weapons and ammunition. We found as well a code book.”

“Excellent! Make sure to note down on which frequency the radio was set on, then send that info, along with the code book, at once to Major Kawena at the joint task force headquarters. In the meantime, we will move the weapons and ammunition to the base and will bring all these nice people to the base detention section. Segregate the prisoners by sex and nationality.”

“Yes sir!”

Woolmack smiled again as the MP walked away to pass his orders: another den of sins had been taken down, on top of neutralizing a dangerous Vietminh spy cell.

05:44 (Indochina Time)

UH-1 DOVE light helicopter

Near village of Dong Dang, northwest of Lang Son

Sino-Vietnamese border area in the Tonkin, Vietnam

The UH-1 light helicopter, with its pilots using night vision goggles to fly low above the trees of the jungle-covered border area, set down as discreetly as it could near the road connecting Lang Son and Cao Bang. Its wheels touched the ground for less than twenty seconds, time for five Army special forces soldiers to jump out with backpacks heavily loaded with water and rations. The soldiers took out as well from the helicopter two jerrycans of water, a crate of rations and two backpack radios before hurrying towards the cover of the nearest trees once their helicopter lifted off. At about the same time, another fourteen similar special forces teams were being inserted covertly along the China-Vietnam border, near the roads and trails that could be used by the enemy invasion force poised just a few kilometers from the teams inside China. While these teams would prove to be very inconspicuous indeed, they would end up wreaking quite a lot of havoc, thanks to their long range radios.

06:20 (Indochina Time)

AC-142GT Heavy gunship 'PUFF THE MAGIC DRAGON'

Flying over the area of Ping-Siang

Kouang-Si Province, China

Captain Fredericca McAfee pointed at a portion of the valley of the Tso-Kiang River ahead and below their heavy gunship as she shouted over the din of their four turboprop engines to the pilot, Major Magda Tacke.

"THERE IT IS! I CAN SEE THE LINES OF TENTS THROUGH THE TREES."

"I SEE THEM TOO!" Replied the petite Jewish-American aviatrix. "I CAN ALSO SEE THE VARIOUS VEHICLE PARKS AND SUPPLY DUMPS. THOSE WILL MAKE JUICY TARGETS FOR OUR BOMBERS AND FIGHTER-BOMBERS. LET'S GO

DOWN AND LINE UP ON THE TENTAGE AREAS. WE WILL DROP OUR BOMBS AT INTERVAL FROM 9,000 FEET.”

Tacke then pushed forward on her control wheel, making her big plane dive at a slight angle. Her AC-142GT was actually a refurbished model of the plane that had been serving since 1942, with its original four radial piston engines replaced by more powerful and also much more reliable turboprop engines. In view of its main role as an heavy gunship dedicated to all weather strikes on enemy ground troops, the AC-142GT did not need to be very fast and thus jet engines had not been selected for its upgrade, low loiter speed being actually a desired feature of its mission. The more powerful engines had however made it possible to increase significantly its ordnance load, noticeably concerning the carrying of giant five-ton fuel air explosives bombs. While the original AC-142G would normally carry one such bomb, on top of its side battery of twelve 40mm automatic cannons and single nose 127mm gun, the AC-142GT could now carry up to three 5-ton FAE bombs at a time, a capability that was going to be put to full use this morning.

As the AC-142GT was approaching its target and was leveling off at 9,000 feet, Magda Tacke saw a pair of YF-83As swooping down ahead of them, firing each a pair of missiles, then raining sub-munitions bomblets on known anti-aircraft gun emplacements around the Soviet and Chinese camps and supply dumps.

“There’s our Wild Weasel element getting to work. It should make our life much easier for our bomb run.”

Even though a few surviving 37mm guns tried to hit their AC-142GT, the heavy gunship was flying too high for their fire to be effective and was thus able to line up on its first target, a large tent camp that housed a Chinese infantry division along the south shore of the Tso-Kiang River.

“FIRST BOMB AWAY!” Soon shouted their navigator/bombardier, Captain Helen Marshall. Magda Tacke felt her plane jump up in the air when the 5-ton BLOCKBUSTER bomb dropped, soon stabilized and slowed down by a tail parachute. Equipped with a long telescopic nose probe that made it burst well above the ground for maximum effect, the BLOCKBUSTER’s primary charge initiated the giant bomb at a height of five meters, bursting it open and dispersing in a huge cloud of flammable droplets the 4,300 kilos of liquid ethylene oxide that it contained. A couple of seconds later, after the cloud of droplets had time to expand and mix with ambient air, a lighting

charge attached to the braking parachute initiated the detonation of the fuel-air mixture. The effect was like that of a mini atomic bomb, the detonation of the cloud of explosive vapors equating the power of nearly twenty tons of TNT. Everyone within 200 meters of the bomb was killed instantly by the overpressure, while anyone within 500 meters ended up being wounded, most with severe burns and collapsed lungs. Even those occupying trenches or bunkers were not spared, as the explosive vapors were heavier than the ambient air and infiltrated holes and tunnels before exploding.

As a giant fireball rose in the air over the first infantry camp, now all but wiped out, a second BLOCKBUSTER bomb was released over the next camp, then a third bomb. Over 24,000 Chinese infantrymen were killed or severely wounded by those three bombs alone. The ordeal of the enemy force camping around Ping-Siang was however only beginning. As the AC-142GT effected a wide turn to return over the enemy camps and dumps, the fourteen A-3N attack aircraft of the Marine VMFA-232 Attack Squadron, the 'RED DEVILS', swooped in with their loads of napalm canisters and rockets. A fourth divisional camp was targeted by the Marine aviators, along with a field headquarters complex and three separate supply dumps. Once their wing pylons were emptied of napalm canisters, the fourteen A-3Ns also made wide turns around the camp areas, giving space for the heavy hitters of the strike force: two Northrop YB-50 CONDOR heavy bombers, each loaded with 256 500-pound retarded general purpose bombs. The two heavy bombers, part of the 118th Special Support Squadron, the 'DRAGON LADIES', lined up on separate, low altitude bombing runs against two vehicle and artillery parks containing hundreds of trucks, light armored vehicles, towed guns, truck-mounted multiple rocket launchers and even a few self-propelled guns. Some Chinese and Soviet soldiers were running among the vehicles, intent on driving out of the airstrike area, as the bombers overflew them at an altitude of merely 200 meters while releasing a string of 500-pound bombs equipped with retarding tails. The bombs either exploded on the ground or made direct hits on vehicles or artillery pieces. The vehicles and guns were either destroyed outright by direct impacts, peppered with large, red-hot steel fragments or blown away and overturned by the series of powerful blasts.

As the surviving Chinese and Soviet soldiers were either running for their lives or crouched down in ditches or trenches, the Marine A-3Ns came back for their second pass, this time firing five-inch rockets from their retractable launchers and targeting a

series of lines of parked medium tanks and assault guns, plus a huge artillery ammunition dump. A total of 120 five-inch dual purpose rockets slammed among the heavy armored vehicles, their hollow charge and fragmentation warheads easily burning through the armor of the medium tanks and igniting either their fuel or their gun ammunition. Four of the A-3Ns reserved their rockets for the artillery ammunition dump, breaking away in a hurry once they had fired their rockets at the piles of shell and rocket crates. Those rockets, fired against four widely separated spots of the ammunition dump, immediately initiated a chain reaction of powerful explosions that projected live shells and burning artillery rockets all over the area, some even falling on the nearby village of Ping-Siang. The Marine aviators were however not finished, coming back for third and fourth passes and firing their 30mm cannons at any vehicle, gun or supply dump that looked still intact in the area. When the American planes finally flew away, their ordnance and ammunition expended, they left behind an area devastated over a surface of more than five square kilometers, with the ammunition and fuel dumps still on fire and generating spectacular explosions and fireballs.

06:33 (Indochina Time)

Vietminh field headquarters

Vicinity of Cao Bang, Tonkin

Some sixty kilometers away to the northwest of Ping-Siang, the flashes and rumble from huge, distant explosions were clearly seen and heard in the field high headquarters of the Vietminh, camouflaged among the jungle trees near the town of Cao Bang. As a worried Ho Chi Minh woke up on hearing the explosions and went out of his hut to look, another series of explosions, closer and from the East, shook the horizon. Now frankly alarmed, the old and frail leader of the Vietminh shouted at one of his staff officers, who was running by.

“WHAT IS GOING ON?”

The man gave him a bewildered look and shrugged.

“WE DON’T KNOW YET, SIR!”

“THEN, FIND OUT AND REPORT BACK TO ME!”

“RIGHT AWAY, SIR!”

As the officer ran away, Ho Chi Minh returned inside his hut and dressed properly, then went out and walked to the hut sheltering the radio communications center and the

operations room of the headquarters. He found there his military commander, General Vo Nguyen Giap, watching over the shoulders of the duty radio operators and giving them directives. Giap, a small but energetic man of medium built, looked at Ho Chi Minh with clear worry in his eyes.

“Ah, Bac Ho! I am afraid that something very bad just happened.”

“What is going on exactly, Vo? What are those explosions over the horizon inside China?”

“I am not sure yet, but we just received fragmentary messages from our liaison teams in Li-Ban and An-Ping-Ting. Those messages were interrupted in mid transmission but it seems that the camps and supply dumps of the invasion forces there were under severe air attack. From the explosions visible to our southeast, I suspect that the Sino-Soviet camp near Ping-Siang has also been attacked by planes.”

“Could these be French planes, Vo?”

The Vietminh general shook his head at once.

“Very improbable, Bac Ho. My bet is that those planes are American ones and came from Da Nang. Remember the report from our clandestine cell in Da Nang yesterday that said that a whole armada of fantastic-looking jet aircraft had just landed there. We in fact got another report from Da Nang barely one hour ago, saying that four big aircraft had taken off from Da Nang to fly northward.”

At that moment, one of the radio operators politely cut in the conversation.

“Comrade General, our liaison team at the Sino-Soviet camp north of Lao-Kai is not responding. We now are unable to get answers from our teams at all four main invasion force camps inside China.”

As Giap looked at the radio operator with an horrified expression, Ho Chi Minh suddenly remembered with a shock part of a radio message received late last night from the head of the Vietminh spy network in Saigon.

“We will not be able to count on our allies anymore...”

Giap snapped his head around on hearing that.

“What was that, Bac Ho?”

The old Vietminh leader took the time to sit down on a chair before answering, dread washing over him.

“That message we got last night from Duong, in Saigon: it conveyed a warning from that young American general that said that we would soon be unable to count on our allies. I am afraid that this American general was very serious, after all.”

Giap looked at him for a moment, stunned, then gave a curt order to the senior radio operator.

“Get me the two last messages we got from Da Nang, along with the message received late last night from Saigon.”

“Yes sir!”

The radio operator took only a minute to take out and give to Giap the three messages requested. Rereading carefully the three messages, Giap then sat down himself and mumbled to himself.

“First, the airstrike on Kunming, now this... That young general is a true devil.” Shaking off his sudden dread, Giap got up and nearly ran into the adjacent operations room, coming back a minute later with a file in his hands and sitting back to read it. Ho Chi Minh looked with curiosity at the file held by Giap.

“What is this?”

“The intelligence file on that Major General Dows. We may get to hear a lot about her and her aircraft in the days to come. We might as well make sure we know all we can about her.”

“A judicious thought, Vo. Please pass me that file once you have gone through it, then find out what happened to our Chinese and Soviet allies.”

“Yes, Bac Ho!”

08:08 (Indochina Time)

Marine annex, American embassy

Saigon

Ingrid listened carefully to the short but concise report given to her via telephone by Teresa James in Da Nang, then nodded to herself.

“Thank you, Teresa! Congratulate our pilots for a job well done and concentrate now on Phase Two of Operation Carpet Sweep. I should be done here by about eleven, so send me our C-20 liaison jet for noon to pick me up and bring me back to Da Nang... See you in a few hours.”

Putting down slowly the telephone receiver, Ingrid then looked at Captain James Flaherty, whose phone she had just used.

“Thank you for letting me use your telephone, Captain.”

“You’re welcome, General. Was it good news from Da Nang, General?”

Ingrid had a devilish smile at that question.

“Very good news indeed, Captain: we just started repaying big time the Chinese for their attacks on us in Korea. You will be particularly pleased to learn that a Marine attack squadron was part of the force that administered the pasting we just gave them from the air.”

“OOH YAH!” Replied proudly the young Marine officer.

09:04 (Indochina Time)

Grand Headquarters of the French forces in Indochina

Saigon

Just before entering the conference room, the Ambassador of the United States to Indochina pulled aside Edward Lansdale to speak with him in private, away from other ears.

“Colonel, what can you tell me about that young Major General Dows? Can she be taken seriously?”

Lansdale eyed coldly Edward Heath: even though he was supposed to obey the ambassador, he had quickly pegged the political appointee as a man grossly under-qualified for his position as ambassador. The man barely spoke French and understood little about Asia in general and Indochina in particular.

“Yes, we should take her very seriously, sir. She has a very impressive military record, despite her young age, and also has a significant influence over the President as his special military advisor.”

What Lansdale didn't tell Heath was that he knew a lot more about Ingrid Dows, thanks to his CIA connections. He was not however ready to pass that knowledge to Heath: the ambassador would be liable to open his big mouth and blow secrets in the open. Heath, apparently satisfied, nodded and turned away, walking inside the conference room guarded by two French soldiers. Lansdale followed him, finding already inside Lieutenant General Girardon, the deputy commander of the French forces in Indochina, and Major General Ingrid Dows. Lansdale couldn't help admire secretly Dows' profile as he went to sit at the table, taking place besides Colonel James Belknap, the United States Army Attaché in Saigon. Belknap was another one Lansdale had little regard for. An Army logistician, Belknap was long on years of service but short on everything else except knowledge of logistical matters.

General Raoul Salan, Commander of French forces in Indochina, walked in the room a few minutes later, accompanied by the High Commissioner for Indochina, Admiral Jean-Guy de Largentière, a small, thin and arrogant-looking man. The doors of the room were then closed as the two last participants sat down at the table and looked in unison at Ingrid, with Salan speaking to her, some impatience showing in his voice.

“So, General Dows, what can you tell us about that Sino-Soviet invasion force along the Chinese border?”

“That this invasion force was much bigger than I first thought after taking my reconnaissance pictures, General Salan.” Replied Ingrid, also using French. “After full analysis of my photos, my analysts concluded that we were facing a combined force totaling about fourteen infantry divisions, an artillery corps and a tank division.”

Ingrid then went to a wall map and used a wooden pointer to show four locations along the Chinese border with the Tonkin.

“That invasion force is basically split in four main elements: three major ones across the border respectively from Lao-Kai, Ha-Giang and Lang Son, plus a smaller force at Li-Ban, near Cao Bang. That force had vast supply and ammunition dumps around its camps and appeared ready to invade soon. That last factor decided me to act quickly, before it went on the move and became harder to hit. My air wing in Da Nang thus launched early at dawn this morning simultaneous, massive airstrikes against those four concentrations of enemy forces across the border. As of the last report I got at eight this morning, that Sino-Soviet invasion force has been largely decimated, with its vehicles, guns and supplies destroyed and with two thirds of its infantry wiped out.”

The other participants to the meeting were left surprised and stunned by her declaration, with General Salan the first to speak.

“Why didn’t you wait to coordinate your air attacks with my own forces, General Dows? Surely, this could have waited a day or two.”

Ingrid shook her head slowly at that.

“I’m sorry, General Salan, but I have to disagree with you on that point. We simply could not risk waiting for that force to go on the move. Besides, your own air force wouldn’t have made a difference in those strikes.”

“But, we have three fighter-bomber squadrons here in Indochina. You call that insignificant, General Dows?” Replied Salan, raising his voice in apparent irritation.

"General, you don't have a single jet aircraft here in theatre, while your three squadrons of BEARCAT propeller-driven fighters put together can carry less bombs than a single one of my heavy bombers. You may not know it yet, but my air wing is equipped entirely with new, high performance pre-production aircraft that are superior to anything anyone else has in the World."

"Still, you could at least have had the courtesy to present your attack plans to me before launching your airstrikes, instead of acting alone."

"General Salan is right, General Dows." Cut in Ambassador Heath. "You were sent here to support the French forces in Indochina, thus you should work closely with General Salan and his staff."

Swearing mentally to herself at the fact that she had to deal with that utter amateur, Ingrid gave him a cold look.

"Ambassador Heath, you should reread the directives of President Dewey about the mission of my joint task force. I am here to prevent the Chinese and the Soviets from interfering militarily in Indochina, not to fight under the orders of the French command. I consider this information meeting as an act of courtesy, and not as an act of subordination to the French High Command."

She then looked at Salan and at de Largentière.

"Please forgive my bluntness, gentlemen, but one of the wishes of President Dewey is for France to eventually put an end to its colonial rule in Indochina and to let the local people have full independence. President Dewey agrees with me that there can be no purely military solution to this conflict and one of his directives to me was to do my best to find a peaceful solution for Indochina. I have just struck at an invasion force of over 200,000 men equipped with tanks and heavy artillery. I also struck at the enemy air force and destroyed most of its planes either in the air or on the ground. I however don't expect the enemy to give up right away, especially in the case of the Vietminh. As for presenting my plans in advance to you, General Salan, that would have been tantamount to throwing surprise away. Unfortunately, your forces have a very poor past track record where operational security is concerned, with the Vietminh routinely learning of your plans even before your troops can deploy in the field."

Her words proved too much for the French High Commissioner, Admiral de Largentière, who rose from his chair and shouted at her.

"WHO THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU ARE, YOUNG GIRL? YOU ARE TALKING TO A FOUR STAR GENERAL!"

Ingrid fixed him in the eyes, not intimidated one bit.

"Who I am, Admiral? Simple: I am a special advisor to the President of the United States, a nation that is presently footing most of the financial bill for your faltering military campaign in Indochina. I am also the commander of a force that just saved you from a massive invasion by a mechanized force of over 200,000 men. Your forces are already unable to regain control over the Vietminh in most of Indochina and you can't even ensure security inside the main cities, so do you really think that you could deal by yourself with that invasion force? Not likely, Admiral! Your own fighters were taking a beating in the air before I arrived in Da Nang with my own fighter-bomber."

As de Largentière fumed, unable to find a good reply to Ingrid's acidic judgment, Edward Lansdale couldn't help starting to like that straight talking, shoot from the hip young woman. Ingrid then spoke again to the French commanders, eyeing them somberly.

"I am still expecting the remnants of that Sino-Soviet invasion force to enter the Tonkin in the coming days, most probably in coordination with attacks by the Vietminh against your forces. You should thus put your forces on full alert in expectation of a Vietminh internal offensive."

"And who will deal with the invading Chinese troops, General Dows?" Asked Salan. "You?"

"Yes, me! I will use my aircraft to slow down and thin out any invading columns, while I work on other means to discourage any further Chinese force from entering Indochina. However, my task force will not stay indefinitely in Indochina. Your government should thus start to look for a non-military solution to this conflict before I depart in a few months."

"And what kind of non-military solution do you have in mind, General Dows?" Asked Admiral de Largentière in a caustic tone. "Capitulation to the Vietminh?" Ingrid's eyes hardened as she fixed the small Frenchman.

"If you persist in trying to defeat militarily the Vietminh, then you could well end up having to capitulate to them once your forces become overwhelmed in a few years, Admiral. What I still consider a possible option is to negotiate a ceasefire with the Vietminh once the Sino-Soviet invasion threat is over and to pledge full independence and free elections for the people of Indochina. The trick will be to not let the Vietminh most hard-line leaders steal or manipulate those elections, so that a truly moderate government could emerge."

“So, you are basically telling France to simply leave Indochina and abandon its interests here, is that it?” Growled General Salan. “Do you really believe that France is so weak and irresolute, General Dows?”

If Ingrid was intimidated by Salan, she didn't let it show one bit, instead staring hard at him while crossing her arms, adopting a defiant pose.

“Is France militarily weak in my mind, General? Certainly! Should I remind you who helped free France from German occupation, and at what cost in human lives and resources? Over two thirds of your troops in Indochina come from African colonies and are of dubious reliability and effectiveness. France is also over its head in many other places, including in Algeria and Morocco, and its forces are badly overextended. As for being irresolute, I could point out to you that your own government refuses to send French conscripts to serve in Indochina, because the war here is too unpopular with the French public. Instead, you have to use colonial troops and professional soldiers that are often little more than mercenaries, like those in your Foreign Legion. Do I need to remind you as well of how many French Communist Party members there are inside your legislature and government? President Dewey is now starting his second four-year mandate, while the government of the French Fourth Republic falls on average every ten months and has to be replaced constantly. France is definitely irresolute politically, as well as being militarily weak, General Salan, and I believe that it is high time that you face the stark reality here. Either you become ready to compromise, or you will be thrown out in the next few years.”

Edward Lansdale nearly applauded on hearing Ingrid's argument about the heavy presence of communist politicians among the French government. On his part, Ambassador Heath appeared incensed by the harsh words from Ingrid.

“GENERAL, ARE YOU TRYING TO SABOTAGE THE GOOD RELATIONS BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND FRANCE? HAVE YOU GONE OUT OF YOUR HEAD? SECRETARY OF STATE DULLES WILL HEAR ABOUT THIS!”

“Ambassador Heath,” replied coldly Ingrid, “I am here under the authority of President Dewey, and not under that of Secretary Dulles. I have a mission to fulfill here and I will do it with whatever means and methods I find necessary and appropriate.”

Lansdale then cut in on the exchange, hoping partly to silence his bungling ambassador.

“General Dows, what other means did you have in mind to discourage further Chinese incursions inside Vietnam?”

Ingrid gave Lansdale a sober look, while the CIA man suddenly felt a strange sensation inside his brain.

“I am still thinking about my options on that subject, Colonel. I could actually use your expertise in psychological warfare and anti-guerrilla tactics, if you would be willing to help.”

Lansdale smiled at that, amused by the proposition: him, a dirty jobs clandestine operative, helping a goodie-two-shoes like Dows. That goodie-two-shoes was however known to get the job done, contrary to the collection of bunglers and incompetents he was working for. She also had in her hand a few fantastic advantages that few people knew about.

“I would be happy to be of help, General.”

That made Ambassador Heath and Colonel Belknap look at him as if he had suddenly turned into a traitor.

“Colonel Lansdale, you are supposed to work for me, remember?” Said tersely Heath. Lansdale answered back in a polite tone, while his lips smiled. His eyes were not, however.

“Mister Ambassador, I was sent from Washington to help counter the communist threat to Indochina. If helping General Dows accomplishes that, then I see no reason not to assist her.”

Ingrid then spoke up, not letting time to Heath to protest Lansdale’s decision.

“Well, gentlemen, there is a lot for me still to do and I can do it only in Da Nang. Now that you have been warned by me about that Sino-Soviet threat, I will return to my command. Colonel Lansdale, could I speak to you in private outside?”

“Of course, General!”

As Lansdale got up from his chair, General Salan also got up and looked angrily at Ingrid.

“General Dows, I find your manners most impolite and disrespectful. You ask for a meeting with me, only to insult France and demean my forces, then dare leave without my permission. If this is your idea of cooperation between our two countries, then don’t count of me and my soldiers from now on.”

Even though Ingrid knew that she could have been more diplomatic during this meeting, she didn’t regret one bit having been frank with Salan and eyed him coldly.

“Do that, General Salan, and you will end up cutting your own throat. As for insulting France, I would say that, yes, the truth may often sound insulting, but it is still

the truth. Count yourself lucky that I didn't delve in the less savory aspects of French activities in Indochina, like the opium trafficking done by your GCMA¹⁴ to finance the clandestine buying of weapons and to buy the collaboration of local criminal groups. Good day, General!"

Ingrid saluted Salan, then turned around and left, with the French general too incensed and stunned to further protest. The moment Ingrid was gone, followed by Lansdale, Salan turned towards his deputy commander, Lieutenant General Girardon, shouting in French to him.

"WHO THE HELL DOES THIS YOUNG BITCH THINKS SHE IS? AND HOW COULD SHE KNOW ABOUT THE ACTIVITIES OF OUR GCMA? FIND OUT FOR ME WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT HER!"

Girardon, who had been shocked by the way the meeting had turned, could only nod and salute Salan.

"I will get to it at once, General."

Once outside with Lansdale, Ingrid led him to her waiting jeep, with a Marine driver waiting behind the wheel. She however didn't get in at once, instead going with Lansdale to the rear right corner of the jeep to speak to him in a low voice while looking into his eyes.

"First, thank you for being ready to help me, Colonel. I will now be as brutally frank with you as I was with the French: I hate hypocrisy with a passion. Have you ever heard about the ATHENA files?"

"I have, General: they contain the information from the future brought by the Canadian time traveler, Nancy Laplante. And yes, I know that she was your adoptive mother, General."

"Good! Then know that I read extensively everything about Indochina and its future that was in those files and know about all the stupid mistakes that could be made in the future or have already been made by every player concerned with Indochina. I also know a lot about you and your past and future activities, Colonel."

¹⁴ GCMA : Groupement de Commandos Mixtes Aéroportés or Mixed Airborne Commando Group in French. The special operations unit used by the French intelligence services in Indochina to supply weapons to anti-communist partisans, assassinate or kidnap suspected Vietminh members or sympathizers and effect clandestine raids.

As Lansdale stiffened, now on the defensive, Ingrid gave him a pinched smile.

“Normally, you would be the kind of man I would truly hate, Colonel. You are already quite infamous in the Philippines for the way you handled the communist Hukbalahap insurgency, torturing and assassinating suspected Hukbalahap members. You also used torture, assassination, corruption, blackmail and disinformation when it fits your needs and will continue to do so for many years, all with the goal of furthering the interests of the United States around the World. I personally hate anyone that uses torture, for any reason, and I am not about to condone its use now in Indochina. However, I believe that you do all that because you truly want to protect the United States and you are said in the ATHENA files to believe in democracy. You were also described in those files as being one of the rare officers of this time period who tried to understand the minds of our enemies, including those of Communists. I am ready to forget your past deeds and to use your expertise here in order to split the non-communist, purely nationalist members of the Vietminh from the other, hardcore communist members. In exchange, I am ready to brief you in depth about the things I know about this conflict and about future operations in which you will possibly be involved, so that you can avoid a few very costly mistakes you did out of ignorance in Nancy’s history. Call it a pact with the Devil, if you will.”

Lansdale grinned then: this promised to be most fascinating indeed.

“Me, the Devil? And you would be what? An angel?”

It was Ingrid’s turn to grin.

“Why not? Satan was an angel before he fell from grace.”

13:06 (Indochina Time)

Headquarters, Joint Task Force – Indochina

Da Nang Air Force Base, Annam

Ingrid surprised more than one subordinate when she entered the operations center of her task force with Edward Lansdale and a group of five rather thuggish-looking Asian men at her back, each carrying a kit bag or backpack. Calling to her Major Jennifer Watson and Lieutenant Colonel Jenny Kawena, Ingrid presented her followers to the two female officers.

“Colonel Kawena, Major Watson, this is Colonel Edward Lansdale, an Air Force intelligence branch officer who normally works out of the American embassy in Saigon.

Those five men here work for him and will be used to send disinformation to the Vietminh headquarters while masquerading as the clandestine radio station we found early this morning. Major Watson, if you could show them the log book and code book we captured in Da Nang, along with the list of frequencies and call signs that station used?”

“Of course, General! This way, gentlemen!”

As the five men in casual civilian clothes went with Watson towards the communications section, Brigadier General Lewis Puller entered the operations center and went to Ingrid, having apparently been just told of her arrival. Ingrid smiled with satisfaction at his appearance.

“Aaah, Chesty! Just the man I wanted to see. Are Colonels Krulak, Carl and Bank nearby, by chance?”

“Uh, Krulak is at his regiment’s camp, but both Colonels Carl and Bank are here in this building. How did your meeting in Saigon go?”

“You could say it was a bust. I did a ‘Chesty’ on the French and they didn’t like it one bit.”

“A ‘Chesty’, General?” Asked Lansdale, mystified, making Ingrid grin with malice.

“It means telling the brutal, unvarnished truth straight in someone’s face. That’s Brigadier General Puller’s specialty. By the way, Chesty, this is Colonel Edward Lansdale, from the Air Force intelligence branch. He normally works from the American embassy in Saigon but I hired his services to run a disinformation program against the Vietminh. Colonel Lansdale, this is Brigadier General Lewis Puller, my deputy commander and the bravest Marine I ever knew.”

Both Puller and Lansdale exchanged a strong handshake before Ingrid spoke again.

“Chesty, could you get Colonels Carl and Bank to our conference room, along with Colonel Lansdale, while I get a few of my girls: I need to brief you on a few highly classified things. You can brief Colonel Krulak later on.”

“Got it, Ingrid! Please follow me, Colonel Lansdale.”

As the two men walked away, Ingrid went to see her chief of staff, Lieutenant Colonel Mary Hiller, and spoke to her in a low voice.

“I need you, Jenny Kawena, Helen Richey and Teresa James to join me in the conference room right away, unless they are out flying. I also need you to have a C-10 VSTOL assault transport ready to fly me and my jeep to Taipei Airport, on Formosa. I

will depart for Taipei with Jenny Kawena, Hazel Ying Lee and my driver as soon as I am done with our meeting. Tell Jenny and Hazel to pack a bag for a possible overnight stay and to bring their weapons.”

“Got it!” Replied Hiller, nodding her head in understanding before walking away. Major Hazel Ying Lee was a Chinese-American and a veteran fighter pilot, having enlisted in 1942 with the first batch of female pilots to enroll in the 99th Composite Air Group. The need for her knowledge of the Chinese language was obvious for that trip to Formosa, where the Nationalist Chinese forces had taken refuge after being thrown out of Mainland China by the Communist Chinese in 1947.

Four minutes later, the last participants that Ingrid had called to come had joined the others in the conference room adjacent to the operations room. Ingrid surveyed with her eyes the four men and four women now sitting with her around the table, then spoke in a sober, dead serious tone.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I had you gathered here so that I could brief you on a few highly classified things and could explain what happened in Saigon when I met General Salan this morning. First, my meeting with General Salan, to which Colonel Lansdale, sitting here to my left, was a participant, didn’t go very well. I gave the unvarnished truth about the situation in Indochina and the French commanders didn’t like it one bit. They are unfortunately refusing to consider that France would withdraw from Indochina and give the local people their full independence. They also think that they still can win militarily against the Vietminh. In my usual diplomatic style, I told them they were full of shit, something they apparently didn’t appreciate.”

That got her a few chuckles around the table and she paused before continuing.

“Now, about my classified information. What I am about to tell you is classified ‘Top Secret ATHENA’ and is information that came from the future with Nancy Laplante in 1940. That information concerns the history of the conflict in Indochina and its future as it happened in Nancy’s history. While our own history is already quite different, many points in that information are still extremely relevant for us and knowing them will allow us to avoid some costly strategic mistakes and errors of judgment. Know that President Dewey has also read that information and discussed it with me before I left the United States to come here. That is one reason why I clashed in Saigon with Ambassador Heath: apparently, Secretary of State Dulles and his department, along with many others in Washington, never bothered reading the ATHENA files on Indochina and are in the

process of repeating the same mistakes they did in Nancy's history. Know this first: if those same mistakes are allowed to happen, then France will suffer a bloody military defeat within a couple of years and will then be forced to withdraw from Indochina. Following this, the United States will be stuck trying to support a series of corrupt, dictatorial local politicians and generals, supposedly to protect democracy from communism. Eventually, the United States will have to bring in more and more troops just to stop the Communist Vietnamese forces in the North from invading the South. That war will involve up to half a million American troops at one time and will cost us 50,000 dead soldiers, apart from placing a heavy toll on the American budget. All that will end in 1975, after years of atrocities, mass killings and destruction, with the forced withdrawal of all American forces from Vietnam and the eventual taking over of the South by the Communist Vietnamese. It will also result in the United States Army coming out of the conflict as a broken, demoralized force, plus will cause massive anti-war riots all over the United States and will make the then President renounce a second mandate. I am sure that none of us here want this scenario to materialize. I certainly am not ready to sit still while this would happen."

From the somber faces of the participants around the table, Ingrid saw that they were all in agreement with her on that.

"Now, I am going to cover the specifics of what went wrong in Nancy's history concerning Indochina, so that we know what not to do. Then, we will discuss a plan I have in mind to avoid such a gloomy scenario. Be assured that you will all have an important part to play in that plan..."

15:52 (Indochina Time)

Taipei Airport

Island of Formosa

As the rear cargo ramp of their YC-10 THUNDERBIRD was coming down, Ingrid looked somberly at the three women sitting in her jeep, which had its canvas cover up in order to make their vehicle more anonymous.

"Remember, girls: the Nationalist Chinese may be enemies of the Communist Chinese and may be nominally on our side, but their government rule is nothing less than that of a brutal police state and Formosa has been under martial law since 1948. Government security agents and political commissars are everywhere and any dissent

or criticism of the ruling Kuomintang Party can get one arrested, or worse. We are here to get any intelligence we can get about possible political targets in Beijing and nothing more. We are not here to promise any support to the Nationalists' attempts to retake Mainland China from the communists. Let me do the talking at first. Got it?"

Jenny Kawena, Hazel Ying Lee and Denise Bateman all nodded their heads, already wondering in what kind of place they had landed. Their YC-10 had arrived over Formosa without advance warning or formal air clearance and the initial reaction had been rather harsh, with two Nationalist Chinese P-51 MUSTANG propeller-driven fighters sent to challenge the YC-10 once it had requested by radio the authorization to land in Taipei. Their YC-10 could of course have easily left the P-51s in its dust, but Ingrid's goal, apart from keeping her visit as discreet as possible, was to gain the cooperation of the Nationalist Chinese, not to humiliate them. They thus had dutifully followed their escort fighters to Taipei Airport, where a substantial military welcome committee was waiting for them on the tarmac, in front of a hangar.

On Ingrid's order, Denise Bateman drove slowly their jeep out of the YC-10 and rolled to a stop only twenty meters away, in front of a waiting group of Nationalist Chinese officers and soldiers. The Chinese major who was heading the group stiffened with surprise when Ingrid stepped out of her jeep, dressed in her Air Force going out uniform: he had not expected a woman, and even less a major general. The major called his men to attention and saluted Ingrid, who saluted back before speaking in fluent Mandarin to the major.

"I am sorry to have come like this without any prior warning, Major, but I wanted my visit here to stay secret. I am Major General Ingrid Dows, Commander of the United States Joint Task Force – Indochina, based in Da Nang, Vietnam. I came here to speak with your head of military intelligence concerning possible targets for my planes inside Mainland China."

Even more than her title, her stated goal to strike targets inside China awoke at once curiosity and interest in the major, who looked at the jeep behind her.

"Who is with you, General?"

"My intelligence officer, one of my pilots and my driver."

The Chinese major thought for a second, then nodded his head.

"I will need to make a quick telephone call first, General. I will have to ask you to wait inside your jeep in the meantime. It shouldn't be long."

“Very well, I’ll wait.”

Ingrid then returned to her jeep and sat inside, while the major hurried inside the nearby hangar. Jenny Kawena couldn’t help ask Ingrid a question on an anxious tone.

“What did they say, Ingrid?”

“Their officer will make a quick phone call, probably to his superior, to see if they will receive us. It shouldn’t take long.”

They actually ended up waiting a good fifteen minutes before the major reappeared and walked to their jeep, making Ingrid step out in the light rain that had just started to fall. The major saluted Ingrid while addressing her.

“General, the Minister of Intelligence is waiting for you. My jeep will guide yours and escort you through our security checkpoints.”

Ingrid refrained from smiling as she returned the salute: that their minister of intelligence himself was ready to see her was an encouraging sign indeed.

“Thank you, Major.”

Going back in her jeep, Ingrid pointed the major’s jeep, which was coming forward now, to Denise Bateman.

“Follow that jeep closely, Senior Airman, and please don’t lose it!”

“Understood, General!”

Putting her jeep into gear, Denise started to follow the Chinese jeep along the tarmac, then along a road that led to the main gate of the airport, where they encountered their first security checkpoint, manned by heavily armed Nationalist Chinese military policemen. The stern-faced MPs, despite the presence of the Chinese major, insisted on seeing the military identity cards of the four American women before letting them pass, making Jenny make a remark once they had crossed the gate and were rolling towards the city of Taipei.

“A suspicious bunch indeed, those MPs.”

“Expect more of the same around Taipei, Jenny: this place was not deemed a police state for nothing. The ruling Kuomintang Party is obsessed with the danger of spies and dissenters, including the ones asking for true democracy. They don’t even fully trust their own soldiers.”

“Wow!” Said Denise. “Talk about a bunch of paranoid men!”

“Yes, but those paranoid men probably have much better intelligence on the Communist Chinese than we do. Whether we like it or not, we need the help of those

paranoid men to be able to realize what I have in mind. Striking blindly inside China would only be a waste of bombs.”

Jenny and Hazel, who didn't know what she had in mind as her next operational move, refrained from asking about that, knowing her well enough to understand that her mind was still putting various information together before deciding on a plan. Ingrid may have seemed impulsive to many in the past, reacting quickly to various crisis, but she always thought over her actions before moving. She simply thought faster than most could and always took account of the whole picture when solving a problem.

During their trip to and across Taipei, they encountered no less than five security checkpoints, all manned by stern-faced MPs apparently ready to shoot at a simple whim. At the last checkpoint, which was manned by no less than twelve MPs, one MP even took the time to go make a phone call before he let the two jeeps through, on top of putting a MP jeep in charge of escorting them for the rest of the trip. They finally parked in front of a large masonry building whose entrance was heavily guarded by more MPs. Telling Denise Bateman to accompany her, so that she wouldn't be stuck alone outside, Ingrid followed the Chinese major, her two officers and her driver in tow, inside the building. Their group made many heads turn on their way to a third floor suite of offices, which was guarded by four MPs who again checked their papers and asked for their weapons before they were admitted inside a large, plush office where a small man in his early fifties was waiting. The man, who wore the uniform of a Nationalist Chinese Army general, looked at the major who had escorted Ingrid from the airport and gave him a curt order.

“Wait outside while I speak with General Dows, Major.”

“Yes, General!” Replied the major, saluting before turning around and leaving the office. Ingrid and the Chinese general took a second to measure each other before Ingrid saluted and presented herself, speaking in Mandarin.

“Major General Ingrid Dows, Commander of the United States Joint Task Force – Indochina, based in Da Nang, Vietnam.”

“General Mao Renfeng, Minister of Intelligence. I had time to review what is known of you while you were driving here from the airport. I must say that you have an impressive reputation and combat record, General Dows. Your Mandarin is also excellent.”

"Thank you, General!" Said simply Ingrid, not willing to press too quickly her host with her requests. Renfeng then said something that stunned Ingrid.

"I suppose that you came here to finally act on the intelligence we passed to your State Department a few months ago about American prisoners held in Manchuria, General Dows."

Renfeng at once saw the expression on Ingrid's face and his eyes narrowed as Ingrid spoke as calmly as she could.

"I am not knowledgeable about that intelligence you just mentioned to me, General. Could you be kind enough to enlighten me?"

"I am talking about reports we got about ten months ago about American soldiers and aviators taken in Korea and being held in a camp in Manchuria, near the Soviet border. If it wasn't for that reason, then why did you come here, General?"

"I came here to see if you had any intelligence that would help me plan an airstrike against known top Communist Chinese leaders and their command apparatus in Beijing, General."

A faint smile on Renfeng's lips then told Ingrid that the Chinese general was interested at once in her idea of an airstrike on Beijing.

"I believe that we indeed have some information on that subject that you will find most interesting, General Dows."

Ingrid nodded slowly, relieved to see that her trip had not been for nothing.

"We will be most thankful to review that intelligence with you, General. First, though, could you tell me more about that business of American prisoners in Manchuria?"

"I certainly can, General Dows. Anything that hurts the Communists will please us. Please follow me: we are going to visit our main intelligence analysis center."

That visit turned into a gold mine of useful information concerning Ingrid's initial plan for airstrikes on Beijing, the communist capital of China, and they ended up spending a good four hours there, taking notes and borrowing copies of maps and photos. Renfeng also gave them access to the few reports he had about American prisoners held in Manchuria. While rather limited, those reports were enough to fire up Ingrid's mind about acting on them. Her mind quickly made up, she smiled to Minister Renfeng as her officers were gathering the pieces of information they had been given.

“Minister Renfeng, I would have one last request to ask you. In exchange, I promise you that your assistance tonight will help me deal a very painful blow to the Communist Chinese leadership.”

“If that is the case, then I will be most pleased to help you, General Dows.”
Replied the Kuomintang general, smiling fully for the first time to her.

CHAPTER 17 – HEAD HUNTERS

08:48 (Indochina Time)

Wednesday, December 24, 1952 'C'

Headquarters, Joint Task Force - Indochina

Da Nang Air Force Base, Annam

Vietnam, Indochina

"Hell, I knew that those communist leaders were the paranoid type, but this is utterly ridiculous!" Exclaimed Lewis Puller, assembled with the other commanders and main staff officers of the joint task force around a map board with Ingrid Dows. Edward Lansdale nodded his head at that.

"That they are, General, but I am only partly surprised by this: they see spies and saboteurs everywhere. On the other hand, this gives us a perfect target for an airstrike: well concentrated, with well-defined borders and highly visible landmarks nearby."

"Exactly what I was thinking, Colonel." Replied Ingrid, smiling. "We will use that paranoia to our advantage, ladies and gentlemen. First off, though, we will need good air photos of downtown Beijing, along with photomaps of the Beijing area, so that we can properly plan our airstrikes. Jane, I will need some of your aircraft to fly high altitude photo-recon missions over Beijing before dusk today. I want both high definition coverage of downtown Beijing, centered on the old Forbidden City, and medium resolution mapping coverage of the whole of Beijing. I will also need a couple of your YF-83s to fly a photo-recon on another target area, this one in Manchuria, near the border with the Soviet Union."

The officers present, except for Ingrid and Jenny Kawena, looked blankly at the spot pointed at on the map by Ingrid. Colonel Victor Krulak was the first to react, his tone showing confusion.

"But, there is little of interest in that region, General."

"Not true, Colonel! At that spot just south of the Soviet border, there is supposedly an internment and transshipment camp where American prisoners of war are being kept until being transferred eventually into the Soviet Union."

All heads snapped towards her at those words, with Puller, Krulak and Bank in particular drilling Ingrid with inquisitive eyes. She thus continued without delay.

"According to a few intelligence reports the Nationalist Chinese got ten months ago, the Chinese have holding up to a couple hundred American prisoners of war captured in Korea in a camp besides the Sino-Soviet border, northwest of Mukden. Some of those American prisoners are in turn handed over to the Soviets for transfer into internment camps in Siberia or to Moscow for detailed interrogation. Before any of you explode in indignation and demand that we go get those American prisoners, you can calm down, because we WILL go get them! We however need to wait for the results from the photo-recon missions we will fly today, in order to have proper intelligence to plan such a rescue mission. Colonel Krulak, I am tasking your Marines for that eventual rescue mission. Since we have only a limited number of YC-10 VSTOL transport aircraft that we can use for such a raid, you will need to limit your raiding force to no more than 280 men, so that we have some space for liberated prisoners. The raid will have a fighter cover of four YF-83s from the FOXES and a close air support of eight A-3 fighter-bombers from the HELL RAISERS. One of our EC-200Rs will act as both the force command aircraft and as an overhead long range radar watch aircraft."

"Thank you for choosing my men, General." Said Krulak, grateful and happy. "You can't know how happy my Marines will be to pay back the Chinese for their atrocities in Korea."

"I can understand that your Marines have no love for the Chinese, Colonel," cautioned Ingrid, "but I wouldn't mind if you are able as well to take prisoner some of the Chinese interrogators you may find in Manchuria. If you can find some Soviets as well, the better."

"Soviet and Chinese prisoners, coming up!" Said with a smile Krulak while scribbling notes on a pad. Next, Ingrid turned towards Lieutenant Colonel Kathryn Bernheim, the commander of her air transport and support group.

"Kathryn, I was able to get the accord of the Nationalist Chinese to use Taipei Airport as a staging point for our raids inside China. Our aircraft may have unusually long ranges, but we are talking about distances of over 2,000 miles for return trips. I want part of your heavy transport squadron to start hauling jet fuel to Taipei to build up a reserve there sufficient to refuel four combat squadrons. Your four KC-200 tanker aircraft will also be based in Taipei for our raids inside China, along with a fleet of tanker trucks and ground servicing vehicles. Colonel Krulak, I will need one company from your Marine regiment to set tents up at Taipei Airport, in order to guard and protect our fuel

reserve there. If you have still some of your old hands that speak at least some Chinese, use them for that guard force.”

“I do in fact have a few NCOs and officers who had tours in China before the war, General.”

“Excellent! All of our longer range fighter-bombers and our four heavy bombers will participate in the strike missions inside China. That will leave the A-5s of the HELLS ANGELS and the four AC-142GTs of the DRAGON LADIES available to harass and strike any surviving Sino-Soviet forces that will still be bent on invading Vietnam. The YF-10s of the WALKYRIES will provide fighter cover over the Tonkin and over Da Nang. The special forces teams of Colonel Bank will be responsible to alert our planes to any enemy ground penetration across the border and to direct our planes in their strikes while themselves staying out of sight. That last point is very important to me, Colonel Bank: I want your outposts to stay invisible to anyone around them, so that they are not compromised.”

“Understood, General. I can tell you right now that the enemy has not yet tried to cross the border. The survivors are probably still reorganizing themselves after our airstrikes on their camps.”

“That’s one good news, Colonel: we certainly will be quite busy for the next few days. Colonel Lansdale, how are you doing on those psychological warfare tracts in Vietnamese that we want to drop over Vietminh locations?”

“I have cooked up a few select, short and concise messages in Vietnamese, General. They are ready for your review and approval after this meeting. Once approved by you, I will be able to start large scale production of them.”

“Excellent! The air unit commanders may now dismiss, to go start planning and preparing for the photo-reconnaissance and strike missions inside China. I will need General Puller, Colonels Krulak, Bank and Lansdale to stay a bit longer with me, to discuss our ground strategy to stop any Chinese land incursion across the border.”

All the while, Lewis Puller could only admire the way Ingrid was conducting business. In his experience in World War Two and in the Korean War, the various units of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Army Air Force couldn’t coordinate a joint operation without wanting to constantly refer to their respective higher commands, often delaying the planning of operations by days and greatly complicating coordination. Even now, the Army, Air Force and Navy still had a hard time talking to each other, or didn’t talk at all, for fear that the other services would come out looking better. Puller himself had often

been guilty of such inter-service rivalry in the past, something he now realized fully as he watched Ingrid command her joint task force.

10:19 (Indochina Time)

Detention cells, Air Force Police station

Da Nang Air Force Base

“Open the door of this cell, Sergeant.”

Din Thi Hoa, still not knowing what fate was awaiting her, looked up like the seven other prostitutes locked up with her in a communal cell when an American female officer stopped in front of their cell and ordered the door to be unlocked. The newcomer, who Din had not seen before, was tall, fit and quite young and was certainly very beautiful, with reddish-brown hair cut at the neck and big blue eyes. An air of quiet authority emanated from the young woman. Din then saw with a shock that the woman wore the rank insignias of a major general. ‘This is impossible!’ thought Din before remembering what the American colonel that had been her customer had said once about ‘a young opportunist who was a major general at the age of 29’. She then knew that she was facing a potentially very dangerous person and promised herself to continue pretending that she did not speak English. Up to now, the American soldiers manning the detention block seemed to still believe that she spoke only Vietnamese and French.

Once the door of the cell was unlocked by the female MP, Ingrid calmly walked in and stopped in the middle of the cell, looking closely in turn at each of the eight female prisoners before speaking in Vietnamese.

“I am Major General Ingrid Dows, Commander of the United States Joint Task Force – Indochina. As such, I command all the American forces presently in Indochina and my mission is to prevent the Chinese and the Soviets from intervening militarily in this conflict, not to attack the Vietminh and certainly not to help the French to continue ruling Indochina. You were arrested yesterday because you were inside a bordello where a clandestine radio set was hidden, sending information about this base to the Vietminh. First, I can assure you that you will be well treated while held on this base. I do not believe in brutality, nor do I allow the mistreatment of prisoners. Second, I can promise you that none of you will be handed over to the French: I saw firsthand how they treat Vietminh suspects and I am not about to give them anyone to torture.”

Din, like the others, felt relief on hearing that. Stories about the atrocities and tortures committed inside French prisons were known across the whole of Vietnam. Those Americans however seemed to be more scrupulous on that matter. Ingrid then went on.

“Those of you who were simple prostitutes working at the bordello will soon be released. However, your bordello has been shut down for good, so you will have to find another line of work...or another bordello. For those who actually spied on their customers and passed information to be transmitted to the Vietminh, you will simply be detained here until this conflict is over, or when this task force will leave Vietnam. After that, you will be freed.”

Din, like a couple of the other prostitutes, couldn't help be surprised by those last words, something that Ingrid noticed but didn't comment on. Din's nervousness redoubled however at the next words from Ingrid.

“Who here is Din Thi Hoa?”

Din reluctantly got up from her lower bunk bed, expecting the worse now. Ingrid smiled to her, trying to reassure the young teenager.

“Do not worry, Din, I just want to ask you a few questions. Follow me, please.”

Slowly at first, Din followed Ingrid out of the cell and along a concrete corridor, a female MP at her back, as another MP relocked the cell door. Ingrid soon invited Din to enter a small room, mostly bare save for a small table and two chairs, closing the door behind them.

“Please, take a chair, Din.”

The young prostitute obeyed, with Ingrid also sitting down, facing her. There was a moment of silence as they eyed each other. Then, Ingrid asked her first question, her voice still calm and friendly and still speaking flawless Vietnamese.

“Din, did you often have as a customer a certain Colonel Evans? He was in his fifties, has graying black hair and a small moustache. He was also a bit overweight.”

Din nodded quickly her head and spoke in a tiny, timid voice, the same voice that seemed to melt most of her American customers.

“Yes, I remember him, General. He often asked for my services.”

“And how old are you exactly, Din? Do not be afraid to tell the truth: I already suspect that you are well under eighteen.”

Din lowered her head in apparent shame.

“I am sixteen, General. I am an orphan and I had few means to survive and have something to eat. Madam Vuh was kind enough to take me and shelter me.”

'And to profit from you by renting your teenage body to visiting men', thought Ingrid. She however suspected that Din was not telling the whole truth, by a long shot. As Din's head was still down, Ingrid spoke softly in English in a most casual tone.

"My bombs killed Ho Chi Minh this morning."

That got her an immediate reaction from the teenage prostitute, who snapped her head up and looked at her with intense hatred mixed with horror. She then shouted in English.

"THAT CAN'T BE TRUE! HO CHI MINH CAN'T..."

Only then did Din realize that she had just betrayed herself. Ingrid, her face now hard, stared into her eyes.

"First, I lied to you, Din: Ho Chi Minh is not dead. In fact, none of my planes have attacked any Vietminh positions yet...and won't attack any if things go the way I want. Second, you just proved to me that you understand and speak English, something you would hide only if you were afraid of being found to be a Vietminh spy."

Din looked at Ingrid with horror and fear in her eyes, again expecting the worse.

"Wha...what are you going to do with me now, General?"

"You will simply be held here until the end of the war, as I said before, Din. What I would like to know is why a beautiful and apparently intelligent girl like you would demean herself by becoming a prostitute. What would your family think of you?"

The reaction from Din at those last words truly surprised Ingrid, with Din glaring at her with pure hatred and shouting in Vietnamese.

"I DON'T HAVE A FAMILY LEFT! MY FATHER WAS EXECUTED BY THE FRENCH AND MY MOTHER DIED IN A FRENCH PRISON, AFTER BEING BEATEN AND RAPED EVERY DAY. I BECAME A PROSTITUTE BECAUSE IT WAS THE MOST USEFUL WAY I COULD SERVE THE VIETMINH: BY GETTING INFORMATION FROM IMPERIALISTS LIKE YOU."

Something then cracked inside Din and she sat heavily on her chair while breaking out in near hysterical crying. Stunned and saddened, Ingrid let her cry her tears out, signaling to the MP ready to irrupt in the interrogation room to stay out.

"Din... Din... I am truly sorry about your parents."

"I don't care about what you think." Replied the teenager, her head still down between her arms on the table. "I just want you and your kind to either leave Vietnam or drop dead."

"I will only leave Vietnam once the threat of a Chinese invasion will be over, Din."

Ingrid's response took many seconds to register in Din's troubled mind.

"A...a Chinese invasion? What are you talking about?"

"An invasion by over 200,000 Chinese and Soviet soldiers that were poised at the border with China, Din. My planes struck at that invasion force early yesterday morning. You remember seeing them take off from this base, no?"

"I...I thought that they were going to attack Vietminh positions in order to help those French bastards."

"Again, my planes have not attacked any Vietminh position or unit...yet. That may change however if Ho Chi Minh persists in asking for the Chinese' help."

"Ho Chi Minh would never ask the Chinese to invade Vietnam. He is a patriot!"

"He is also a Communist and he was getting desperate to find help against the French. As for you, I believe that you are simply a nationalist and use communist expressions only to go along with your other comrades. I have nothing against any Vietnamese that simply wishes true independence for his or her country, Din. My beef is only against those who would invite in Chinese and Soviet troops in Vietnam. Peace and independence is still possible for Vietnam, but not if the Soviet Union and China get militarily involved. If they do come in, then my country will have no other choice but to push them back, something that would result in an even worst and much longer war. Believe me, Din: that is the last thing I want."

Din, now sitting straight in her chair, still was crying silent tears while listening to Ingrid. She finally shook her head slowly, as if in denial.

"I don't know what to believe anymore. I just want to see my country free."

"And one day it will be free, Din. For the moment, I have little choice but to keep you detained here until the end of the war, for your own good. If the French learn about your role in Madam Vuh's bordello, they will not hesitate to torture you."

"Why? Why do you care so much for me? I am only a stranger to you."

Ingrid's voice then became very soft and she bent forward to gently take hold of Din's left hand.

"Why? Because I am an orphan myself and because my adoptive mother died in a torture chamber eleven years ago. One thing she taught me before her death was to always show compassion and tolerance towards others. I now have to go, as I have many things to do, but be assured that you will not be mistreated here and that you will be able to go free once this war is over. That I promise you."

Ingrid then got up and left the interrogation room, giving a few instructions to the waiting female MP.

“Bring her back to her cell...gently. She is a Vietminh spy and speaks good English. She is also only sixteen years old, so make sure that the other guards go easy on her.”

There was some dismay on the MP's face on hearing about Din's age, but she then became impassive again.

“Understood, General!”

Leaving the detention block, Ingrid went to Major Woolmack's office in the building attached to the block. Thankfully, Woolmack was at his work desk, filling some report. He nearly jumped out of his chair to come at attention and salute on seeing Ingrid in front of his opened door.

“General!”

“At ease, Major! I just interrogated the young prostitute Din Thi Hoa, the one Colonel Evans kept visiting. She is actually a Vietminh spy and speaks good English, but I have no wish to see her harmed, especially by the French. She will be held here until this war is over, then we will release her and her file will be destroyed. Nobody but me and you will know about her true status, especially not any French official: they would be liable to torture her if they ever put their hands on her. Another thing: she is sixteen years old and an orphan. Tell your guards to be easy on her and to simply ensure that she does not escape. As for Colonel Evans, add the charge of sexual abuse of a minor to the list. He will be sent back to the United States to face a court martial there.”

“I am certainly looking forward to that, General.” Replied the veteran MP.

14:50 (Indochina Time)

Downtown Da Nang

Ingrid was coming back from the American military port of Da Nang in her jeep, after going to inspect the unloading of the ammunition transport ship U.S.S. VESUVIUS, when the sight of a plaque besides the main door of a three-story building made her pat on the shoulder of her driver.

“STOP! STOP IN FRONT OF THAT DOOR, DENISE!”

Denise obeyed and braked to a stop just past the main entrance, then backed up to park in front of the double doors. She tried to read the door plaque, which was in French and Vietnamese, but without success.

“What is that building, General?”

“It is an orphanage run by the French religious order of the Sisters of Christian Charity, according to that plaque. I think that I will take a few minutes to visit it.”

“You are feeling the spirit of Christmas in the air, General?” Asked Denise with a smile, making Ingrid nod somberly her head.

“Our people sure could use the spirit of Christmas right now, Denise. Wait besides the jeep and be on your toes while I do my visit.”

“Understood, General.”

Stepping out of her jeep, Ingrid went to the entrance and knocked on the thick wooden door while Denise also got out, grabbing her carbine and taking a watch stance. A nun in the traditional black and white dress and hood of her order partially opened the door after about a minute and gave Ingrid a welcoming smile while speaking to her in French.

“What can I do for you, miss?”

“Good day, Sister! I am Major General Ingrid Dows, from the United States Air Force, Commander of the American forces based at the airfield, and I just saw your plaque while coming back from the port. Would it be possible to visit quickly your orphanage?”

“Certainly, General!” Replied the nun, opening wide the door and letting Ingrid in. “I will lead you to Mother Thérèse, who will be most happy to guide you and answer your questions.”

“Thank you, Sister.”

The short trip to the office of the Mother Superior showed to Ingrid that the orphanage, while poorly furnished, was immaculate, as one would expect from a religious establishment. She also passed on the way a nun leading a group of about twenty small children aged between four and six years and smiled widely at their sight. The nun guiding her smiled as well on seeing her reaction to the children.

“I see that you like children, General.”

“I adore them, Sister. Just seeing them is bringing back some normality in those tragic times, especially now, just before Christmas. I suppose that you will celebrate Christmas here, Sister?”

The nun made a pinched smile at her question.

"We have done our best to prepare as good a Christmas that we could for our children, General. Unfortunately, the times are hard and tragic, as you must know. Here is the office of our Mother Superior, Mother Thérèse. I will announce you."

Knocking on the closed door, the nun waited for an answer before sticking her head inside and speaking briefly with another woman in the office. She then opened the door wide and let Ingrid in before closing the door behind the latter. Ingrid found herself facing a nun in her late forties, small and thin and with an air of quiet authority on her face. The nun came from behind her desk after a moment of hesitation, surprised and also a bit scandalized to see an armed woman in military uniform.

"Welcome to our orphanage, General Dows. What can we do for you?"

"Well, I was coming back from the port area and was passing in my jeep when I saw the plaque besides your door, which poked my curiosity in this day before Christmas. Would it be possible to visit quickly your orphanage?"

"But certainly, General! Please follow me!" Answered at once Mother Thérèse with a big smile, seeing the opportunity to attract the patronage of an organization full of resources and able to help her establishment in those difficult times. Leading Ingrid into the main corridor, she spoke to her while walking in quick, short steps.

"This long conflict has unfortunately made many orphans, often very young ones, General. We presently shelter and care for 248 children, all under the age of twelve, and we still get a few more every week."

"And how many nuns do you have to take care of these children, Mother Thérèse?"

"I have with me seven sisters, plus ten Vietnamese maids, cleaning ladies and cooks. Our order also maintains an orphanage in Hanoi and another one in Saigon."

"And...the logistical and financial support you get from your order, is it sufficient?"

It was the turn of the mother superior to hesitate.

"We have enough to feed adequately our children, General, but we accept any help or donation we can get."

Ingrid nodded her head, having already taken the decision to do what she could to support this orphanage.

"We are presently conducting air combat operations, but I was thinking about ordering a partial halt to our activities tomorrow, in order to celebrate Christmas for at

least a few hours. I probably could include your children in our party at our base, Mother Thérèse. We could at least offer a good meal to your children and to your sisters, plus a short trip in an aircraft.”

That made the mother superior open her eyes wide with anticipation.

“A trip in an aircraft? My God, our little angels would love that! Would there be any risk of your planes being attacked while my children would be aboard?”

“The risk is very minimal, Mother Thérèse. Besides, I will have fighter aircraft escort our transport planes and helicopters, and they would stay far away from the combat zone. I am sure that my pilots and ground crews would be delighted to see your kids, especially on Christmas.”

“In that case, I will be delighted to accept your generous offer, General. When will you want our children tomorrow?”

“I still have to review my agenda for tomorrow, but it will probably by the start of the afternoon. Don’t worry about transportation: I will send buses to your orphanage.”

“Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, General: you are too kind.”

The visit ended up taking over thirty minutes, a visit that confirmed to Ingrid that the establishment, while able to provide the most essential necessities to the orphans, didn’t enjoy any luxuries. The toys used by the children were in limited number and were often broken or worn. As for the children’s clothes, they were clean but their wardrobe was visibly limited, while the dormitories were filled to capacity. As Mother Thérèse made her visit a classroom where small girls were learning the Vietnamese alphabet, Ingrid’s eyes were attracted to a small, sad-looking girl sitting near the back of the class. The child was very pretty and cute, but her eyes reflected no joy of life. Ingrid pointed discreetly the girl to the mother superior while whispering to her.

“That little girl near the back seems to be under some kind of shock. What is her story?”

Mother Thérèse nodded her head after glancing at the little girl.

“Her name is Hien and she is five years old. She arrived last week, after both of her parents were killed in front of her eyes during a terrorist attack. Her mother actually saved her by shielding her with her body. Hien was found twenty minutes after the grenade’s explosion, pinned under her dead mother. We did our best to make her go over her shock, but she seems to have lost the will to live and doesn’t mix with the other

children. She is not aggressive or angry, but she speaks very little, even though we know that she understands and speaks both French and Vietnamese.”

“My God, such a tragic story for such a young girl! I hope that the party tomorrow will help her a bit.”

“I hope so as well, General.”

The nun giving the class then announced the end of the lesson and made the children file out in the corridor. As little Hien was about to pass in front of her, Ingrid crouched down and gently took both of her hands while smiling to her.

“Hello, Hien! My name is Ingrid Dows and I would like to invite you and your friends for supper tomorrow. Would you like that?”

Hien didn't say a word, simply nodding her head without smiling before following the other children out of the class. That brief contact was however enough to awake in Ingrid a special feeling towards that sad little girl.

When she stepped back out of the orphanage and into her jeep, Ingrid surprised her driver with her next order, making Denise Bateman look at her with confusion.

“You want me to find a toy shop, General?”

“Yes, any shop that sells toys. I will then have to speak to the owner, so that we could go shop tomorrow morning. I suppose that the French are routinely forcing the stores to close on Christmas. Thinking of it, we will also try to find a wine and liquor store.”

Having no clue about what her superior was cooking up, Denise however complied and turned around to go back to the main market area of Da Nang.

03:16 (Indochina Time)

Thursday, December 25, 1952 'C'

Village of Phuc Hoa, southeast of Cao Bang

Northern Tonkin, Vietnam

Binh was awakened by a few quick shakes that made him pop his eyes wide. He then saw in the darkness of his hut the worried face of one of the local Vietminh militiamen he commanded. Young Liem sounded near panic as he kept shaking Binh.

“Binh! Binh! Wake up!”

“Stop shaking me, Liem, and tell me what is going on!”

“Soldiers are approaching the village, thousands of them!”

“Thousands?” Exclaimed Binh, sitting up abruptly. “From which direction are they coming from?”

“From the East.”

“From the East? But that’s the Chinese border in that direction.”

“I know, but we were not told anything about anyone coming from China.”

“I realize that, but we haven’t received any directives for over three weeks now. Show me those soldiers.”

Liem led Binh out of his hut and towards his watch post on the eastern periphery of the village. There, through the darkness of the night, Binh was able to see two long parallel lines of silhouettes marching towards the village on both sides of the road coming from the Chinese border. The nearest ones were now less than a hundred meters away and Binh could clearly see that they were armed. Liem had not lied or exaggerated about their numbers: the lines of soldiers snaked on for as far as Binh could see with the moonlight. Binh then patted on the shoulder of Liem.

“Hold your fire! These are probably friendly troops. I will go warn the other sentries.”

Left alone for a few minutes as the unknown soldiers kept approaching, Liem grew gradually more nervous, holding his old French-made bolt action rifle with sweaty hands. As the first of the approaching men came within thirty meters of his small mud brick outpost, Liem shouted out in Vietnamese, not knowing any other language.

“HALT! WHO GOES THERE?”

The two lines of soldiers stopped at once and pointed their weapons in Liem’s general direction while crouching down. Instead of a salvo of shots, their response was shouted words in Chinese. Liem didn’t answer that, as he had no clue what had been said. An idea then came to him and he shouted again.

“VIETMINH! VIETMINH!”

After a few seconds and a few exchanged whispers between themselves, the newcomers lowered their weapons and stood up, resuming their advance. Liem was still nervous as the first soldier came and stopped by his outpost to say something in Chinese. Liem could only shrug in response, in turn attracting a frustrated grunt from the Chinese before he marched on. Binh joined back with Liem as the two lines of soldiers were already snaking through the village.

“Don’t worry, Liem. They are Chinese soldiers and they are coming to help us throw out the French and their lackeys.”

“And who is going to throw them out afterwards?” Replied in a low voice Liem, voicing without thinking his gut reaction to seeing more foreign soldiers on his land.

Liem’s feelings were confirmed only three hours later, when a second large group of Chinese soldiers came by. The Chinese stopped their marching as sunrise came and congregated in small groups around each house or hut, hiding from air observation by sitting under the roof overhangs of the huts. Some of them however went in search of food at once, apparently under order from their officers. Liem watched with growing frustration and anger as Binh’s protestations were ignored and most of the reserves of rice of the village were taken away and distributed among the thousands of Chinese now hiding in Phuc Hoa. His anger then became rage when he saw four Chinese soldiers lead by its rope in the main village square a water buffalo. It was his family’s water buffalo, a beast they depended on to work their fields! For Liem, however, Tri was more than just his family’s water buffalo: it had been his companion since Liem was a little boy. Liem had ridden it proudly countless times, going around on top of the most powerful buffalo in the village. The fate the Chinese were reserving to Tri was too obvious to Liem, who started running towards them, hoping to be able to dissuade them. He was however too late, as one Chinese soldier drove his bayonet deep in the jugular of the water buffalo, making the animal moo with pain before it collapsed to the ground. Liem shouted in despair and, stopping where he was, was arming his rifle when Binh interposed himself, grabbing his rifle and immobilizing it.

“Please, Liem, let it go!”

“But, that’s our family buffalo! What are we going to use to prepare our fields for the next harvest? These bastards already stole most of our rice!”

Binh saw with alarm that the soldiers around them were now eyeing darkly young Liem, whose tone of voice was not hard to interpret.

“Liem, calm down! Do you want the Chinese to kill you simply for trying to save one buffalo? If you kill one of them, they are liable to take revenge on the whole village.” Tears of rage in his eyes, Liem looked for a moment at Binh, then turned and ran away in order not to see his buffalo being butchered in the middle of the square by cheerful Chinese soldiers hungry for meat.

Liem finally found refuge in the small temple of the village, actually only a small hut containing the niche honoring the ancestors. He then cultivated his growing hatred of the newcomers, who were acting as if the village belonged to them. He was still sitting inside the hut when the characteristic noise from a jet aircraft started to be heard, approaching the village. Liem got up, worried that his village was about to be bombed, as he could see through the opened door the Chinese soldiers scramble to go hide inside the houses of the village. To the surprise of Liem, only one aircraft appeared, flying just high enough to be out of rifle range. It was a fairly big airplane, with two big engines, and it flew directly over the village, but mercifully didn't drop any bombs. Instead, it dropped hundreds of sheets of paper that floated down and landed all around and inside the village. Liem ran to one of the paper sheets and, seeing that it bore a text in Vietnamese, read it with curiosity.

TO ALL THE PEOPLE OF VIETNAM.

THE UNITED STATES IS YOUR FRIEND. THE ONLY MISSION OF OUR FORCES IN VIETNAM IS TO PREVENT AN INVASION OF YOUR COUNTRY BY CHINA, AN INVASION SUPPORTED BY THE SOVIET UNION AND FOOLISHLY REQUESTED BY HO CHI MINH, WHO IS PASSING HIS LOYALTY TO THE COMMUNIST PARTY AHEAD OF HIS LOYALTY TO HIS COUNTRY. OUR PLANES AND SOLDIERS WILL NOT FIRE ON OR ATTACK ANY VIETNAMESE, EVEN IF THEY ARE MEMBERS OF THE VIETMINH, UNLESS THEY ARE ATTACKED. OUR AIRCRAFT WILL NOT BOMBARD ANY VIETNAMESE VILLAGE AND WILL ONLY ATTACK THE SOVIET AND CHINESE INVADERS IF THEY ARE OUTSIDE OF YOUR VILLAGES AND TOWNS. IF YOU SEE AMERICAN SOLDIERS, IDENTIFY YOURSELF AS BEING VIETNAMESE AND DISASSOCIATE YOURSELF AT ONCE FROM ANY NEARBY CHINESE OR SOVIET SOLDIERS: YOU WILL THEN BE SAFE FROM OUR SOLDIERS. YOUR COUNTRY IS ALREADY COMING CLOSER TO INDEPENDENCE. DO NOT ENDANGER THE FUTURE OF VIETNAM BY LETTING THE COMMUNIST LEADERS IN THE VIETMINH INVITE MORE INVADERS IN YOUR COUNTRY.

Liem read twice the tract, surprised by its content. While he was skeptical about the promises made by the Americans about not shooting at Vietnamese, Liem had to recognize that he had not heard about any such attack by Americans against Vietnamese villages or even against Vietminh units. A Chinese soldier arrived at that moment, shouting and gesticulating, to rip the pamphlet out of his hands. The Chinese, like dozens of his comrades, then went around to pick up every pamphlet they could find. Liem, seeing one such pamphlet that had fallen between trees inside the nearby jungle, waited for the Chinese to walk away before going to discreetly go pick up the sheet of paper, hiding it inside his shirt.

08:51 (Indochina Time)

Observation post of Team Alpha Two (1st Battalion, 10th SF Group)

National Road 31, between Lang-Son and Dong-Dang

Northeast Tonkin, Vietnam

“Look at all those Chinks, Sarge! There must be thousands of them!” Said in a low voice Corporal Steve Wright to his team leader while continuing to look through the scope of his sniper rifle, a Springfield 1903. Their carefully camouflaged position had an excellent view along the road from Dong-Dang to Lang-Son and then Hanoi. Presently, two long columns of Chinese soldiers were advancing towards Lang-Son, one column on each side of the paved road. Sergeant Brad Murphy, the special forces team leader, also observed the enemy column with his binoculars for long seconds.

“I don’t see any Vietnamese in this column, only Chinese soldiers. Our aviators will be able to go at it with gusto on that column.”

“Is it really necessary to take so many precautions in order not to shoot at Vietnamese, Sarge? It complicates a lot our job, while increasing the risks to us.”

Murphy gave a dubious look to his subaltern in response.

“Steve, you heard like me the briefing given by our colonel. We are right now trying to break the alliance between the Vietminh and the Chinese and, with luck, to turn them against each other. Be happy to have for once a general that thinks with her head rather than with her asshole and be nice and all smiles to the Vietnamese we will meet. Now, go discreetly wake up the others while I make a radio call.”

As Wright was crawling backward to go wake up the three other soldiers of their reconnaissance team, Murphy grabbed the handset of their long range HF radio backpack set and pressed the microphone switch.

"X-Ray, this is Alpha Two, contact report, over."

The answer came nearly immediately, strong and clear, making Murphy thank mentally the presence of a command and control aircraft high over the Northern Tonkin.

"This is X-Ray! Send your report, Alpha Two."

"X-Ray, I have a massive column of Chinese infantry walking along National Road 31 towards Lang-Son and coming from Dong-Dang. I don't see any Vietnamese with them. Here are the coordinates of the head of the column..."

The tactical air controller noted the position given by Murphy and replied after a short delay.

"Understood, Alpha Two. Keep the enemy column under observation. Planes are on the circuit and will arrive in four minutes, out."

Murphy had a mean smile as he put down the handset: the portion of road the Chinese were now using was bordered on both sides by nearly dried rice paddies, leaving precious little cover to the Chinese soldiers. Normally, the Chinese would advance only by night, in order to lower their vulnerability to air attacks, but they were probably already late on their schedule. They were also probably short on food and had to advance in order to find something to eat on their way, thanks to the devastating attacks by the planes of Major General Dows on their supply dumps inside China. Murphy looked at his radio operator, who was now awake and was putting on his headset.

"It will soon be raining shit on those Chinese. Keep your ears open for any call from X-Ray."

"Understood, Sarge!" Answered Private Reading in a nervous tone as he watched the seemingly endless column of Chinese soldiers walking briskly towards Lang-Son, visible in the distance to the Southeast.

As promised by the air controller, Murphy heard the approaching sound of jet engines less than four minutes later, coming from the direction of Dong-Dang. Arriving low and at high speed, four Republic A-3 THUNDERBOLT II attack aircraft loaded down with sub-munitions dispensers and napalm canisters swooped one after the other over the startled Chinese column, each plane releasing in sequence eight napalm canisters. A portion of road over a kilometer long was then transformed into hell, with huge fireballs

rising in the air, and with over a thousand Chinese soldiers roasting alive in seconds under the satisfied eyes of the American SF soldiers. The surviving Chinese soldiers at the head and the tail of the column jumped at once in the rice paddies, trying to find some cover. The water however came only to their ankles, leaving them plainly visible to the pilots of the attack aircraft. This time, the planes broke into two pairs for their next attack, each pair targeting one side of the road and firing their 30mm cannons. Hundreds of Chinese soldiers fell under the cannon fire, leaving less than 300 terrorized survivors to try to find refuge in the nearest portion of jungle. The planes made a third pass, again using their 30mm cannons before the survivors could get to the jungle trees. Less than fifty Chinese soldiers manage to get under the cover of the trees, having thrown away everything except their personal weapons. Even the cover of the jungle proved insufficient to protect the surviving Chinese, the A-3s swooping over them and releasing a rain of high explosive-fragmentation heavy bomblets that broke through the jungle canopy before exploding on the ground, each bomblet shooting hundreds of steel pellets in all directions. Murphy and his men were grinning from ear to ear as the four fighter-bombers flew away, leaving hundreds of dead bodies behind them.

"That's what I call close air support!" Exclaimed Murphy before grabbing the handset of their HF radio set.

"X-Ray, this is Alpha Two. The thrash removers just passed by and did an excellent cleanup job. I estimate enemy casualties at close to 2,000 men. Less than fifty enemy soldiers survived the raid and took refuge in a patch of jungle three miles northwest of Lang-Son, over."

"X-Ray, understood. Stay in your location and continue to observe and report, out."

"So, Sarge, what do we do now?" Asked Wright as Murphy put down the handset. The latter smiled to his men and turned on his back to sleep a bit, putting his jungle hat over his face to hide the Sun.

"We quietly wait for our next customers. Wake me up when they will arrive."

11:53 (Indochina Time)

Vietminh field headquarters near Cao Bang

Ho Chi Minh, who was finishing a frugal meal of rice and dried fish, looked up with impatience at Vo Nguyen Giap when the latter approached the table used by Ho and his two highest ranking associates, Truong Chinh and Le Duan.

"So, Vo, do we finally have news from the Chinese and the Soviets?"

"Yes, and they are not good, Bac Ho." Answered somberly the head of the Vietminh forces. "The American planes have succeeded in destroying completely the supply depots of the invasion force, as well as nearly every one of its vehicles, tanks and artillery pieces. The Chinese infantry also suffered grievous losses. Despite those losses, Marshall Lin Piao decided to still launch the invasion and ordered his surviving troops to enter Vietnam. However, the American planes continue to harass the Chinese troops and are causing them further losses, apart from slowing their advance to a crawl. The worst thing for us, though, is that the surviving Chinese troops, cut off from their supply lines, have started to seize food in the villages they are passing through. I have already received many reports of incidents between Chinese soldiers and our militiamen in the border area villages where the Chinese grabbed the local rice reserves. Also, the Americans have started to drop over every village pamphlets that encourage discord between us and the Chinese. I am sorry to report that those pamphlets seem to be having a significant influence on many of our people, Bac Ho."

"Those of our people who are ready to doubt our cause and to distrust our allies simply because of pamphlets do not deserve to be parts of the Vietminh and should be eliminated." Said on an indignant tone Truong Chinh, the number two man of the Vietnamese Communist Party and an admirer of the Communist Chinese leader, Mao Zedong. Ho Chi Minh threw an annoyed look at him before facing Giap.

"And the Soviets in all this? Where are their tank and artillery units that were supposed to support the Chinese infantry?"

Giap made a derisive gesture of the hand at that question.

"The Soviets evaporated with the American bombs, Bac Ho. What survived the bombardments then withdrew from the border area, pretending that they were too badly mauled to fight effectively."

"Those damn Soviets!" Raged Ho Chi Minh. "We cannot trust them in anything. And their air force? Can they at least intercept those damn American planes?"

"General Sokolin told me that he has only a handful of planes left, all outclassed by the American planes, while his airfields are a shambles."

Ho Chi Minh took a moment to digest all those bad news, nodding his head while mumbling to himself.

"We won't be able to count on our allies anymore... That young Dows was saying the truth after all. She is decidedly dangerous, very dangerous indeed."

"What do we do now with our own forces, Bac Ho?" Asked Giap. "Should I delay again the general attack order for our regular and clandestine units?"

"No! We will attack isolated French garrisons, as well as French officials and citizens in the main cities, as planned. I want the French citizens in Vietnam to be so terrified that they will flee back to France while abandoning their plantations and plants. By creating fear and confusion in the enemy's rear, we will give a chance to our Chinese allies to reorganize and concentrate their efforts."

"And the Americans, who pretend to be the friends of all the Vietnamese?"

"I don't know anymore, Giap." Said Ho Chi Minh in a discouraged tone. "I had lost all hope during the last years of convincing the Americans to support our fight for independence, but it is as if someone just rewrote their foreign policy concerning us."

"This General Dows may have succeeded in influencing her president, Bac Ho." Cautiously suggested Le Duan, the number three of the party. "From what we know of her, she seems sympathetic to the Vietnamese people."

"Could a simple major general, as talented as she is said to be, have so much political influence in Washington?" Asked Ho Chi Minh, clearly skeptical. Giap took on himself to answer him.

"I studied carefully the intelligence and information we have on that woman, Bac Ho, and I think that she effectively has a discreet influence on her president. She in fact served as a presidential adviser for the preceding president, Martin, before the arrival in power of Dewey. Our sources in Saigon say that she is in deep disagreement with the American ambassador concerning the foreign policy of the United States concerning Vietnam and she clearly detests the colonial policies of the French. General Dows also has a reputation for often taking important initiatives without the prior approval of her superiors."

Ho Chi Minh thought that over for a moment before looking again at Giap.

"The American planes, have they attacked our men or our camps yet?"

"Not once, Bac Ho. In fact, I received this morning a report from Dong-Dang saying that the American aircraft that were attacking and decimating a Chinese column near the village stopped their attacks immediately once the surviving Chinese soldiers

withdrew inside Dong-Dang. I believe that the American pilots have orders not to fire on any Vietnamese, at least civilian ones, something supported by their propaganda pamphlets.”

“So, if our forces do not engage the Americans, they won’t attack us?”

“I believe so, Bac Ho.”

“Then, we will attack the French, but will avoid completely the Americans. Cancel our planned attack on their base in Da Nang for the moment. Le Duan, see if it would be possible to send a trusted man to contact discreetly this General Dows, to see what she wants exactly. Does she really have the authority to act like she does, or is she playing on her own?”

Truong Chinh listened to this with growing outrage, finally exploding in indignation.

“How could we speak of sparing those Americans when they are causing such cruel losses to the courageous Chinese soldiers that came to support our fight against the Imperialists, Bac Ho?”

“Our fight is against the French, Truong.” Replied Ho Chi Minh. “If the Americans are really ready to accept the independence of Vietnam and to encourage the French to leave, then we would be stupid to make them our enemies.”

“But, the Chinese are our allies! Acting like this would be to betray them while their soldiers are dying for our cause.”

Ho Chi Minh didn’t have a reply to that, realizing a bit too late that accepting the Sino-Soviet offer of an invasion force in order to get rid of the French had possibly been a grave political mistake on his part. He knew well his people and how it was suspicious of the Chinese, who had invaded Vietnam numerous times in the long history of the country. However, he could not take a proper political decision concerning the actual situation without knowing exactly what to expect from the Americans, this new factor in an already complicated equation.

“My orders stand, Truong! Anyway, from what I understand of the actual military situation, our Chinese allies have basically failed, while the Soviets have vanished. Let’s concentrate our efforts on the French for the moment until we know what to really expect from the Americans.”

Furious, but not daring to disobey him, Truong Chinh got up from the table and walked away, leaving behind his half-finished meal. That left Ho Chi Minh to think about his next move while finishing his own meal. Much would depend on that young Dows now.

13:48 (Indochina Time)**Headquarters of the Joint Task Force – Indochina****Da Nang Air Force Base**

Edward Lansdale had a thin smile on his lips as he entered the operations center of the task force: Dows' plan seemed to be going along very well indeed. The Dulles brothers and his superiors at the CIA could decidedly learn a lot from that young woman. Not seeing Dows around, he elected to go see instead her intelligence officer, the very pretty Jenny Kawena. He found the Hawaiian-Japanese in the adjacent intelligence section, studying a pile of reports.

"Colonel Kawena, I believe that I have a piece of good news for you and General Dows." Said Lansdale after stopping in front of her desk, making her look up from her reports. "The Vietminh high command has just issued a general order to all its units and cells to refrain from any hostile actions against American forces and personnel. A planned attack on this base has also been suspended. Added to that, the Vietminh cell that we now impersonate has been told to expect soon the arrival of an emissary who will come to talk discreetly with General Dows. However, the Vietminh high command has ordered as well the start of a general offensive, both conventional and unconventional, against the French in Vietnam, starting at midnight tonight."

Jenny scribbled that quickly on a notepad, then smiled to Lansdale.

"It seems that the general's plan is falling into place quite nicely, Colonel Lansdale. I will warn Commandant Larose about the expected attacks against his people...while keeping mum about the Vietminh directives concerning us."

"Right! You are quickly learning about this cloak and dagger stuff, Colonel Kawena."

"Well, I am learning from an old hand at that game, am I not, Colonel Lansdale?"

"True!" Replied Lansdale, amused, before leaving the intelligence section. Logically, he should advise the American embassy and Ambassador Heath of this, but he had been suspecting for some time already that there were leaks inside the embassy. Passing his info to Heath could thus possibly compromise his team of radio operators impersonating the Vietminh cell in Da Nang. It was also very possible that either Heath or Secretary of State John Foster Dulles himself would either ignore this vital piece of information or make the wrong conclusions from it. With the blinders that the analysts of the State Department were wearing concerning Vietnam, that last possibility was actually

a near probability. Lansdale finally decided to simply inform the CIA by routine means, without divulging the exact source of information. If Allen Dulles could figure out the correct meaning of this information by himself, something that was not a given, then he was welcomed to pass it himself to his brother.

16:50 (Indochina Time)

Officers' Mess, Da Nang Air Force Base

Mother Thérèse opened her mouth wide under the shock of surprise when she saw the improvised Christmas tree set up in a corner of the big dining room of the base's officers' mess. Hundreds of boxes of various sizes, all gift-wrapped, lay around the tree. The old nun looked at Ingrid, who had just led her inside the mess with her nuns and orphans.

"You have arranged for gifts for the kids, on top of offering them a plane ride and a supper? You are going to spoil them, General."

"This war has not spoiled them up to date, Mother Thérèse. As for the gifts, the whole personnel of my command contributed money to buy them: for the 5,000 of us, it was little, but it would mean so much for the children. I must say that my clerks had a lot of fun touring the stores in Da Nang and buying every toy and gift in sight: it gave them an excuse to become kids again. I am myself an orphan and I want these poor children to have the best Christmas possible."

Mother Thérèse felt a tear roll down her cheek as she watched her little orphans scream with joy at the sight of the gifts piled around the tree.

"You are too good, General. May God bless you."

"God has already blessed me, Mother Thérèse." Replied Ingrid, her expression sober. "As you can see, the personnel of my command that could free itself temporarily from their work will participate in the party and supper, but many others must stay on duty. Unfortunately, the war continues, even on Christmas."

"And...how are things in the Tonkin, General?" Asked hesitantly the old nun, who had received in the morning an anguished call from Mother Mathilde, the Mother Superior in charge of the order's orphanage in Hanoi. Panic had started to spread through the French community in the Tonkin at the news of the Chinese invasion and at the rumors concerning the depredations committed by the Chinese soldiers along their route. Ingrid gave her a reassuring smile.

"Better than I expected actually, Mother Thérèse. My planes have succeeded in decimating the Chinese invasion force at the border and what is left of it is advancing very slowly while steadily suffering more losses."

"Sweet Jesus! To have to kill on Christmas Day sounds blasphemous indeed, but I realize that your pilots have no choice but to fight."

"Effectively, Mother Thérèse. Have the children sit around the tree: we will soon start the gift distribution."

As the nuns made the 248 children sit down in a semi-circle around the tree, Ingrid guided herself little Hien, holding gently her hand so that she could sit near the first row. Her ride in a plane, the first of her life, seemed to have broken partly the ice in the small girl, who smiled weakly to Ingrid as she was sitting down on the floor with the other children.

"There will also be a gift for me?" She asked in her tiny voice.

"Yes, my cute Hien. All the children will get at least one gift. I now have to go organize the distribution of the gifts. I will join you after that, I promise."

After kissing Hien on her forehead, Ingrid returned to the side of Mother Thérèse, who stood near the Christmas tree, inside the semi-circle of children. Looking at the orphans, then at the few hundred men and women of her command present for the party, Ingrid spoke first in English.

"Men and women of the Joint Task Force – Indochina, we are here to celebrate Christmas and to give a bit of joy to those little orphans, despite the fact that we are fighting a war. I would like first for all of us to have a thought for those of our command who are presently in combat and are risking their lives on the ground or in the air. May God be with them!"

"MAY GOD BE WITH THEM!" Replied in unison the aviators, Marines and soldiers present, their heads bowed, imitated by the few reporters and war correspondents that had been invited by Ingrid to Da Nang for the day. Those reporters and correspondents, including a few American ones that had also covered the Korean War, had already been able to take many sensational pictures, Ingrid having decided to let pictures of her planes be taken from some distance. Her goal in permitting such photos was to impress on the Soviets in particular how outclassed they were in the air in Indochina. With luck, that would finish convincing the Soviets to stay away from now on from Indochina. Ingrid then spoke in French, which most of the orphans understood.

"Welcome to the Da Nang Air Force Base on this Christmas Day, my little ones. Time has come to give you your gifts, following which we will have supper. I will ask to Mother Thérèse and her nuns to send you one by one to me, starting with the first row, from left to right."

Ingrid repeated her announcement in Vietnamese as the nuns started lining up and sending the children to her one by one. Greeting each child with a smile and a wish for happiness in Vietnamese, Ingrid chose two gifts per child and gave them to the excited girl or boy. Each gift box wore a tag indicating the type of toy it contained and for which sex and age category it would be most appropriate. This allowed Ingrid to proceed quickly, with Lewis Puller and Teresa James helping her by selecting the gifts and putting them at her feet as each child came up. There were in fact enough gifts to end up with a surplus, which was going to help the French nuns reequip the communal playrooms of the orphanage. The more than 9,000 dollars that her flash collection had gathered last evening had also allowed the buying of gifts of good quality, on top of leaving enough surplus to be able later to buy new clothes for the young orphans. More than one of the older children screamed with joy on receiving a nice wristwatch as one of their two gifts. Ingrid had however given some directives to those who had gone out this morning to buy the gifts, in order to make sure that the gifts would be appreciated by Vietnamese children. One of those directives had been simple but firm: no toy weapons! When came the turn of little Hien, Ingrid couldn't help have tears in her eyes on seeing her happy smile as she got her two gifts, a stuffed teddy bear and a tricycle.

"Merry Christmas, my sweet Hien."

"Thank you, Ingrid!" Said Hien in her little voice, bringing warmth to Ingrid's heart. A project started to form in her mind as Hien went back to her comrades, happily pedaling her tricycle while holding her teddy bear with one tiny arm.

Once the gift distribution was completed, Ingrid announced that supper would soon be served, then hurried to Major Woolmack, who was waiting near the entrance of the dining room.

"You can now let them in, Major. Just make sure that they are escorted at all times."

"My policemen will keep a close eye on them, General." Promised Woolmack before turning around and making a sign to one of his sergeants.

"Let the prisoners in, Sergeant!"

Whispers of surprise ran around the crowd of Americans in the mess when the seven Soviet pilots captured four days ago, including Lydia Litvyak and another female aviator, entered in single file, escorted by fourteen vigilant MPs. Ingrid quickly interposed herself as the reporters and war correspondents present ran up to take pictures of the Soviets, who still wore their flight suits.

“Please, I will ask you not to take pictures of our prisoners of war, as the Geneva Conventions prohibit that they be humiliated or used for propaganda purpose. I invited them simply so that they could share with us the spirit of Christmas. You can mention them in your articles, but I will not allow you to take pictures of them.”

Ivan Kozhedub, who still had one leg in a big cast and walked with crutches, nodded his head in satisfaction when Lydia Litvyak translated Ingrid’s words in Russian for his benefit. He then went with his six pilots to a table designated by Ingrid, which was situated at the end of the main line of tables forming a large ‘E’. To the surprise of the Soviets, four little Vietnamese orphans flanked by a French nun and two American female pilots sat opposite them at their section of tables. Their surprise turned to delight when Ingrid, now wearing a cook’s apron and hat in order to serve the meal with her senior officers, put down in front of them four bottles of vodka and seven little glasses. She explained herself at once with a smile, speaking in Russian.

“For your exclusive use, ladies and gentlemen. We have to fly tomorrow, but not you.”

“Decidedly, you are the perfect hostess, General Dows. Thank you for your sense of humanity.” Said Kozhedub, meaning it. Ingrid nodded her head and went to the head table before looking at the men, women and children around her.

“I wish to dedicate this Christmas party to our little guests, as well as to all the men and women of goodwill here and in the frontlines. May this war end quickly, so that peace could return to Vietnam. Amen!”

“AMEN!” Replied in unison the 400 Americans present.

09:10 (Washington Time) / 21:10 (Indochina Time)

Saturday, December 27, 1952 ‘C’

Oval Office, The White House

Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State of the United States, didn't like the expression on President Dewey's face when he was let in the Oval Office. The fact that Dewey had asked to see him in private only two days after Christmas didn't augur well either. His initial impression proved correct when Dewey neglected to offer him a seat, instead slapping down on top of his work desk morning copies of the WASHINGTON POST and of the NEW YORK TIMES. Both newspapers showed on their front pages an official picture of Ingrid Dows in Air Force uniform, with bold titles saying 'A 7,000 YEAR-OLD YOUNG WOMAN?' and 'AMERICAN, RUSSIAN OR CHINESE?'

"Secretary Dules, can you explain to me how a secret supposedly known only to my closest advisors and highest appointees could end up on the front page of most American newspapers and even on some European papers as well? How come the CIA, who was not on the list of those who officially knew about this secret, could pass that information to the French? Wouldn't it have anything to do with the fact that your brother Allen is head of the CIA?"

Realizing that lying would be futile, Dulles took a dignified expression while answering Dewey.

"Mister President, I believe that it is high time that the true nature of that woman be looked at with critical eyes. What tells us where her loyalty really lies?"

"I could start with her two Medals of Honor that she wears around her neck, plus her Purple Heart medal with cluster." Replied frostily Dewey. "This girl has amply proved her courage and loyalty in the course of two wars while serving the United States, Secretary Dulles. However, you chose to ignore my directive about keeping her unique talent secret, this while that girl is in the process of fighting her third war in an American uniform. I was expecting better from you, much better!"

"Mister President, if this girl is truly loyal to us, then this information won't hurt her, in my opinion."

"Really?" Replied the President on a dangerous tone. "Then what do you think of the fact that President Auriol of France called me earlier this morning to ask me to have her replaced in Indochina, on the pretext that she is partial to the Vietminh because of her past incarnation as a Vietnamese? You know what I told him? That he should in fact count himself lucky that there is a real expert on hand in Indochina, helping his bunch of colonialists from being wiped out by the Chinese. I also reminded President Auriol that France has been dragging its feet for over two years now concerning their promise to give complete independence to Vietnam and to leave Indochina. That foot

dragging has in fact contributed directly to the worsening of the general situation in Indochina in the last two years. President Auriol then tried to make me believe that the French forces were fully able to deal with the Vietminh threat, something that the news reports from Indochina and the latest situation report from General Dows totally contradict. I then suggested that I could withdraw both Dows AND our joint task force from Indochina if he had so little confidence in her. Strangely enough, he then withdrew his objections to Dows. Seeing the reaction of the main American newspapers to this piece of news this morning, I don't even want to imagine what kind of circus we will see tonight on TV and on radio news. By your indiscretion and your hostility towards her, you have potentially discredited our most effective military commander in that theater, Secretary Dulles."

"Effective against the Chinese and the Soviets, Mister President, but against the Vietminh? According to the reports sent from Saigon by Ambassador Heath, Dows has not attacked even once the Vietminh and even supposedly helped free a Vietminh spy from jail. She is way too soft with those Communist Vietnamese and is clearly biased towards them, in my opinion."

Dewey stared at Dulles for a moment, bitterly disappointed to realize how much his own Secretary of State was blinded by his prejudices.

"Mister Dulles, know that I received late last night a new report from General Dows on the political and military situation in the North of Vietnam, along with her plans to turn around the Chinese invasion. This morning, I personally approved her plans after reviewing them with General Bradley. Do you even understand Dows' strategy concerning the Vietminh, which is to dissociate its purely nationalist elements from the communist ones? She is also trying to discredit the Vietminh leaders who called for the help of the Chinese. As a result, Ho Chi Minh now seems to be reconsidering his options and gave an order to his troops to avoid any hostilities against American forces in Indochina. Just name me one other American general or diplomat who would have been able to accomplish such a feat, Mister Dulles."

Dulles was left speechless for a moment, caught off balance by this. He had not been told about such a directive from Ho Chi Minh and had no retort ready. Dewey watched Dulles' evident confusion and took at that moment a decision based solely on his personal judgment, ignoring the counsels he had received to date from the various Washington 'experts' during the last days.

"I see! In view of all this, I have decided on the line of conduct I will follow concerning Indochina, Secretary Dulles. I will do my best to defend the integrity and reputation of General Dows from the public accusations and attacks that your indiscretion have caused. I will also publicly announce today that I have full confidence in Major General Dows and that I am naming her my plenipotentiary envoy to Indochina, on top of retaining her as commander of our joint task force there. From now on, I have the firm intention of rewarding success in Indochina, instead of listening to the empty promises and the anti-communist verbiage spewed by your department."

Dulles looked at his President with horror in his eyes.

"Dows, your plenipotentiary envoy to Indochina? But, you can't do this, Mister President! What about our official policies concerning Southeast Asia?"

"Consider those policies as being under active review, Mister Dulles. As for your position as my Secretary of State, I will also have to reconsider my options."

Dulles' eyes narrowed behind his glasses, while his jaws tightened.

"This could cost your dearly politically, Mister President. I am not alone in Washington, by far, to have doubts about that young opportunist."

Dewey then exploded and jumped out of his chair, enraged by so much bad faith.

"A YOUNG OPPORTUNIST, A WOMAN WITH 7,000 YEARS OF LIFE EXPERIENCE? ARE YOU STUPID OR SIMPLY OBTUSE, SECRETARY DULLES? THIS MEETING IS OVER! NOW, GET OUT!"

Severely shaken, Dulles turned around and left the Oval Office, leaving Dewey alone to calm himself. Sitting back down, the President thought for a moment about his next move, finally grabbing the receiver of his telephone and forming a number before speaking in the microphone.

"This is the President! I want to speak as soon as possible on an encrypted line with Major General Dows in Da Nang, in Indochina. Then advise the French ambassador that I want to see him in the Oval Office for one O'clock this afternoon. Don't bother informing the State Department or Secretary Dulles about that meeting... Thank you!"

Dewey then put back down the receiver and straightened his back against his swivel chair, reclining back and closing his eyes to better think.

10:51 (Indochina Time)

Sunday, December 28, 1952 'C'

Headquarters of the French intelligence services in Indochina

Saigon, Cochin China

Captain Antoine Savani, head of the Indochina Department of the 2ème Bureau, the French intelligence services, reread a second time the article on the front page of the newspaper LE MONDE that spoke about the past incarnations of Ingrid Dows, as well as her nomination as the plenipotentiary envoy of President Dewey for Indochina. From what Savani knew already about Dows' intentions, her growing political influence in the United States could only mean bad news for the French who had businesses or interests in Indochina. In this, the 2ème Bureau, and by extension the French government, would lose a lot if forced to leave precipitously the country. The 2ème Bureau made a windfall from the traffic of opium that came from Laos and Cambodia and that supplied the opium dens of Saigon. It then used those profits to finance the fight against the Vietminh, buying the loyalty or collaboration of the heads of religious sects or of officials of the Bao Dai government, paying assassins to eliminate suspected Vietminh sympathizers and buying weapons for various groups opposed to the Vietminh. Other substantial revenues came from the casinos and bordellos of Saigon that belonged to the Binh Xuyen, a powerful criminal organization opposed to the Vietminh. The 2ème Bureau had allied itself with the Binh Xuyen, gradually conceding to it effective control of the majority of the city of Saigon and of the Cholon District. Many retired members of the 2ème Bureau, most of whom came from Corsica, like Savani, had taken roots in Indochina, profiting from the French colonial regime to enrich themselves and also often participating in the various local criminal enterprises. One of those retired 2ème Bureau agents even controlled the traffic of the opium that was surplus to the needs of Saigon, surplus that was then rerouted to the opium addicts in Marseilles, while another retiree managed the finances of the leader of the Binh Xuyen, Le Van Vien, also known under the nickname of Bay Vien.

Savani's phone rang as he eyed with hatred the picture of Ingrid Dows on the front page of LE MONDE. Keeping his eyes on the picture of the 'young' woman, he grabbed the receiver and brought it to his left ear.

"Savani here!... Yes, I read it, General... I believe that we should get rid of her before she causes too much damage. We should also make her reveal her contacts with the Vietminh and what she knows about Indochina before killing her... I understand you perfectly, General. We will keep our role in her disappearance very discreet... I will keep you informed of how things will go, General... Have a good day, General."

Putting down the receiver, Savani then thought about how he would proceed. One thing was certain, though: he was going to have to get Dows in Da Nang, her actual base of operation. He made a mean smile as he imagined the interrogation of that beautiful young woman and promised himself to keep most of the fun for himself.

13:48 (China Time) / 12:48 (Indochina Time)

British embassy, Beijing

Peoples' Republic of China

Colonel Dimitri Vlassov, Soviet Air Force Attaché in Beijing, raised his eyes from his cup of tea that a servant had just brought and looked at his host, Group Commander Basil Atkins, who was sitting facing him in one of the reception lounges of the British embassy.

"Have you read those rather fantastic press articles concerning that young Major General Ingrid Dows, Commander Atkins?"

Atkins, who looked very 'R.A.F. pilot' with his bushy red moustache, nodded his head while thinking back at those press articles.

"Our embassy has received a few copies of the LONDON TIMES and of the DAILY TELEGRAPH via Hong Kong, Colonel. The BBC also broadcasted a whole one-hour program about Dows. A very interesting woman, I must say."

"Only interesting, Commander? We are talking about a case that is probably unique in the history of Humanity, a case that concerns a person who is holding a lot of influence on the situation in this part of the World. You British must have often heard stories about this incarnation business while in India. What do you think of this story?"

Atkins smiled slightly, understanding the curiosity of the Soviet officer: the British embassy was now full of often passionate discussions on that very subject, following the publication of the revelations concerning Ingrid Dows. The fact that she had just been named as a plenipotentiary envoy by President Dewey only had added to the conversations.

"The Aide de Camp of Sire David Beatty, a Sikh, discussed this story with me. He was actually happy to see that one of the main beliefs of his religion, reincarnation, was finally supported by an actual fact. Unfortunately, the articles on Dows do not give much real details on her supposed past incarnations, except to say that she was at one time a Vietnamese and had also been a Russian and a Chinese in other past lives. It is as if this story had been released in order to hurt her reputation inside the United States. In that, I must say that whoever did that utterly failed to achieve his goals."

"But, can't such past souvenirs create some personality disorders? This Major General Dows could be a potential schizophrenia case, a schizophrenic that has now been given full powers by her president concerning Indochina."

"That is indeed what some of the enemies of that Dows in Washington are trying to insinuate, Colonel Vlassov, but I don't believe it. The ADC of Sire David think that those souvenirs only deepen her level of personal experience and general knowledge, without affecting her actual personality. I must say that this story actually explains many things that made me curious about Dows."

"What do you mean, Commander?" Asked Vlassov, clearly interested at once.

"Well, for one, I always wondered how such a young woman could demonstrate enough maturity to be a good general. Her tactical and strategic genius, which was amply demonstrated in two wars, is also uncommon for her age. Imagine the maturity and wisdom of a person that could mine 7,000 years of life experience. Imagine that this Dows could have been a famous general or a powerful king in the past. Maybe she was a general more than once in the past."

"A female general, in the past? That is difficult to believe, Commander."

"Not a female, but a male general, Colonel. According to Hindus, a person can be reincarnated either as a man or a woman, or even as an animal. Dows could very possibly have lived many lives as a man."

"And she would be able to recall those lives as a man, when she was sleeping with women?"

Atkins smiled in amusement when he thought about the implications of the Soviet's remark.

"That could effectively be quite spicy: Dows as a bisexual. She could catch about any man with her actual beauty. If she also happens to hunt women..."

It was the turn of Vlassov to smile in amusement.

"A picture that could be, uh, quite controversial in the United States, no? Those Americans are so prudish and hypocritical on the subject of sex. On the other hand, that would make quite a story in France, wouldn't it?"

Atkins laughed briefly at that barb shot at the French, whose sexual mores had always attracted disapproving remarks in Great Britain.

"Touché, Colonel! Changing subjects, can you tell me what is going on around the border with Indochina? The whole border area has been closed off to foreigners for over a month now and nothing is coming out in the local newspapers."

Vlassov thought for a moment about what he could say to Atkins. It would be only fair to give him some information, ideally non-critical one, if he was expecting in return information from Atkins.

"In truth, the new American aircraft in Da Nang have proved to be a severe shock for the Chinese, whose airfields near the Indochina border have been hit hard in the last few days by this General Dows."

"What about the Soviet Air Force?" Replied Atkins, who already had a good idea of what had happened in the border area. "Come on, Colonel Vlassov! The Americans have already said that Soviet pilots have been captured over Vietnam. This story about 'volunteers' in a fictitious air force has no credibility left to it, not after the Korean War." Vlassov shot a sharp look at the British, having lost many old comrades in the recent air battles over Vietnam, including Ivan Kozhedub.

"Our planes are effectively outclassed by the new American planes, particularly by that mysterious F-83. What does the R.A.F. know about that plane, Commander?"

"Only that it is capable of high supersonic speeds and can carry a wide array of ordnance, including air-to-air missiles." Answered frankly Atkins. "I must say that I would give my eyes to be able to pilot one of those F-83s. Dows is said to have directly contributed to its development while she was based at the American Air Force flight test center in California."

"That is also what we heard." Conceded Vlassov, thoughtful. "At least, we can say that her past incarnations didn't help her on that subject: planes didn't exist before the 20th Century."

"Quite true! Even without her past souvenirs, this General Dows is evidently not to be underestimated."

"Many are starting to realize that, Commander." Said Vlassov before putting down his cup of tea and getting up from his sofa. "Well, I believe that I will have to leave you now, Commander. Thank you for having received me."

"It was my pleasure, Colonel." Replied Atkins, also rising from his chair before shaking Vlassov's hand. He then escorted him back to the main entrance of the embassy, where the car from the Soviet embassy that had brought Vlassov was waiting. Atkins waited that the Soviet had gone in the car and that the vehicle in turn rolled out of the main gate before turning around. As he was about to return to the warmth of the embassy, a high altitude condensation trail in the sky attracted his attention. A single plane, most probably jet-propelled judging by its speed, was calmly overflying downtown Beijing in a straight line, coming from the North. By its direction, Atkins concluded that it must be a Soviet aircraft coming from Vladivostok, on the Pacific coast, and going to Kunming, which he knew was occupied by the Soviet air force. He thus didn't think much about it and walked inside to return to his office.

07:32 (China Time)

Monday, December 29, 1952 'C'

Lead Northrop YB-50A CONDOR heavy bomber

On very low altitude penetration run towards Beijing

"We are now passing the Chinese coast." Announced calmly the pilot of the YB-50A heavy bomber to her crew. "Objective in three minutes!"

The copilot, Captain Lois Brook, smiled slightly at the apparent lack of excitement in Major Barbara Erickson, as Lois fully realized how historic this mission will most probably become. In truth, the whole crew of the YB-50A were veteran flyers of the Second World War and had participated as such in many memorable bombing raids, including the devastating attack on Rabaul Harbor that had sunk the Japanese battleships YAMATO and MUSASHI. Normally, all those years since that war would have been enough to split apart crews, who would go on their way to various postings and, hopefully, promotions. However, the women of the 99th Wing, THE FIFINELLAS, had been stuck with very limited career choices, thanks to the rules of employment of women in the Army and Air Force, and still were. Apart from the 99th Wing itself, only a handful of other units, all transport or helicopter units, were open to women in the United States Air Force. For female combat pilots, the sole choice if they wanted to stay with a

combat air unit was the 99th Wing. While that had resulted in very slow promotions, it had on the other hand kept together what were probably the most experienced and combat-hardened fighter and bomber crews in the whole United States Air Force. The Communist Chinese were about to taste what facing such crews meant.

The four heavy bombers leading the mission package on Beijing were flying at an altitude of no more than 150 meters in the low light of early dawn, flying with the Sun at their back and doing Mach 1.2, or nearly 1,400 kilometers per hour. Eighteen YF-83As led by Brigadier General Teresa James, also flying low at Mach 1.2, were following closely behind the four YB-50As for the final sprint towards the Chinese capital. Further behind were the heavily laden Republic A-3Ns subsonic attack aircraft of the VMFA-232, The RED DEVILS, who would constitute the second wave of the attack. Much higher but still close to the Chinese coast was an EC-200R, on board which stood Ingrid Dows, which had activated mere minutes ago its electronic jammers in order to jam the two sole Chinese air search radars covering the Beijing area, as well as jamming the radio command network of the Chinese military. Behind the A-3Ns of the RED DEVILS, a lone Ball YC-10A THUNDERBIRD followed, flying just over the waves of the ocean, its crew ready to pluck out of trouble any pilot that would have to eject over China. That precaution, added by Ingrid Dows to the attack plan, had pleased the aircrews, who knew too well what they could expect if captured by the Communist Chinese, especially after this raid.

To fly at Mach 1.2 so low above the ground demanded absolute concentration on the part of the pilots of the raid and also boosted a lot fuel consumption, but it had three big advantages. First, with them flying faster than sound, any Chinese anti-aircraft gunner they would overfly in the still dark sky would hear the planes only after they had passed, when the sonic shock wave of the formation would hit the ground with enough force to pulverize every windows along its path. Second, at such a speed and low altitude, manually pointing a canon at the planes with any precision would be next to impossible. Thirdly, the short flight time between the coast and the objective would not allow any coastal observer to pass in a timely fashion the alert to Beijing before the arrival of the bombers over their objective. As for the objective itself, the Americans were being helped by the paranoia and obsession for security and secret of the Communist Chinese leaders. That paranoia had pushed all of those leaders to take

residence in a large, walled complex immediately to the west of the old Imperial Forbidden City, in the center of Beijing. The Chinese leaders also worked and met inside that complex, named the Zhongnanhai, coming out only under escort and for specific reasons. The Chinese leaders had thus provided unwittingly to the American planes a high value target, perfectly concentrated and easily recognizable.

Following roughly the railroad tracks of the Tianjing-Beijing line, Barbara Erickson turned on her final attack heading and took a bit of altitude on the signal from her navigator/bombardier, who was following closely their progression on her radar screen and infra-red cameras. Erickson then made a short radio call.

“To all Blue Dragon call signs, from Blue Dragon Leader: reduce speed to 500 knots now and deploy in attack formation.”

Her copilot took care of pulling back the engine throttles for her, Barbara holding firmly on her control wheel while her plane was being constantly shaken by air turbulence. They could now see the first suburbs of Beijing straight ahead as they were flashing by a series of small villages and towns.

“Blue Dragon call signs, arm your bombs now and tighten the formation around me: we want a good density for our bomb impacts... Target in sight dead ahead, three miles away! Open your bomb bays!”

In the residential building next to the British embassy that served to house diplomats, Group Commander Basil Atkins had just eaten breakfast and had served himself a last cup of tea. A group of jet aircraft suddenly thundered right above his building, making it shake on its foundations. The surprise made him drop his cup, which shattered on the floor of his kitchenette and splashed hot tea on his slippers.

“BLOODY HELL! WHO’S THE IDIOT...”

Atkins didn’t have time to complete his sentence before what sounded like the end of the World could be heard, while all his windows exploded into shards. A powerful shock wave blew through his apartment, sending him flying backward to thump down on the wooden floor. Incredibly, the ear-splitting sound went on for many seconds, sounding like a fierce thunderstorm right over his head. Atkins was forced to stay behind the cover of his kitchen counter as his window curtains kept dancing from the successive shock waves. The truth then struck the R.A.F. fighter pilot.

“Good God! A bombing raid on Beijing! This must be the Americans!”

As soon as the noise from bomb explosions stopped, Atkins ran to his balcony, which gave him a fantastic view of the old Imperial Forbidden City, braving the cold air of December in his woolen robe. He was then able to see four huge jet bombers of unknown design zooming towards the sky while flying away, leaving behind them an enormous cloud of smoke and dust over the Zhongnanhai. The district itself had disappeared, completely covered by the cloud, but the nearby Imperial Forbidden City seemed wholly intact, by some kind of miracle. Atkins was marveling at the precision of the American bombing when eighteen new jet aircraft, smaller than the bombers but still of very respectable size, overflew the Zhongnanhai. The newcomers were split in two groups and flew in tight formations, cutting at right angle the trajectory of the bombers while releasing hundreds of bombs.

"Aw shit!" Exclaimed Atkins while dropping down on his belly on top of the balcony. The explosions of strings of bombs again shook his building, making him fear that his balcony could well fall off. He however kept his eyes on the American planes, mentally recording their shapes as they climbed in the sky and turned eastward. Not a single anti-aircraft gun had opened fire yet, proof of the utter surprise the Americans had achieved. Atkins finally got up cautiously, dusting himself off while trying to evaluate the damage caused to the Zhongnanhai District. He had to concede that the American flyers had done a job that any R.A.F. Bomber Command pilot would have been proud of. At first sight, and despite the enormous cloud of smoke and dust that covered the district, nothing must have been left intact inside the Zhongnanhai, while the majority of its occupants must be dead by now.

The enormity of what had just happened, as well as the political and strategic consequences that would come from the mass elimination of the highest Chinese leaders, were starting to dawn on Atkins when more jet aircraft zoomed over his building from an altitude of less than fifty meters, nearly making the British fall off his balcony. His heart beating hard again, the R.A.F. officer easily recognized the American emblems on the planes, which were of a different model than the two previous ones. The planes, their wings and bellies heavily laden with ordnance, overflew the Zhongnanhai District, disappearing for a moment in the cloud of smoke and dust while dropping their loads. Instead of powerful explosions, Atkins heard rumbles this time, as enormous fireballs climbed in the sky after dousing flaming liquid over the ruins of the district.

“Damn! Napalm! Tens of tons of napalm! These Americans sure want everybody in that district to be dead.”

Again, he mentally noted the shape of the attacking planes and the details he could see about their design. His mind feverish, he ran inside of his apartment, which was cooling down rapidly due to the freezing wind now entering freely through the broken windows, to note down in writing what he had just seen, also making quick sketches of the planes he had seen. His ambassador, like his superiors in London, were certainly going to question him about this American raid. One thing was clear at once to him, though: this raid had Major General Dows written all over it. It had everything: audacity, surprise, concentration of fire and precision.

In the last A-3N to overfly the Zhongnanhai, still carrying nine tons of napalm canisters, First Lieutenant James McConnell was having a hard time controlling his plane with any precision, the air turbulences created by the passage of the previous aircraft making his attack aircraft shake wildly. He was already way too low to his taste, flying at an altitude of about thirty meters when the preceding A-3Ns had dropped their napalm canisters. His navigator/bombardier, Second Lieutenant Martin Letheridge, shouted then in the intercom.

“CANISTERS AWAY! YOU CAN CLIMB!”

McConnell, busy fighting the air turbulences that wanted to suck his plane towards the ground, was not able to obey immediately and suddenly found his aircraft right in the middle of the rising fireballs from the napalm canisters dropped by his squadron mates. As he was pulling with all his strength on his control stick to climb, he heard both of his turbofan engines die down. He then understood with horror that the burning napalm had burned all the oxygen in the air around him, smothering his engines. Still flying on but being very low, he put his plane in a moderate climb while turning to the right, intent on restarting his engines once out of the fireballs. He was starting to overfly the old Forbidden City when he pushed the ‘start’ buttons of his two engines, hoping like hell that they would get back to life. Nothing happened. His attack aircraft was now quickly losing speed and was close to stalling. McConnell realized with a pang of the heart that he now had time for only one thing to save himself and his navigator/bombardier.

“MARTIN, EJECT, EJECT, EJECT!”

Letheridge obeyed without hesitation, understanding that their plane was lost, and pulled his ejection handle, making the canopy fly off just before the rocket motor of his seat lit

up and catapulted him out of the A-3N. James McConnell took two seconds before imitating him, time for him to point the nose of his aircraft down towards an impressive-looking building whose façade was decorated with a huge red star. Ejecting only seconds before the impact of his plane with the building, the young Marine Corps pilot felt relief when his parachute opened and started to slow down his fall. He then remembered where he was, something that cooled down his joy considerably. He was now floating down at an altitude of less than 200 meters above the eastern limit of the old Forbidden City, with the wind pushing him southward. His navigator/bombardier was on his part floating above the center of the Forbidden City. The view that McConnell presently had of the complex of ancient palaces and parks would have contented any tourist, but the problem was that he was not a simple tourist and that the Chinese on the ground would certainly not greet him simply by asking for his admission ticket. Pulling on the ropes controlling his directional parachute, he veered towards the right, with the intention of landing close to his comrade, so that they could defend each other. His doomed A-3N then impacted against the building that he had pointed it at, crashing through its façade and ending inside before its fuel, 76mm rockets and 30mm shells exploded, blowing off the roof and setting what was left of the building on fire. The shock wave from the explosion actually pushed McConnell in the direction of his navigator/bombardier but also deformed his parachute for a few crucial seconds and accelerating his fall. He felt an intense pain in his right leg when he landed on the snow-covered pavement of the Forbidden City, just in front of the magnificent Palace of Supreme Harmony, the central point of the complex. Ending face down on the ground, McConnell kept in a cry of pain and sat up slowly in order to undo his parachute harness. Martin Letheridge had landed less than fifty meters from him, apparently without injuries and ran towards him as he finished unbuckling his harness. McConnell then tried to get up but had to sit back with a cry of pain: his right leg was probably broken. His comrade took only a few seconds to get to him, his Colt .45 pistol in one hand.

“Are you okay, James?”

The pilot shook his head, his face tight from the pain.

“Not really, Martin. I think that my right leg is broken.”

“Shit! That won’t help us.” Said rather uselessly the young navigator, attracting a sarcastic look from his pilot.

"It wasn't on the program, believe me, Martin. We have to get out of here, quickly!"

"But, how?"

The howling from powerful jet engines approaching them then answered his question.

In the YC-10 designated as the search and rescue plane for the Beijing mission, Major Ann Morgan shouted an order on her intercom as she made her aircraft come down towards the two shot down American aviators, her two big turbofan engines already pivoting up towards the vertical.

"MACHINE GUNNERS, GET READY! FIRE ON ANYONE APPROACHING OUR PILOTS!"

The two women acting as observers/gunners switched on at once their respective machine gun turret, making its aerodynamic cover slide out of the way and revealing a .30 caliber Gatling machine gun with rotating multiple barrels. They then grabbed firmly the handles of their swivel-mounted observation scopes, which also acted as target sights and to which the roof-mounted turrets were slaved. On her part, the cargo master of the YC-10, a technical sergeant in her mid thirties, grabbed her M1A2 carbine and slung it across her chest before getting up and going quickly to the control box of the rear cargo ramp. Sitting in one of the folding jump seats inside the cabin and with her heart beating hard, Margaret Bourke-White, photo-journalist for the LIFE magazine, started to wonder if she should really have volunteered to come on this mission. She had already been able to take some sensational pictures of the raid from the cockpit of the YC-10 and had even photographed the huge cloud of smoke and dust caused by the bombardment, but had been ordered back to her seat after she had photographed two parachutes opening over the old Forbidden City. From the view she now had from her window, she could clearly see the imposing mass of the Palace of Supreme Harmony, sitting on top of its steps, as her plane flew down towards the esplanade facing it. Telling herself that this had to be a one-of-a-kind opportunity, Margaret took photo after photo, both through her window and inside the cabin, photographing the two female gunners and the cargo master, standing ready. The rear ramp started coming down just before the aircraft touched the ground smoothly, its ten large, low-pressure main wheels cushioning their landing on the pavement. Margaret then saw with a jump of her heart through the opened ramp the two downed aviators, still wearing their flying helmets, hurrying towards the plane. They were however still a good eighty meters from the YC-

10 and one of the aviators was limping, while his comrade was supporting him on one side. Margaret took a couple of pictures of them, with the Palace of Supreme Harmony visible behind the aviators, as the cargo master ran out of the plane to meet them. Margaret herself then decided to go out and undid her seat belt, getting up and running out to go stand at the foot of the ramp, her boots crunching the thin layer of snow. From there, she was able to take multiple pictures of the cargo master as the latter got to the aviators and took hold of one arm of the limping pilot, wrapping it over her shoulders and starting to run with the navigator, dragging the pilot towards the search and rescue aircraft. One of the machine gunners then opened fire, her Gatling gun producing an ear-splitting racket and spitting close to one hundred bullets per second. Swinging her camera, Margaret took pictures of a large group of Chinese soldiers that had just appeared from behind a secondary palace about 300 meters away. The other aircraft gunner also opened fire a few seconds later as another group of Chinese soldiers appeared from the opposite direction. Despite severe losses among their ranks from the Gatling gun fire, the Chinese soldiers kept running towards the YC-10, with some of them stopping and kneeling to aim their rifles. A bullet whistled past Margaret's head, while another bullet ricocheted on the ground nearby. Despite her fear, the journalist kept taking pictures, alternating between the approaching trio of aviators and the Chinese soldiers. One of the groups of soldiers suddenly disappeared in a carpet of explosions just as Margaret was taking a photo of them. A YF-83A then zoomed overhead, caught by the next picture taken by the journalist. A second YF-83A also strafed the other group of soldiers with a salvo of 76mm rockets, making the rifle fire against the plane stop abruptly. The two Marine aviators and the cargo master finally arrived at the aircraft, hurrying up the ramp and inside the cabin. Margaret took one last picture before running inside as well as the ramp started going up. She however didn't have the time to get to a seat before their plane suddenly started rising quickly, making her fall flat on the floor of the cabin. A few bullets hit the YC-10 with metallic noises but the aircraft continued its speedy climb while accelerating forward. Taking a deep breath to calm herself down, Margaret looked at the two Marine flyers that they had saved in extremis, who were now sitting in jump seats and were catching their breath.

"Hey, guys, give me a nice smile!"

James McConnell and Martin Letheridge grinned from ear to ear at once, too happy to be alive and free after their misadventure.

07:45 (China Time)

Prisoners of war work camp in Manzhouli

Four kilometers south of the Soviet-China border

Northern Manchuria, China

Lieutenant (Navy) Jack Anders was still sleeping as best he could on his rickety wooden bunk bed, shivering in his dirty, ragged flight suit and aviator's vest, despite the single stinky wool blanket covering him. The wooden barrack housing him and another hundred or so Americans taken prisoners in Korea had only a single small pot-bellied stove to heat it, and their Chinese captors were quite stingy with the coal they provided for it, even though the hundreds of American prisoners of war held in Manzhouli were the ones toiling day-long to extract it from the local coal mine. Anders had been captured seven months ago, after his F9F PANTHER had been shot down by a Mig-15 over Korea, then had spent two months in a prison camp in North Korea before being transferred here. He could however still consider himself lucky, as most of his companions of misfortune had now been held in this work camp for over four years, while others had been taken north by rail into the Soviet Union, to be never heard again after. Their camp was itself a mere four kilometers south of the border, with the Soviet city of Zabaykatsk just across the border, along the main rail line that linked the U.S.S.R. and China and carried most of the rail traffic between the two countries.

A string of powerful explosions outside of his barrack suddenly made Anders wake up with a startle. As more explosions followed, the Navy fighter pilot jumped out of his bunk bed, like his companions, to look out through the nearest window. However, dawn was still over one hour away and he could see nothing at first but darkness. A huge fireball suddenly burst where he knew the guards barrack to be, lighting up the night for a few seconds. Then he heard the loud WOOSH of a jet aircraft passing speedily overhead, making him scream with joy.

"OUR PLANES ARE ATTACKING THE CAMP!"

While the others around him also cheered at first, some quickly sobered down, including another pilot captured at about the same time as Anders and who was occupying the top bed of their bunk.

"Damn, what good will this be to us? The Chinese will only be meaner with us after this."

Anders gave a sharp look to First Lieutenant Denis O'Leary: the B-29 bomber copilot had shown in the past months a propensity to believe much of what the Chinese were telling the prisoners, apart from often complaining about everything and anything.

"Look, O'Leary! If you think that the Chinese were treating us kindly, then feel free to go lick their asses if you want a better treatment."

O'Leary threw him a mean look in response but didn't say a word. The sound of powerful jet engines approaching slowly then caught the attention of Jack Anders, intriguing him and making him run to the barrack's door.

"What the fuck is this? It sounds like some of our planes are on the ground, rolling. That can't be!"

As the sounds of explosions and cannon fire kept going around the camp, some coming from the direction of the nearby airfield, Anders soon got to the window nearest the door and looked through it, only to see a sight that froze him and made his heart jump: the distinct blue flames from the exhaust of jet engines were visible close by in the sky. The problem was that those exhausts were directed towards the ground and were slowly coming down just in front of the row of barracks housing the American prisoners, where the flat, snow-covered parade ground of the camp was.

"What the hell!"

The dancing light of a fireball from a bursting napalm canister that took out the camp commandant's house then illuminated for a few seconds the fantastic-looking aircraft about to land vertically on the parade ground. Anders could only watch with disbelief as the big aircraft landed smoothly on the frozen ground, sending up a whirlwind of blown snow. He then shouted with joy when armed men started coming out at a run from the back of the aircraft, while more similar aircraft were landing in the parade square.

"THEY ARE COMING TO GET US! OUR SOLDIERS ARE HERE!"

A concert of exclamations greeted his announcement, many obviously disbelieving him. The door of their barrack was then kicked in a few seconds later and an officer wearing the combat uniform of a United States Marine stepped in, an assault rifle at the ready. The man, who wore the rank insignias of a major, looked quickly left and right before shouting an order.

"ALRIGHT, MEN, THE VACATION IS OVER! GET OUT NOW AND FOLLOW THE DIRECTIONS FROM MY MEN. BE CAREFUL NOT TO STEP IN FRONT OF A JET EXHAUST IF YOU DON'T WANT TO END UP LOOKING LIKE A BURNED UP HOT DOG!"

That call triggered a human stampede out of the barrack, with the Marines stationed outside near the landed aircraft controlling the prisoners only with difficulty. While equally eager to escape, Anders showed more restraint than most of the other prisoners and took the time to look around him once out of his barrack. He could see four aircraft inside the wire perimeter of the compound, but there were more aircraft visible on the ground around the camp, thanks to their jet exhausts. At least a hundred Marines were also visible by the light of the burning guards barrack, guarding the aircraft or running around the detention barracks. The transport aircraft that were on the ground inside the compound were apparently quickly filled with American ex-prisoners, as they took off vertically one by one in the thunderous noise of their big jet engines. The other aircraft outside the compound took more time to fill up but also took off vertically a few minutes later, to the dismay of Anders: there were still hundreds of prisoners left to evacuate, including himself, while the Marines that had delivered them were now apparently left behind with him and the others. Yet, the Marines didn't seem to be phased out one bit. Suspecting that he was missing something, Anders went to a Marine officer who was barking orders around him.

"Excuse me, sir, but could you tell me what will happen next?"

He saw a bit late that the officer actually wore the eagle insignia of a full colonel as the man answered him in an authoritative voice.

"Don't worry, mister. My men have also taken the nearby airfield and a column of light trucks is on its way to here right now to pick us up all and drive us to waiting transport aircraft. Identify yourself!"

Anders instinctively came to attention then.

"Navy Lieutenant Jack Anders, from the carrier USS CORAL SEA, Colonel! I was shot down over Korea last June."

"Colonel Victor Krulak, Fourth Marine Regiment!" Replied the colonel while shaking hands with Anders. "Can you tell me how many prisoners there were in this camp, Lieutenant?"

"A bit over 800 men, Colonel. There were more before, but a number of us were taken away at intervals and then sent inside the Soviet Union. We never saw those men again. Will you have enough place in your planes for all of us, sir?"

The mention of the men taken to the Soviet Union made Krulak tighten his jaw for a second, but he then nodded his head and spoke in a reassuring tone to Anders.

"Don't worry about the available space, Lieutenant: we have plenty of it aboard our transport aircraft."

"Uh, while on the subject of aircraft, Colonel, could you tell me what were those fantastic machines that landed vertically around the camp?"

"Those were Bell C-10 THUNDERBIRD combat search and rescue aircraft of the Air Force. They belong to the girls of the 99th Wing, THE FIFINELLAS, like the transport aircraft you will go into. You will be able to thank them soon, Lieutenant. Since you are not running around like a chicken without a head, unlike most of the other prisoners, why don't you stick with me for a while? I could use someone who knows the setup around this camp."

"With pleasure, Colonel! What would you like to know?"

"First, was this the only barrack for the guards of the camp?" Asked Krulak while pointing the burning barrack just outside the wire perimeter.

"For the Chinese guards, yes, Colonel. There is however a smaller barrack, nearly a hut, about fifty meters behind it, that housed visiting interrogators and interpreters. We even saw Soviet officers from time to time. In fact, I think that there is one or two of them around these days."

Krulak swore to himself before looking around him and shouting at a passing jeep mounting a heavy machine gun, making the driver veer and come to him. The moment it was stopped besides him, Krulak gave a few terse orders to the Marine sitting in the front passenger seat.

"Sergeant, collect a squad and go investigate the hut behind that burning guards barrack. There may be a few enemy officers to take as prisoners there. Shoot only if necessary."

"Understood, Colonel!" Replied the NCO before signaling his driver forward, leaving Krulak with Anders.

"Over 800 Americans... The news will shake Washington, for sure. If we could catch as well a few of those hypocritical Soviets, then the better."

Krulak's wish came through just as a long convoy of light Dodge trucks started rolling in, coming from the airfield two kilometers to the south of the camp. The Marine colonel made a mean smile when a discomfited and fearful-looking Soviet Red Army colonel and a Soviet Red Air Force major were brought to him under solid guard, along with a man in civilian clothes.

"Well well, look at what we have here! These two will make a nice New Year gift for Brigadier General Puller."

Krulak then looked at the civilian man, whom Anders was now staring at with utter hatred.

"You, who are you?"

"Sir," interrupted Anders, "that piece of shit is a traitor, an American who turned coat and was helping translate for the Soviets during interrogations. He was not above hitting the prisoners himself, including in my case."

Krulak threw a murderous look at the terrified man in civilian clothes, then took out his pistol in a flash and shot the man point-blank between the eyes. As the two Soviet officers looked on, terrified that they would be next, Krulak spat on the dead man lying in the snow in front of him.

"Problem solved! Let him be buried on communist ground, if he liked them so much. Well, I believe that we can now take our ride to the airfield. You are welcome to ride with me and those two commie bastards, Lieutenant."

"With pleasure, Colonel!"

Krulak then spoke briefly in the handset of his portable radio.

"All Jarhead call signs, this is Jarhead Six: pack up and fuck off! Make sure that nobody is left behind first before rolling out."

He then shouted around him.

"WE'RE MOVING OUT! GET EVERYONE LEFT IN THE CAMP AND FORM UP IN CONVOY COLUMN!"

Jack Anders did his bit of helping by kicking into the back of a truck their two Soviet prisoners before jumping in the back of Krulak's jeep. The Sun was still a good half hour from rising over the horizon when the convoy of armed jeeps and light trucks rolled out of the camp and onto the road leading to the airfield, leaving behind the now burning buildings and barracks of the camp. Overhead, Anders could hear the faint noise of jet aircraft turning around at medium altitude, apparently ready to cover the waiting transport aircraft. Twelve minutes later, his jeep rolled inside the biggest aircraft he had ever seen, with a female cargo master closing the rear cargo ramp behind his vehicle. Going to strap himself in one of the folding jump seats lining both sides of the cargo cabin, Jack was able to sigh with relief a few minutes later, when his cargo plane

lifted off from Chinese ground: he was finally going to be able to see the United States again.

18:35 (Indochina Time)

City of Da Nang, Annam

Indochina

Ingrid felt supremely happy as Denise Bateman drove her jeep towards the orphanage run by the Sisters of Christian Charity, rolling at moderate speed through the poorly lit streets of Da Nang. The raid on Beijing had gone nearly perfectly, with the loss of only one A-3N and no personnel losses, while the objective there had been completely obliterated. As for the air assault on the prisoners camp in Manchuria, while the potential risks had been enormous, the actual operation had proved surprisingly easy, with no effective ground resistance left after the initial supporting airstrikes. Even better, the return for that operation had surpassed her wildest expectations, with a total of 838 American soldiers and airmen freed from Chinese captivity, at the cost of only four Marines wounded in combat. With all her planes and personnel now back safely in Da Nang after staging back through Taiwan and with her preliminary mission report sent to Washington, Ingrid felt that she had earned the right to a little favor and was on her way to go visit little Hien at the orphanage tonight. Deep into her euphoric thoughts, she saw too late the big truck that suddenly emerged out of a side street and cut her jeep's path. As for Denise Bateman, she only had time to shout a single warning while stepping on her brake pedal.

"WATCH OUT!"

Denise was however unable to avoid the collision, with the jeep's front bumper crashing against the side of the five-ton Peugeot truck. The impact projected forward both Ingrid and Denise, their heads and faces hitting either the hood or the driver's wheel of the jeep, leaving them dazed for a few seconds. Six men in civilian clothes ran at once out of their hiding places and towards the immobilized jeep. Before the two Americans could react or even detect the men, rubber truncheon hits to their heads knocked them out for good. Two cars waiting in nearby side streets then rolled to the jeep, with the six attackers loading quickly the two unconscious women in the cars. Less than a minute after the collision, the two cars, the truck and the attackers were gone with their victims, leaving behind a stalled jeep with its front bumper bent.

Ingrid woke up slowly with a pounding headache and with the taste of blood in her mouth. Her vision still unfocused, she tried to raise her right hand to her lips but found out with surprise that she could not raise her right arm. Then she realized with alarm that she was actually tied by her wrists and ankles to a wooden chair. She also found herself completely naked. Now fearing the worst, she raised her head and looked around her as her eyes became better focused. She was now in a windowless room lit by a single electric bulb hanging from the ceiling. Denise Bateman was also in the room, also tied naked to a chair and still unconscious. Two men with brutish faces stood on each side of the only door of the room, looking at Ingrid with sadistic pleasure. One of the men, a European like his companion, opened the door after seeing that Ingrid was awake and spoke in French to the other guard.

"Keep an eye on her: I will go tell the boss that she is awake."

"Don't worry: I have two good reasons to keep my eyes wide open."

The two men laughed at the joke before the first one left. The one who stayed then took a revolver out of his belt and pointed it at Denise while looking at Ingrid and speaking to her in French.

"Don't even think about playing a trick on me, girl, or I will kill your friend."

Ingrid swore mentally, realizing that the man would very probably not hesitate one second to kill Denise, who must be of little to no value to these men. Looking again around her, Ingrid tightened her jaws on seeing a number of torture instruments around the room, including a large hand dynamo connected to pairs of electric wires ending with steel alligator clips. It was already clear to her who had kidnapped her and Denise and why. The French secret services had good reasons to fear her, having many dirty secrets and traffics to protect in Indochina. They also would probably want to know who she had contacted in the Vietminh. A thing was also certain in her mind: those French were never going to release her alive, nor would they release Denise, since they would evidently want to leave no witnesses behind. Things were thus looking quite bad.

Denise slowly woke up about a minute after Ingrid, moaning with pain before raising her head and looking around her with confusion. Fear showed in her eyes when she saw that she was tied down and naked, like Ingrid, with a man pointing a revolver at her.

"General, what is going on? Why were we kidnapped?"

"I am the intended target of these men, Denise, not you. Unfortunately, you are stuck in the same trap as me and they will most probably kill both of us after they will have interrogated me."

The man guarding the door walked quickly to Ingrid and slapped her hard on her left cheek, snapping her head to the right.

"SILENCE, BITCH! ONE MORE WORD AND YOUR FRIEND WILL PAY FOR IT."

As Ingrid was throwing him a murderous look, the door opened and the other guard came back in the room along three more men, all Europeans. One of the newcomers, a rather small and thin man with an angular face, went to stand two paces in front of Ingrid, looking down at her with a mean smile.

"So, this is the famous Major General Ingrid Dows, the 7,000 year-old girl."

"What do you want from me?" Spat back Ingrid, defiant.

"Simple: answers!"

"So that you could then kill me and my driver afterwards? Go fuck yourself!"

The man smiled, then swung his right fist without warning, hitting her on the left cheek and making her head snap around again, leaving a reddish imprint that started at once to swallow.

"It is true that we will kill you at the end of this, but you could at least avoid a lot of pain, both for you and your driver, by answering my questions. Marcel, prepare the electrodes."

Watched with growing fear by Denise Bateman, the said Marcel grabbed the two pairs of wires connected to the hand dynamo and clipped one clamp from each pair to short metal tubes. Ingrid watched with pure hatred the man as he went first to Denise Bateman to insert one of the connected tubes inside her vagina, then clamped down the clip end of the other wire of the pair to her clitoris. The man then repeated the operation on Ingrid with the second pair of wires, getting a murderous look from her.

"You bunch of bastards! When I think that my country has supported your government in this war. You're nothing but criminals and parasites!"

Her words earned her a second hard hook from the thin man, this time on her right cheek. She could taste the blood in her mouth as the man brutally grabbed her hair to force her to look at him.

"I know that you are a tough girl, Dows, but I also know that you have the reputation of having a soft heart. You probably wouldn't want your driver to suffer because of you."

Denise Bateman then surprised Ingrid. Repressing her fear, the young blonde shouted to her in English, showing that she actually understood part of what the man had said.

"DON'T SPEAK JUST BECAUSE OF ME, GENERAL!"

The man named Marcel, who had gone to take position behind the dynamo that sat on a small table, then turned energetically its hand crank, sending electricity through the wires and making both women scream with pain during long seconds. Denise started crying from the pain afterwards, while Ingrid tightened her jaws, thinking furiously about a way out of this trap. Her interrogator punched her again in the face before asking a question in a dangerous tone.

"Where did you bring the young Vietnam girl that you had freed from jail a week ago?"

Ingrid didn't answer him, speaking instead in English to Denise.

"Denise, promise me that you will keep my secrets to yourself, and..."

That earned her a vicious jab that squashed her left breast, making her groan with pain. Catching her breath with difficulty, she spoke again in English while staring at Denise.

"Promise me, Denise, if you want to live."

"I...I promise to keep your secrets, General, whatever they are."

Marcel turned again his hand crank, making the two women scream and keeping the electricity flowing for a good five seconds. The interrogator then grabbed Ingrid's chin in his left hand and forced her head up.

"You are finished with your little chit-chat? ANSWER ME! WHERE DID YOU BRING THE YOUNG VIETMINH GIRL?"

Ingrid stared without flinching at her tormentor, having taken her decision.

"Captain Antoine Savani, of the S.D.E.C.E.¹⁵, I find you guilty of torture, murder and drug trafficking, and condemn you to death."

The man, surprised to see that she knew his name, looked at her with confusion for a moment. His eyes then lost focus and he crumbled down like a rag doll, his head falling between the opened legs of Ingrid. The latter next looked at Marcel, who could not turn

¹⁵ S.D.E.C.E. : Service de Documentation Extérieure et de Contre-Espionnage. Official name of the French secret services between 1944 and 1982. Also commonly called 'le 2^{ème} Bureau'.

his hand crank now without electrocuting his boss. The brute also crumbled to the ground under the stunned eyes of the three remaining Frenchmen. Their stupor quickly turned into incredulity when Ingrid, using her full strength as a Chosen, made the chair she was tied to break into splinters. Immediately getting up, she pointed the palm of her left hand towards the man who stood near the door with a revolver in one hand. Before the man could fire a shot, a small crackling ball of blue energy shot out of Ingrid's hand and struck the Frenchman, incinerating the upper half of his torso and his head. Two more blue energy balls then killed in quick succession the two Frenchmen still alive.

Taking the time first to extract the steel tube inserted into her vagina and to take off the clip pinching her clitoris, Ingrid then went to Denise, who had watched the preceding scene with incredulous eyes. Kneeling in front of her driver, Ingrid delicately removed the electrodes from her genitals and undid the ropes tying her down before looking into her eyes and speaking softly to her.

"Do not fear, Denise. We are now safe."

"But, how, General?" Stuttered Denise, still terrified by her misadventures of the night and utterly overwhelmed by what she had seen. Ingrid gave her a gentle smile while putting one hand over the blonde's genitals.

"How? The same way that I will now heal the electrical burns to your genitals, Denise: with my powers as a Chosen."

Denise was about to ask what she meant by that when Ingrid's hand started glowing. The sharp, burning pain that Denise was feeling in her crotch was then replaced by a sensation of well-being and she sighed with relief as Ingrid healed her.

"I can heal as well as I can kill, Denise. I have become what my adoptive mother had become herself: a person that has received special powers from something that you would probably call God. My ability to remember my past lives is one of those powers. You will now be fully healthy, Denise."

Her driver looked into her eyes for a moment before tears rolled down on her cheeks. She then gently caressed one of the bruises on Ingrid's face.

"And you, General? I would like to see you also healed."

Ingrid then read something more than simple compassion in Denise's attitude. Exploring quickly the thoughts of the blonde, she finally smiled to her and kissed her tenderly on the lips. Denise didn't object, on the contrary, returning her kiss while caressing Ingrid's right breast.

"Will you keep my own secret, General? You know that lesbians are immediately thrown out of the Air Force when found out."

"I know, Denise. Don't worry about that: I myself am a bisexual woman."

Ingrid then concentrated while her hand rested on her own crotch area, healing her electrical burns to her genitals under the marveling eyes of her driver. She next got up, imitated by Denise.

"I will keep for the moment the bruises on my face, to prove that I was beaten by those men. Take that revolver on the ground until we could find our weapons and our clothes. We will then disappear from this place. Be on your guard: there could be more Frenchmen in this house."

"Understood, General."

Herself grabbing the pistol that had belonged to Savani, Ingrid cautiously walked out of the torture room, followed by Denise, to find herself in some sort of basement storage room filled with old furniture and various other objects. She however found in one corner a number of crates containing weapons and ammunition from various sources, plus large bundles full of a sort of brown past that she tasted cautiously.

"Opium paste! We can now prove that those bastards were trafficking in opium. I think that I will change our escape plan now."

"General, I found our things!" Announced triumphantly Denise after looking in another corner. She then brought to Ingrid a large cardboard box filled with their uniforms, underwear and pistols, while holding as well their two carbines.

"Aaah, excellent! Dress up first: I will keep watch in the meantime."

As Denise was slipping on her panties, she gave an admiring look at Ingrid's naked body.

"I am surprised that nobody proposed marriage to you yet, General. Your body is sublime."

"Thank you! You are not bad looking either, Denise." Replied Ingrid with a smile while caressing her driver's breasts. "I must say that I already refused many proposals in the past. Unfortunately, there is still that stupid law passed by the Congress in 1942 that forbids military women from having children in their care, or from becoming pregnant, on pain of separation from the service."

Ingrid then let that question hang for the moment and watched the wooden staircase that led up to the ground floor while Denise got dressed. It was soon her turn to dress, which

she did quickly. She was now nearly certain that the house was empty and that she had killed all the Frenchmen present in it, not having heard any noise from above.

Again taking the lead, Ingrid climbed as silently as she could the wooden staircase, her carbine at the ready, and slowly pushed open the door at the top of the stairs, to find herself in an hallway. A cautious exploration eventually showed her that they were in a two-storey house situated on the sea shore and that it was empty of people. Two cars were parked in front of the house, on a small private dirt road that led through the jungle to the National Road Number One, which followed the Vietnamese coast from North to South. Ingrid nodded to Denise after further studying the coast from a window of the top floor.

"We are probably in the region of Kim Lien, just north of Da Nang and facing its bay."

"It would be a nice place for private dips, if it would not be for the present circumstances, General."

Ingrid smiled tenderly to Denise while caressing her face, making her shiver with desire.

"Later, Denise. By the way, simply call me Ingrid when we are alone. Go take watch in the lounge downstairs and keep an eye on the dirt road: I am going to prepare a setup in order to explain our escape without divulging my secrets. Don't worry if you hear two gun shots from the basement."

"Understood, Gen...uh, Ingrid."

"That's better!" Said Ingrid, smiling, before leaving for the basement. Denise then went to the lounge and, leaving the lights off, positioned herself with her carbine to one side of a window and started watching the dirt road and the jungle. Two gun shots soon were heard from downstairs but, being warned in advance, Denise didn't worry about that. She saw Ingrid come up from the basement two minutes later, dragging the half incinerated body of one of the men killed by her blue balls of energy. Going out of the house by its back door, Ingrid dumped the body in the jungle, more than a hundred meters away, hiding it behind a large bush. She repeated the procedure with a second incinerated body but did something different with the third one, which had a big hole in its torso but still had its head. Sitting down the body against a tree in front of the house, she put a grenade found with the weapons stored in the basement in the right hand of the dead, then placed the hand over the big hole in the chest of the man and pulled out

the safety pin and let go the safety lever, priming the grenade. Sprinting to one of the nearby cars, she hid behind one while shouting a warning to Denise.

“GRENADE!”

The explosion of the grenade finished shredding the torso of the dead man and projected steel fragments and pieces of flesh around, shattering two windows of the house and holing the body work of the two cars. Ingrid then returned to the body, examining with satisfaction the results. It would now be next to impossible to see traces of the impact of her plasma ball on the mutilated body. Returning inside the house, she went to see her driver to explain herself.

“When help will arrive, we will say that I managed to secretly undo the ropes tying me down and was able to grab the gun of my interrogator and to kill him and the man at the dynamo. The three other men fled in the jungle but one of them turned around to throw a grenade at me. I hit him in the chest and his grenade then exploded against him. All this happened now, at about ten past eight. I will now call for help: I found a working telephone in one room.”

“You should write film scenarios for Hollywood, Ingrid.” Said Denise, amused, attracting a knowing smile from Ingrid.

“Actually, the Twentieth Century-Fox had offered me to become an actress after my sea rescue operation off the California coast last June.”

Denise laughed at that. Her commander would effectively have everything to be a frank success in Hollywood: she was beautiful, charismatic, intelligent, had a strong personality and also knew how to dance, sing and play piano well, having shown her various talents at Christmas, at the dance that had followed the supper.

21:02 (Indochina Time)

SDECE safe house, shore of the Bay of Da Nang

Major Charles Woolmack looked around with disgust at the torture instruments visible around the basement room, then at the body of Antoine Savany and his SDECE identity card that had been found on him. The shore house was now full of MPs and his investigation specialists were already at work photographing and documenting in detail the crime scene, as crime was definitely what had happened here in his opinion. He then looked with regret at the bruised face of his commanding general, who had just told him in detail the story of her misadventures.

"We were becoming quite worried for you in Da Nang after we found your jeep abandoned, General. Thank God that you were able to free yourself in time: you avoided the worst."

"The worst was effectively what these men had in mind for us, Major. They intended to torture us first, then to execute us, once I would have answered their questions."

"And why would they want to torture your driver, General? She doesn't know much of importance, no?"

"True, but they planned to torture her in front of me to convince me to talk. They were connecting both of us to that damn dynamo when I was able to free myself and grab the gun of that bastard."

Woolmak glanced at Denise Bateman, whose face still bore the bruises from the collision between her jeep and the French truck, then looked at Savani's body, becoming furiously tempted to kick it.

"What do we do with that bastard now, General?"

"Bring his body and that of his accomplices to the base morgue. I want all the evidence that could implicate the French SDECE in my kidnapping and that could link it to clandestine arms and opium trafficking in Indochina to be listed and safeguarded. Prepare a criminal investigation report on this case, with the French SDECE as the accused and the American government as the plaintiff. If you find enough proofs to implicate other French officials or government departments, then feel free to do so. Do as if you were conducting an investigation against an organized crime group, Major."

"With pleasure, General!" Replied with enthusiasm Woolmack, who was liking more and more working with this commander who didn't hesitate to go straight to the point.

11:16 (Washington Time) / 23:16 (Indochina Time)

Cabinet conference room, The White House

Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

President Dewey, exasperated by the endless disputes between his military chiefs and his political advisors about what to do following the raid on Beijing, slapped down his hand on the conference table.

"Gentlemen, we have been turning in circles for more than one hour now. If you can't agree between yourselves on what you are ready to recommend me to do, then I will be forced to take a decision by myself."

What he didn't say to the collection of men with graying hair sitting around the table was that he already had a strategic plan in his pocket, a plan that came directly from Ingrid Dows. He had called this emergency meeting to see if his generals and advisors could propose something even better. Unfortunately, he was now pained to see that all their combined experience led only to endless disputes, each service or department only preoccupied with promoting its own vision of things. General Omar Bradley, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, spoke after a quick glance around the table.

"Mister President, from a purely military point of view, the raid on Beijing led by General Dows was certainly justified, even though it took everybody here by surprise. After all, China had sent an invasion force of close to a quarter million men to take Indochina, which we had promised to protect from external military threats. The raid in Manchuria, while incredibly risky, was in my opinion a masterpiece and, apart from freeing hundreds of our soldiers from communist captivity, has demonstrated once again the hypocrisy of the Soviet Union in all this. I can thus only praise General Dows for those two raids and we should use the results of those raids to the maximum to paint both China and the U.S.S.R. as the guilty parties in the World's opinion. However, I expect the Chinese to react fiercely to the raid on Beijing, which was a public slap in the face for them. How they will react will depend of who in the Chinese leadership has survived that airstrike."

"We must expect the Chinese to hide as long as they can their losses in that raid, Mister President," added John Foster Dulles, "especially if Mao and other high level leaders have been killed. In the short term however we can expect extremely fierce anti-American propaganda on their part."

"And that would be very different from what they are spewing out regularly?" Asked in a sarcastic tone Dwight Eisenhower, who was still the Secretary of Defense. "I can live with verbal violence. If, however, Mao and his closest collaborators have been killed, then it is quite possible that the surviving Chinese leaders will do nothing concrete until they decide who is in charge in China."

Seeing that they were finally progressing a bit, Dewey looked at the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, Hoyt Vandenberg.

"And how murderous was that raid in your opinion, General Vandenberg?"

"Very murderous, Mister President!" Replied with a grin Vandenberg. "Even General Curtiss LeMay, the head of the Strategic Air Command, was jealous when he saw the damage assessment air photos faxed from Da Nang. To give you an idea of the severity of that bombardment, my experts have calculated that, on average, one 500 pound bomb fell each forty feet inside that leadership compound. Dows then finished off the job with a one hundred gallon canister of napalm every hundred feet. Those that were not killed by the bomb explosions or the collapse of the buildings they were in then were burned alive or asphyxiated when the napalm burned all the oxygen inside the target zone. The majority of my experts are telling me that there should be no more than an handful of survivors inside that compound after such a raid."

"Thus, we could reasonably expect that all the high level communist Chinese leaders are now dead, including Mao Zedong, right?" Asked Dewey, making Vandenberg nod his head.

"Exact, Mister President."

"And what can we then expect in China if that is the case?"

"Chaos!" Proposed Eisenhower. "It will be the same as if we could have eliminated in one shot the whole Nazi leadership in 1940 by, for example, bombarding one of their famous political rallies in Nuremberg. The regional leaders of the Communist Chinese Party will probably run to Beijing to try placing themselves in the best position possible to replace their dead leaders. This could turn out to be very dirty and could even turn into a civil war, with at the minimum massive political purges among the ranks of the CCP."

"All things that could help us, no?" Asked Dewey.

"Effectively, Mister President." Answered John Foster Dulles, who was doing his best not to choke on this tremendous success by a woman he despised.

"And Stalin? What could be his reaction to this if the death of Mao and of the other top Chinese leaders is confirmed? Could he decide to launch an atomic attack against us, especially after Dows' raid just short of the Soviet border in Manchuria?"

"A general attack against us? I don't think so, Mister President." Answered Eisenhower. "He is not able yet to strike deep inside the continental United States with atomic bombs, while our new B-50 heavy bomber can easily roam all over the Soviet Union with near impunity. He will however most probably put his air defense network on full alert, to prevent a similar raid against the Kremlin. I don't expect him to do much more than that, apart from putting General Dows on the NKVD's black list."

Dewey looked at him with apprehension, taken by surprise by his last sentence.

“What do you mean, put Dows on the NKVD’s black list?”

Eisenhower then became most somber while looking at the men around the table, then at Dewey.

“Mister President, please allow me to be brutally frank with you and with all the other gentlemen around this table. Whether some of us like it or not, Major General Dows has been playing an increasingly important role in the military fortunes of this nation in the last eleven years. She first saved the Philippines from Japanese invasion with her air tactics and her strategic counsels to General MacArthur, then helped ensure the success of our Guadalcanal landing with her new female air group. She then went on to help retake Papua New-Guinea by a series of masterful air assaults and emasculated the Japanese fleet at Rabaul Harbor. When transferred to the European Theater, she became the mastermind behind our Southern France landings and our express crossings of the Rhine, again proposing and using audacious heliborne assaults. In Korea, she was about our only successful general officer, even when defending ground positions with her female crews. Next, she inspired and directed the development programs of all our new planes which are now proving so effective and superior in Indochina. To add the icing on that cake, she is now known to be able to benefit from 7,000 years of accumulated life experiences. I had the privilege of having her under my command a number of times and I am ready to declare that she is our best fighting general at this time, on top of being a strategic and tactical genius of the first magnitude. All this certainly didn’t escape the attention of Stalin or of the NKVD, who have made their specialty of eliminating anyone that could represent a threat to their power. Well, Ingrid Dows just proved to Stalin that she could be a mortal threat to him and I wouldn’t be surprised if he orders his NKVD to assassinate her.”

“Are you saying that we should put her under permanent close protection?”

“No, Mister President! First, Dows would refuse such a close protection. Second, she is most useful to us in the frontlines of the World, and not in some office in Washington. I would counsel instead to support to the maximum her actions, in order to destabilize as much as possible our enemies at the highest levels.”

“So, you would advocate making Dows our official scarecrow in the eyes of the World.” Said Omar Bradley, making Eisenhower nod his head.

"Exact, Omar! This girl has proved repeatedly that she often is our best solution to our most serious military and strategic problems. Let's continue using her in that role."

Dewey was weighing that idea in his mind when one of his aides quickly entered the conference room after knocking on the door, a message in his hands and a grave expression on his face.

"Mister President, we just received a CRITIC priority message from General Dows in Da Nang."

General Vandenberg showed surprise as Dewey was taking the message from his aide.

"Dows is sending you messages directly to the White House, Mister President? She is not passing through the Pentagon?"

"I named her my plenipotentiary envoy to Indochina, General, with the right to correspond directly with me." Dewey reminded him before starting to read the message. The men present then saw his face turn suddenly red with anger.

"WHAT? HOW COULD THE FRENCH DO THIS TO US?"

"Uh, what did the French do exactly, Mister President?" Asked Dulles, who honestly didn't know what was going on. Dewey gave him an indignant look, rendered furious by the content of the message.

"What did the French do? Their secret services kidnapped General Dows and her driver in Da Nang and were ready to torture her and then execute her, along with her driver. Thankfully, Dows managed to free herself and kill her captors. She says that she has enough proofs to accuse the French in a court of law. Dammit, we are helping the French by repelling a massive Chinese and Soviet invasion force and they thank us by kidnapping my own envoy to torture and kill her? President Auriol will hear me about this!"

Dulles, like the others, could only look at him with wide, incredulous eyes, aghast at the French actions.

10:57 (Indochina Time)

Tuesday, December 30, 1952 'C'

Briefing room, headquarters of the Joint Task Force – Indochina

Da Nang Air Force Base, Annam

Indochina

"HEY, DICKEY!" Shouted Marguerite Higgins in order to attract the attention of the petite woman standing in the middle of about sixty reporters and press photographers nearly filling the briefing room. Dickey Chapelle, wearing as per her custom an old combat uniform, an Australian bush hat, Arlequin glasses and pearl earrings, on top of her camera, turned around and smiled on seeing the NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE correspondent.

"Maggie! I thought that you were in Okinawa."

"I was there, until I learned that Ingrid Dows was here. You know that girl: you normally can find action where she is."

"You can say that again! General Puller invited me to accompany his Marines in Indochina and I have been here for a week now. I was even able to go to the frontlines with the 1st Marine Brigade around Hanoi."

"And the Marines have already returned from Hanoi?"

"Hell no! I was brought back here by helicopter just for this press conference. I will then return in the Tonkin once I will have been able to transmit my article to the NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC magazine."

"Do you know the reason for this press conference?"

"Major Marion Dietrich, the public affairs officer of the task force, told me earlier this morning that we will get the latest news about this war. She however refused to say more then."

"Well, that's Dows style alright: she hides her cards until she can drop a brick on your head." Replied with a smile Marguerite before looking around at the other reporters and photographers. "Say, there is a real smorgasbord of reporters here this morning. There are at least as many Vietnamese and Asian reporters and photographers here as there are Europeans and Americans."

"I noticed. Actually, this doesn't surprise me: nobody can accuse Dows of being a racist."

"Yeah, especially after this business about souvenirs from past incarnations. God knows what she was before in past lives. Hey, I see Margaret Bourke-White. I didn't know that she was here."

"Me neither. MARGARET, THIS WAY!"

The photo-journalist from LIFE magazine, a woman now approaching fifty and a veteran war correspondent, smiled on seeing them and closed in on them at once, cutting through the crowd of reporters to get to them. Marguerite and Dickey frowned at once

on smelling on Margaret a strong smell characteristic of the chemicals used in photo labs.

"Phew! You just came out of a photo lab, Margaret?" Asked Dickey, attracting a tired smile on the face of the photographer.

"Yup! The poor girls working in the photo lab of the task force were swamped with work, so I lend them a hand in order to repay the favor Dows did to me yesterday."

"A favor? What favor?" Asked Marguerite Higgins, suddenly both suspicious and jealous. While being great friends, the competition for exclusivity among reporters was still as ferocious as ever. Margaret's answer blew away both Marguerite and Dickey.

"Oh, she let me get in one of her planes that participated in a bombing raid on Beijing yesterday morning."

"A RAID ON BEIJING?!" Exclaimed in unison the two women, making heads turn and prompting Margaret to put an index across her lips to quiet them down.

"Shush! You will soon know as much as me...one day late."

Swallowing the puff of jealousy that had risen inside her, Marguerite Higgins lowered her voice, whispering a question to her friend from LIFE magazine.

"But, how could you find a place aboard a bomber? They don't have seats available for passengers, no?"

"In a bomber, no. I was aboard a search and rescue C-10, the type that did the famous rescue at sea off California last June. One C-10 was following the bombers and fighter-bombers of the raid, ready to land vertically if need be to pluck out any pilot that would have been forced to eject over Beijing."

"But, that was a near suicide mission!" Exclaimed Dickey Chapelle. Margaret nodded her head gravely.

"Even if it transported no bombs, that plane effectively had the most dangerous job in the raid. I was proud to be able to photograph the girls of that crew as they landed right in the middle of the old Imperial Forbidden City in Beijing in order to save two of our aviators who had to eject over the city. My photos and article have already been transmitted to LIFE magazine, with the attached condition that they waited until today before publishing them."

"You lucky bastard!" Grumbled Dickey, green with jealousy.

Major Marion Dietrich then showed up and asked the reporters and photographers to take place in the folding chairs lining up the briefing room. After a minute of shuffling around, Dietrich went to a lectern equipped with a microphone connected to an amplifier and spoke first in French to the crowd of journalists.

“Good day to all and welcome to the United States Joint Task Force – Indochina. You were all invited here so that we could inform you of the latest events concerning the present war. After the presentation, copies of documents and photos will be distributed to all of you and you will then be able to go eat at the officers’ mess before being returned by plane to Saigon.”

Dietrich then switched to English and repeated her initial announcement. She however added to it.

“I will ask the American press and news representatives to stay here after lunch, so that I could speak more with you. I will now give the microphone to Brigadier General Lewis Puller, Deputy Commander of the Joint Task Force - Indochina.”

The old general was photographed from every angle as he entered by a side door of the briefing room and took place behind the lectern, itself placed in front of a number of panels and voluminous objects covered with either canvas tarps or bed sheets. A Marine captain then removed a linen sheet covering a large map covered with symbols as Puller started to speak in English, pausing frequently to let Marion Dietrich translate in French.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the press! As you must already know, Communist Chinese troops have started to invade in force with close to a quarter of a million of soldiers the Tonkin area in the early hours of Christmas. Fortunately, air reconnaissance by our planes alerted us to that invasion force, which allowed us to effect preventive strikes along the border... Those airstrikes in turn destroyed the tanks, artillery pieces and vehicles, all Soviet, of that force and also destroyed the enemy logistical depots near the border. As a result, that Chinese invasion force, now down to maybe 100,000 men, is advancing only slowly and is lacking in everything... This map behind me shows the line of maximum advance of the Chinese troops inside the Vietnamese territory, as of midnight last night... The Chinese have up to now seized Mong Cai, Hai Ninh, Dong Dang, Cao Bang and Lao Cai, but are still over seventy miles from Hanoi at their deepest penetration point in the Northeast, while they are still over 200 miles away in the Northwest... Their losses from repeated air attacks by our planes have been very severe and those Chinese soldiers are short of both food and

ammunition, on top of having only light weapons... On our side, the 1st Marine Brigade has deployed around Hanoi with its tanks and artillery guns to reinforce the French protective cordon around the city... To date, only our planes and helicopters have made contact with the enemy, which our soldiers are ready to greet firmly. As for the Vietminh, they launched a general offensive against the French forces in Indochina 24 hours after the start of the Chinese invasion. However, that offensive has proved to be anemic and was conducted with little conviction, which allowed most of the French garrisons to repel their attackers. Some terrorist attacks were also committed in a number of cities and towns, including Saigon and Hanoi, but the situation in that aspect is still under control. At this point of the briefing I will now give the floor to Major General Ingrid Dows, Commander of the United States Joint Task Force – Indochina.”

Exclamations ran around the room when Ingrid walked in, her facial bruises still plainly visible, something that she had counted on for her presentation. As the cameramen photographed her repeatedly, she looked at the crowd of journalists and spoke in French, letting Marion Dietrich translate her words in English.

“Ladies and gentlemen, good day! I have a lot to say, so I will be as concise as I can... First, with Chinese troops already inside Vietnam and with signs that Beijing was ready to send in more troops and supplies to reinforce that invasion force, I decided to launch an airstrike on the Chinese high command in order to cause the maximum of chaos and confusion among the enemy... That airstrike was launched yesterday morning, with Beijing as its target. That strike was extremely selective and concentrated on the Zhongnanhai District in downtown Beijing, where all the Communist Chinese Party high level leaders reside and work. That district was struck by a mixed force of heavy bombers and fighter-bombers, with electronic warfare and tanker aircraft support, plus one search and rescue aircraft. Major Dietrich!”

On Ingrid’s order, Marion Dietrich unveiled another board on which were pinned two large air photo mosaics of downtown Beijing. More exclamations came from the journalists as they compared both mosaics.

“On the left, you will see the Zhongnanhai District, whose perimeter is marked by a red line, before the raid. On the right, you will see what is left of that district after the raid. Reduced size copies of those two mosaics will be distributed to you at the end of this conference.”

"My God, there is absolutely nothing left of it!" Exclaimed to herself Marguerite Higgins, making Margaret Bourke-White smile.

"It was even more impressive while the bombs were still dropping, Maggie." Ingrid let time to the reporters to examine the mosaics before speaking again.

"As you can see, the chances that the occupants of that district survived our raid, which went on for less than seven minutes, are extremely small. It is thus probable that the majority of the Chinese leaders at national level, including Mao Zedong, have been killed. I am counting on the political chaos that will follow inside China to turn around the Chinese invasion forces that entered Vietnam. However, knowing the taste of the Communists for secrecy and deception, I don't expect the Chinese to announce before at least a few days or even weeks who exactly were killed in our raid."

"And how many planes have you lost during that raid, General?" Asked a French reporter, with Ingrid answering him in a calm voice.

"One! Its crew of two was able to eject and was then picked up inside the old Imperial Forbidden City by our search and rescue C-10 aircraft, which landed vertically under enemy fire. Major, unveil the next board, please."

Dietrich uncovered another board, that one covered with enlargements of selected pictures taken by Margaret Bourke-White on the ground in the Forbidden City. Margaret puffed up with pride like a peacock as exclamations ran around the room.

"Those pictures were taken in Beijing by Miss Margaret Bourke-White, of LIFE magazine, who was inside our C-10 aircraft. Copies of these photos, which have been published this morning in the United States by LIFE magazine, will also be distributed around at the end of this briefing."

Ingrid then adopted a resolute expression as she faced the journalists in the room.

"Let this be a lesson to anyone who will try to violate the integrity of the Vietnamese territory, or would try to take power in Vietnam in other than democratic manners. We can and will find and strike with precision any enemy in or around Indochina. Furthermore, instead of hitting simple soldiers, I have the firm intention to strike as a priority their high level leaders. Those who want to cause wars will be the first to pay the price for it, not the poor soldiers who are too often conscripted or pressed into service. The American forces in Da Nang are here to help Vietnam attain independence in a democratic manner, and not to help occupy it. This brings me to my next main subject."

Ingrid, her audience now firmly captured, drank a bit of water before continuing, still speaking in French and with Dietrich doing the translation into English.

“As the plenipotentiary envoy in Indochina of the President of the United States, I am chagrined to say that France, which repeatedly promised to gradually leave Indochina and to give full independence to its local people, has been doing more than drag itself concerning its promise. Despite the fact that it is clearly incapable of militarily winning by itself its conflict with the Vietminh, or to even pay for its war effort without American financial assistance, France is insisting on hanging to power and even made pacts with criminals and drug traffickers in order to maintain its hold on the region. Certain elements of the French government and of the French forces in Indochina, realizing that I was opposed to their plans to keep their grip on Indochina, even went as far as kidnapping me and my driver last night, with the intention of torturing me for information and to then kill both me and my driver. As you can see plainly, I got a few lumps before I was able to free myself and my driver, killing my captors in the process. Major, the last board, please.”

Silence fell in the room when the journalists looked with shock at the pictures taken in the torture room of the SDECE's safe house, which also showed the bodies of Savani and of his agent Marcel. On a sign from Ingrid, two Marines then uncovered the objects sitting on two tables in a corner of the briefing room. Marion Dietrich then grabbed a pair of electrodes and held them high, so that the journalists could see them well.

“The electrodes that Major Dietrich are now holding were about to be used on me and my driver when I managed to break free. For the neophytes, the steel tube connected to one of the wires is meant to go inside the vagina, while the alligator clip connected to the other wire is then clipped to the clitoris, both wires being connected to the manual dynamo sitting on the table. Those who were ready to torture and kill me were members of the S.D.E.C.E., the Service de Documentation Extérieure et de Contre-Espionnage, also better known as the 2ème Bureau. The bodies of those men are now in our morgue and we were able to seize their identity papers, as well as other compromising documents showing that the French secret services finance their clandestine operations in Indochina with the help of opium and arms trafficking, on top of getting part of the revenues from the casinos and bordellos of Saigon. Those clandestine operations include the assassination of political opponents and of Vietminh sympathizers, real or imagined, the systematic torture of prisoners, the corruption of officials of the Bao Dai government and even the execution of terrorist attacks that are

then blamed on the Vietminh. The S.D.E.C.E. also collaborates directly with organized criminal bands in Indochina, notably with the Binh Xuyen, to which the S.D.E.C.E. gave the effective control of the Saigon police.”

A wave of indignant exclamations followed, forcing Ingrid to pause. Marguerite Higgins, disgusted and scandalized, exchanged a glance with Dickey Chapelle.

“I knew that the French could play dirty, but this goes way too far.”

“The French government will effectively have a lot of explaining to do after this, but I am certain that Ingrid has a nice payback ready for the French.”

Once silence had mostly returned, Ingrid approached the two tables in the corner and pointed at a dozen crates full of plastic bags filled with a brown paste.

“These bags you see in the crates under the tables were seized at the S.D.E.C.E. safe house near Da Nang where I was brought with my driver to be tortured. The brown paste in the bags is opium paste, the basic ingredient for the production of opium. Those crates contain the equivalent of about 370,000 American dollars of opium in street value, once converted. This opium paste comes from poppy plantations in Laos and is brought by air to Saigon with the assistance of the planes of the G.C.M.A., or Groupe de Commandos Mixtes Aéroportés, the action department of the S.D.E.C.E.. The opium surplus that are not sold in Saigon then find their way to Marseilles, where they feed the habits of French drug addicts, with the profits filling the coffers of the S.D.E.C.E..”

Marguerite saw more than one French journalist raise their nose from their notepads, looking indignant after hearing Ingrid’s last sentence. Whatever happened, she was now certain that this affair was going to cause a major political scandal in France, with heads probably rolling at many levels. The American public, which had little tolerance for public corruption, was certainly going to be scandalized when they would read the articles that will result from this press conference and was probably going to scream for a stop to all American support to France in Indochina. A Vietnamese reporter then raised his hand to ask a question in French, with Ingrid signaling him to speak.

“General Dows, I represent the SAIGON TIME. Can you tell me why the French secret services wanted to torture you, instead of simply killing you?”

“For many reasons, mister. The French wanted to know if I had contacts with representatives of the Vietminh, probably so that they could find and assassinate them. They also wanted to know what I knew about the future of Vietnam thanks to the

information brought from the future in 1940 by my adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante, who educated me in secret before her death in 1941. Finally, the S.D.E.C.E. wanted to make me pay for putting at risk its dirty little traffics and for being opposed to France's continued hold on Indochina."

"And how do you expect that the American government will react to those actions by the French, General Dows?"

All the reporters present listened on with religious attention as Ingrid adopted a resolute, severe expression.

"President Dewey has already been appraised of this affair by me yesterday and contacted me to discuss the various measures that needed to be taken. Here are the measures already approved by President Dewey, which have by now been turned into presidential executive orders by him. Those measures have thus force of law in the United States and are being announced publicly to the French government and to the World for the first time by me, via this press conference. Paris will be officially informed of these measures tonight, via diplomatic letter."

"Holy shit!" Exclaimed in a low voice an American reporter near Margaret Higgins. "Talk about a diplomatic slap in the face to the French." Margaret could only agree with her colleague as Ingrid continued.

"The first measure decided by President Dewey concerns the financial aid provided to date by the United States to France to help it fight the Vietminh in Indochina. That financial aid will stop immediately as of today. That aid amounted to forty percent of the French military budget for Indochina. Secondly, all direct American military aid to France, either for Indochina or anywhere else, also stops immediately. The money saved by these measures will in turn be put in a special budget that will be reserved for the reconstruction of Vietnam once it is a truly independent, democratic country. Those funds will be provided by the American government in order to support a democratic Vietnamese government during its first years, so that it can repair the damages from this present war. Thirdly, the United States Joint Task Force in Indochina will continue to restrict its military actions to fighting off the Chinese and Soviet forces representing a threat to Indochina. The American forces have orders not to engage or attack Vietnamese, the Vietminh included, unless they are attacked directly. In that case we will respond decisively but defensively. Even if Chinese or Soviet forces take refuge in a Vietnamese village or town, we will not fire on those said villages or towns. The American forces are here to assist and encourage the independence process of

Indochina and of Vietnam, as long as that process is democratic. Fourth, I am authorized by President Dewey to conduct direct negotiations with all parties in Indochina, including the Vietminh. However, if the leaders of the Vietminh refuse to use the democratic process or continue to use or call for the military support of either China or of the Soviet Union, then the United States will be forced to revise its policies towards the Vietminh. The pursuit of a communist ideology, with its one-party rule and its fake elections, will be considered by the United States as contrary to basic democratic principles. However, the United States will be ready to accept a democratic government of coalition that would include communist members, as long as those communist members accept to live in a multi-party system elected via free, popular elections. From my knowledge of the future about Vietnam, I can tell you in passing that a communist government would only bring economic ruin and financial mismanagement to Vietnam for decades to come. The goal of the United States is to see a truly independent, free and prosperous Vietnam emerge from this war.”

Many of the Vietnamese reporters present nearly applauded at these words, which were a blast of fresh air in the too often dirty, stagnant political atmosphere of the country. One of them then raised his hand to ask a question.

“And what will the United States do if France refuses to give full independence to Vietnam and the other parts of Indochina, General?”

“Then, President Dewey will be forced to completely reevaluate the United States links with France...in all its aspects. The American people once rose in order to throw away an imperialistic yoke and it will certainly not be ready to help support another similar yoke.”

Marguerite Higgins shook her left hand, impressed.

“Damn! It will rain nails tonight in Paris. Ingrid should enter politics.”

“Nah!” Replied Dickey Chapelle. “She loves too much her job as a fighter pilot. She’s also too honest to make a good politician.”

Dickey, like the other reporters present, was expecting the conference to be at an end now, but she was mistaken. Ingrid went to grab a thin paper document on a pile sitting on a table and showed it to the journalists.

“You will be able at the end of this conference to each take a copy of this document, which was produced in English, French and Vietnamese, along with copies of the other documents and photos I already described. You have probably heard about

my mysterious souvenirs from past incarnations and certainly have many questions on that subject. Well, you will find an answer to your questions concerning me in this document. My first name on Earth, about 7,000 years ago, was Amdir and I was then a nomadic woman living in the Sumerian Basin. I lived a total of 71 past lives before my spirit came to the fetus that became this body. I am not immortal, far from it, and my souvenirs from my past incarnations are only that: souvenirs. They bring me added experience and wisdom, but they do not affect my basic personality. I am Major General Ingrid Dows, from the United States Air Force, and I will protect and serve my country until I die. I will now take your questions, ladies and gentlemen.”

All the reporters rose from their chairs at once, shouting questions at Ingrid in the hope of being the first to get an answer.

14:04 (Indochina Time)

Main gate of Da Nang Air Force Base

The female MP that was in charge of the main gate guard force of five women looked with surprise and suspicion as a ‘cyclo’ approached the gate and stopped just in front of the barrier, letting out an old Vietnamese man before turning around and leaving. Walking out of the access control hut, the MP went to the man with a gray beard, who was looking with apparent amusement at the big board posted besides the main gate. That board announced the airfield as ‘the Indochina’s base of the Fifinellas’ and also showed the insignia of the 99th Wing, a female winged gremlin wearing a pilot’s uniform.

“Can I help you, sir?” Asked the MP in English. The old man examined quickly the young, strong woman, who stood a head taller than him, before answering in a laborious English.

“I came to speak with General Dows. I am sent by the Vietminh.”

Realizing at once that this was important, the MP sergeant called up one of her subalterns.

“Tina, can you politely keep company with this gentleman while I make a quick call?”

“Sure, Sergeant!”

As an even taller woman posted herself besides the old man, making him gaze up in wonderment at the size of American women, the sergeant entered the control hut and grabbed her field telephone, speaking as soon as someone answered her.

"Hello? This is Sergeant Carter, at the main gate. I have here an old Vietnamese man who wants to talk with General Dows. He says that he was sent by the Vietminh... One moment!"

Carter stuck her head outside of the hut before shouting a question to the old man.

"What is your name, sir?"

"Tell General Dows that Bac Tien came from Saigon to see her."

Carter disappeared inside again, only to come out less than a minute later to walk to Tien, saluting him politely.

"General Dows was advised of your arrival and is sending a vehicle to pick you up, sir. It should be here in a few minutes."

"Thank you, miss. Uh, could I ask you if there are many women on this base?"

"Certainly!" Said Carter, amused. "Over half of the personnel on this base are women."

"Oh!" Could only say Tien, surprised. The growing whistle of powerful jet engines then made him turn his head towards the main runway of the base. A few seconds later, two YF-83As were taking off, sporting large supersonic drop tanks. Tien, who had not seen yet the new American planes, followed them with his eyes, fascinated, as they climbed with impossible speed in the sky.

"So, this is the kind of aircraft that General Dows flies? They are very impressive indeed."

"And they are murderous for our enemies, sir. The Chinese have been learning that lesson for a few days now."

Tien did not reply to that, remembering instead Dows' earlier warning about the fact that the Vietminh wouldn't be able to count on its Chinese and Soviet allies soon.

As promised, a jeep showed up at the gate seven minutes later, driven by a young blonde woman wearing a combat uniform and armed with a pistol at her belt. Tien was politely invited to sit in the jeep, then was driven to a large wooden building, the entrance of which was guarded by MPs manning sandbag bunkers. The jeep's driver escorted Tien inside, leading him to an office and knocking on its door, attracting a near immediate response.

"Come in!"

The driver opened the door and signaled to Tien that he could enter, closing the door behind him once he was inside. Ingrid was already up from behind her work desk and was coming to Tien to shake his hand, a smile on her lips.

"Bac Tien, I am really happy to see that the Vietminh chose you as their emissary. Please, take place in this sofa. Would you like some tea, or anything else?"

"Tea will be fine, General." Replied Tien, sensing that her friendliness was not simply a façade. Ingrid took a few seconds to briefly go out and ask that Denise Bateman bring a tea service, then went to go sit in a padded chair facing the sofa from across a low table. Tien then noticed the bruises and swellings on her face.

"What happened to you, General? Did you have to jump out of your plane?" Ingrid shook her head as her smile faded somewhat.

"No, Bac Tien! The French did to me what they did to poor Mai. Fortunately, I was able to free myself and then kill my interrogators before they could beat me up too much. Many things happened during the last seven days, Bac Tien, things that will weigh heavily in the future of Vietnam."

Ingrid then took a few minutes to describe to him the events of the last few days, including the Chinese invasion, the bombing of Beijing, her kidnapping by the French S.D.E.C.E. and her nomination by President Dewey as his plenipotentiary envoy. She also gave Tien copies of the documents she had distributed to the journalists in the morning, including the list of her past incarnations. Bac Tien was still going through these documents when Denise showed up with a tea service. Thanking her, Ingrid made a point of performing for Tien a full Chinese tea ceremony, something that the old man appreciated greatly.

"Decidedly, General, the Vietminh could not have asked for a better intermediary than you to hold peace talks."

"Thank you, Bac Tien!"

Ingrid then let the old man time to take a first sip of tea before presenting to him a document written in Vietnamese.

"I have already resumed on this document the points on which the United States will insist in order that a just and honorable peace could be declared in Indochina, as well as the measures decided by President Dewey against France following the actions of the S.D.E.C.E.. It is important to note that we will not attack the Vietminh, nor any Vietnamese, unless we are attacked. It is still time for Ho Chi Minh to reevaluate his positions, for the good of Vietnam, so that he could qualify for a key position in a

coalition government headed by Emperor Bao Dai. I know that Bao Dai is little more than a corrupt and indolent playboy, but he has going for him the fact that he never ordered someone's death, something precious few Vietnamese politicians can claim today. His post will however be mostly honorific, with the real powers being in the hands of an elected prime minister and his coalition cabinet. I also foresee provincial governments with extended powers and jurisdictions for the Tonkin, Annam, Cochin China, Laos and Cambodia. That way, each region of Indochina will be able to develop according to its specific needs and traditions."

"And this fund for the development and rebuilding of Indochina, taken from the money originally destined to the French, what will it be used for exactly?"

"It will be used partly to buy back at fair market prices the lands, plantations and businesses belonging to the French who will leave Indochina. According to the plan that I proposed to President Dewey and that he has approved in principle, those lands and plantations will then be redistributed as fairly as possible among the small Vietnamese farmers that were up to now tenants of the French. As for the businesses, banks and industrial plants, they will be initially nationalized, to prevent speculators from profiting from them."

"How much money are we talking about in this fund, General?" Asked Tien, who was taking notes as the discussion went.

"A few hundred million American dollars, Bac Tien." Answered calmly Ingrid, making the old man's eyes open wide. "The war in Indochina was costing a fortune to the French and was even hurting their economy, which is still recovering from the extensive damages of the Second World War. Without the financial help of the United States, France will now be unable to continue to maintain its troops in Indochina and will have no choice but to leave in the next few months."

Tien had to put down his cup of tea then, a wave of emotions hitting him on hearing her words. To see the French leave Vietnam and let it become independent had been his most cherished dream for decades. Now, he could reasonably hope to see that dream become reality in less than a year. Seeing his reaction, Ingrid switched seats and took place in the sofa, besides Tien, passing an arm around his shoulders and speaking softly to him.

"I understand your emotion, Bac Tien. Tran Qui Khiem would also have been happy to see this. In fact, Tran Qui Khiem is happy...through me."

Tien had tears in his eyes as he looked at Ingrid.

“General, Vietnam will never be able to repay you adequately for all that you did. Thank you! Thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

“You can thank me by convincing Ho Chi Minh to accept my peace plan, Bac Tien.”

“You can count on me, General. I will get on my way to see him as quickly as possible.”

“Not before you have been able to eat a good supper and have had a good night’s sleep, Bac Tien. That will also give me time to talk to you in depth about the mistakes Ho Chi Minh will have to avoid in the future, if he wants to see a truly happy and successful Vietnam emerge from this war. Too many of his close aides are dogmatic, ruthless hardliners that will spoil Vietnam’s future by their excesses if not held in check. Then, tomorrow morning, I will personally fly you by helicopter to near Ho Chi Minh’s camp: I wouldn’t want some French soldiers to intercept and kill you on your way. The fate of Vietnam may possibly be in your hands now, Bac Tien.”

15:46 (Washington Time)

Friday, January 2, 1953 ‘C’

Oval Office, The White House

Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

Rereading for a second time the report from Da Nang brought by General Omar Bradley, Thomas Dewey then smiled to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

“So, Ho Chi Minh is ready to participate in a coalition government under the terms proposed by General Dows, on top of agreeing to a ceasefire during the coming talks? I must say that General Dows accomplished the impossible in only thirteen days in Vietnam. What is happening with the Chinese invasion at this time, General Bradley?”

“The surviving Chinese soldiers still inside Vietnam have started to surrender en masse from lack of ammunition and, mostly, food. More and more Vietminh village militiamen were turning against them and allying themselves with our soldiers in order to stop the Chinese from looting their villages’ food reserves, as those Chinese had done already in many places they went through. As for the second wave of Chinese troops that was meant to reinforce and resupply the first wave, it has turned around the day after our air raid on Beijing. Marshal Lin Piao, who was leading that second wave, is

said to have returned at best speed to Beijing, to examine the situation there. For the moment, our air reconnaissance missions show that no other troop trains or convoys are heading towards Vietnam. Besides, Dows had all the bridges leading to the Vietnamese border blown up by her planes. Any Chinese force heading towards Vietnam will now have to walk all the way.”

Dewey thought about the implications of all this for a moment.

“I hope that the French will be intelligent enough to use this respite to start leaving Indochina. At least, the public accusations made by Dows have shaken them hard politically. Prime Minister Pinay is said to be fighting for his political survival and he has fired the head of his secret services.”

“The French got what they sowed, Mister President.” Said Bradley, who had been personally disgusted by the revelations concerning the various traffics and abuses committed by the French in Indochina. “American officials who would have acted like them would have been lynched by the American public, and with good reasons.”

“And I will never let such acts be committed under my administration, General. I...”

The ringing of his telephone then cut Dewey off. Extending an arm and grabbing the receiver, Dewey answered curtly.

“Yes?... Oh? Very well, let them in!”

Dewey put down the receiver and got up from his chair, imitated by Bradley, in time to greet the two Dulles brothers, who seemed to be in very good spirits indeed.

“To what do I owe you this surprise visit, gentlemen?”

“To some very good news about China, Mister President.” Answered Allen Dulles, director of the CIA. That made Dewey smile.

“More good news? Please sit down and give me the goods.”

Once they were all sitting with General Bradley in the coffee corner of the Oval Office, Allen Dulles took a file out of his briefcase and handed it to Dewey.

“Mister President, my services just received some information via the Nationalist Chinese intelligence services, who have spies in Beijing. Mao Zedong is confirmed as dead, killed in our air raid. All the other members of the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party have also been killed, on top of dozens of other, lower level communist officials. The Chinese Communist Party has thus been completely decapitated at the national level, Mister President.”

Dewey, like Bradley, was left speechless for a moment, not believing his good fortune. He finally took the time to read quickly the document given by Allen Dulles, which was essentially a list of the Chinese leaders killed by the raid on Beijing.

"My God! This is pure dynamite! The clocks are now practically reset to zero in China after this."

"Uh, not completely, Mister President." Cautioned politely John Foster Dulles. "My experts however agree that this could mark a decisive turning point in Communist China. With Mao and his closest collaborators dead, they way is now free for new, more pragmatic leaders with whom it may eventually be easier to talk to."

"Does the Chinese population know about Mao's death?"

"Not yet, Mister President." Answered Allan Dulles. "The Taiwanese confirmed to us that the rest of China is still barely hearing about the bombing of Beijing and no official word has come out yet about Mao's fate. The Taiwanese think that the news will take a few weeks to come out and circulate around China. They will keep us informed in the meantime about who will inherit power in Beijing. For the moment, the two most probable candidates to replace Mao are Marshal Lin Piao, whose military rival Peng Dehuai is now dead, and Deng Xiaoping, the Party's First Secretary for the Southwest regions of China, who just arrived in Beijing to assess the situation there."

Dewey couldn't help slap his hand on his left leg in a sign of joy.

"These are decidedly very good news, gentlemen. And what do our Soviet friends think of all this, apart from calling us names?"

John Foster Dulles grinned from ear to ear as he remembered the messages he had seen in the last 48 hours.

"They fled the Kremlin, Mister President, starting with Stalin. Apparently, Stalin's legendary paranoia made him think that we could do against the Kremlin the same kind of airstrike that we did against Beijing. Personally, I would have advocated such a strike if the Soviets would not have had the atomic bomb. Maybe we should transfer General Dows in Europe, to see if Stalin gets a heart attack from it."

Dewey laughed at that suggestion.

"Sorry, but she is too useful to me in Indochina at this time. She just succeeded in convincing Ho Chi Minh to agree to a ceasefire and to participate in peace talks. Here is the report she sent me."

With his brother Allen reading over his shoulder, John Foster Dulles read rapidly the report from Da Nang, making a face afterwards.

"While I don't like much the idea of communists becoming part of a coalition government, I suppose that we could not realistically expect better in the present circumstances. We will soon see if Ho Chi Minh is truly ready to abandon his communist ideology in the next months. At the least, we don't have to worry anymore about that Chinese invasion, something that facilitates a lot of things, Mister President."

"Exactly! My intention is now to let General Dows free to run the show there and to pilot those peace talks between the various local factions. On your side, Secretary Dulles, I would like you to maintain the diplomatic pressure on the French, so that they effectively leave Indochina quickly. Director Dulles, please keep me abreast of any new developments concerning the Chinese leadership. I want to know as soon as possible with whom we will have to deal with."

"Understood, Mister President!"

The four men then got up from their sofas, with Dewey shaking hands with the Dulles brothers before they left the Oval Office.

Now alone with General Bradley, Dewey glanced again at the messages and reports in his hands.

"Such good work deserves an appropriate reward, don't you think, General?"

Bradley made a forced smile at that.

"True, Mister President. However, Dows worked so fast that I haven't yet had time to consider the appropriate rewards for her and her aviators."

Dewey was thoughtful for a moment. A remark that Joseph Martin had once made about Dows then came back to his mind.

"General, I will let you decide which medals to give to Dows and to her subalterns in Vietnam. On my part, I just had an idea about what would be the best reward I could give her."

"What do you have in mind exactly, Mister President?" Asked cautiously Bradley. Dewey, now looking very serious, answered in a deliberate tone.

"Full equality for the women in the American armed forces. After what just happened in Indochina and in China, only the dumbest of misogynists in Congress could still pretend that women have no place in our armed forces. I will prepare a presidential executive order giving those women the right to marry, to have children and to be posted in any of our military units in the Army and Air Force. It will not be said anymore that we are treating our military women worst than our colored male soldiers. I would like on your

side that you choose some open-minded senior officers who will then rewrite the military regulations along the lines of my executive order. You may also search for the opinions of Major General Dows on that matter, since she has been the one pushing hardest for female equality. And if some generals or admirals object to this, put them back in line and give me their names, along with their comments. We already have too many so-so generals who only know how to lead a desk in the Pentagon but keep criticizing Dows or complain about her lack of seniority for her rank.”

“Uh, understood, Mister President.”

09:31 (American Midwest Time)

Saturday, January 10, 1953 ‘C’

Crawfords’ Nest Ranch

Havre, Montana

Patrick Crawford, an handsome and solidly built young man of 27, sighed deeply with regret as he avidly read the article in the TIME magazine which named Ingrid Dows as ‘Person of the Year’. Ingrid’s official picture which adorned the cover of the magazine only increased his nostalgia as he remembered the few, way too short weeks in 1942 he had spent with her while she was on leave after fighting the Japanese in the Philippines. They had then been two sixteen year-old teenagers in love during that short period, but she had then to leave Havre to go to Washington in order to form her female combat air group, returning in the Pacific without passing by Havre. Patrick had then seen her for a blissful two weeks around the Christmas of 1944, before she had started her studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, near Boston. Since then, they had exchanged letters regularly and had stayed very good friends, but she had refused repeatedly his offers to marry her, not because she didn’t like him but because she couldn’t marry without being forced to abandon her career as a fighter pilot. Ingrid had however taken the time in 1949, while she was stationed at Muroc Air Force Base in California, to come to Patrick’s marriage with an old school flame, Alice Baker. Since then, Patrick had been living with Alice at the family ranch, helping his parents to maintain the ranch and raise their herds of horses and cattle.

As Patrick looked again at the cover picture of Ingrid, Alice, a tall and beautiful blonde, bent over the back of his sofa and put her arms around his neck while also looking at the magazine cover.

"I suppose that I should be jealous of her, but what girl would not be jealous of such an exceptional woman?"

"True, Alice! This story about souvenirs of past incarnations still shook me, though: she had never told me anything about that."

"That's understandable, Patrick: she probably would have been deemed crazy then. She did well to hide that all these years. I am actually proud of everything she did for us American women."

"So, you are not jealous of her one bit?"

"Not really, unless of course you start kissing that cover picture."

Patrick answered that by turning his head around to kiss Alice on the lips, attracting a smile on the face of his wife.

"That's better!"

17:32 (London Time)

Sunday, January 11, 1952 'C'

Jones' residence, Richmond Park

Southwest suburbs of London, Great Britain

Reginald Jones, Scientific Counselor of the Prime Minister and head of the influential Athena Section, smiled to himself as he read the TIME magazine article on Ingrid. He had met her first in early 1941, when she was no more than a fifteen year-old German girl detained as a prisoner of war in the Tower of London, after being captured in France with other Germans during a commando raid led by Nancy Laplante. Already at that time, Reginald had felt a weakness for the beautiful, intelligent teenager. That teenager had since grown into a woman who could now rightly claim to have influenced important events in the World. Now she had just brought peace to Indochina.

"Good show, Ingrid! Nancy would have been proud of you today."

CHAPTER 18 – THE END OF THE ROAD

14:25 (Iraq Time)

Wednesday, February 6, 2019 'A'

Small village near the city of Kirkuk

Border area between Northern Iraq and the Republic of Kurdistan

The Al Jazeera three-man television crew was taking a well-earned break from covering the nearby fighting between Kurdish forces and Iraqi extremist Sunni militias, smoking cigarettes while standing on one side of the village's market square, when they saw a pick-up truck of the Kurdish forces approach, a heavy machine gun mount fitted to its back. The Qatari men watched wearily as it rolled towards them, hoping that this did not mean some kind of trouble for them: the various factions involved in this conflict had often proved not to bother much about the rights of reporters. However the Kurdish forces, better disciplined than their Wahabi opponents, had shown much more restraint and even respect towards the handful of war correspondents doing their best to cover this savage war. A big factor in that was most probably that the Kurdish government was out to prove that it was worthy of being helped by the rest of the World against the collection of Sunni extremists, some being openly pro-Al Qaeda, that were bent on grabbing Kirkuk and its precious oil fields. Those Sunni extremists, who had broken away from the rest of predominantly Shia Iraq, had taken control of a portion of Northern Iraq and declared it as the nucleus of a new Sunni caliphate, applying to its population their harsh version of Islamic law. The Kurds, being quite tolerant on religious matters, had refused to bend to the assaults and terrorist attacks from the Wahabis and were in fact pushing back hard against them.

The pick-up truck finally stopped in front of the Al Jazeera camera crew and a person jumped out of the back, then grabbed a big backpack inside the truck and pulled it out before walking towards the Qatari men. The latter then smiled, instantly reassured when they recognized the tall woman wearing a blue bullet-proof tactical vest over her winter coat: she was the most famous war correspondent around the World, apart from being an Hollywood star. The senior Qatari reporter, grinning from ear to ear, presented his right hand for a shake to greet her.

"Hey, we have the great Nancy Laplante with us today! How are you, Nancy?"

"Just fine, Wahid." Replied in Arabic Nancy, who wore her now trademark helmet with incorporated video camera system. "And you guys?"

"We are alive and in one piece, which is more than I could say about too many innocent people around here." Said Wahid, his smile fading. "Those damn Wahabi militiamen keep indiscriminately shelling this village and other villages in the area with mortar and rocket fire, causing many civilian casualties."

Nancy also became serious, eyeing a group of young children playing nearby in the snow-covered square, throwing snowballs at each other.

"Yes, I know! Those damn fanatics don't care much about human life, yet they claim to do God's work. So, what is the situation around here, guys?"

"The Kurds have repelled a number of Wahabi attacks meant to complete their encirclement of Kirkuk, but the extremists are retaliating with indiscriminate mortar and rocket fire." Answered Wahid as the Kurdish pick-up truck turned around and started to leave the market square. Nancy nodded her head in acknowledgement.

"If you can't grab it, then destroy it. That's pretty much the philosophy of those nihilistic bastards. Have you..."

Nancy suddenly froze, seemingly listening to something that the Qatari could not hear yet, then yelled with alarm in Arabic.

"INCOMING MORTAR FIRE! TAKE COVER!"

The Al Jazeera men did not question if she was hearing correctly and scrambled at once for cover: when as experienced a war correspondent and ex-military officer like Nancy said that mortar bombs were incoming, then one was best to react immediately. They, like Nancy, ran and crouched behind an old, derelict pick-up truck parked along the sidewalk that had been the victim of a previous bombardment. The children playing in the middle of the square were slow at first to react until the first mortar bomb, its fall barely audible, blew up after impacting against the roof of a house in the village. Looking quickly from behind her cover, Nancy saw that the children were now dispersing at a run, screaming with fear and terror. Her heart sank on seeing that a toddler girl who was no more than three years old was still in the middle of the square, paralyzed by fear and crying. An older girl, maybe her sister, was running back to her when a second mortar bomb exploded in the square, maybe thirty meters away from the crying toddler. Miraculously, the small child was not hit by one of the hot steel fragments from the bomb but the older girl was, crumbling to the ground with a cry of pain before holding her left

leg. Nancy then reacted without a second thought. Rushing out from behind her cover, she ran towards the two children as a third mortar bomb exploded inside the village. The Qatari holding the video camera of his crew instinctively started filming her then: this was unfortunately a classic image of war and it was his job to show to the World what the reality of war was.

Nancy chose to go first to the toddler girl and put one arm around her waist, picking her up effortlessly before turning around and going to the wounded girl, kneeling besides her to examine quickly her wound. She did not even have time to assess the severity of the bleeding from the girl's leg when a light whistle told her another mortar bomb was falling. Hurriedly putting the toddler girl down besides her sister and forcing her face down on the ground, Nancy then lay over both girls, rolling her body so that she covered as much of the two children with her own body and tactical vest and helmet. The Qatari cameraman filmed that but instinctively jerked when a mortar bomb exploded right in the middle of the village square, no more than ten meters from Nancy and the two girls. Readjusting quickly his camera's aim, the Qatari saw that Nancy was still crouched over the children. The wounded girl was still moaning with pain and moving somewhat, being pinned down under Nancy's body, like the younger girl. Wahid was the first to react in their group, getting up and rushing towards the trio in the middle of the square, closely followed by his photographer, Yusuf. Wahid, sick with worry, knelt besides Nancy and the two girls and patted Nancy's shoulder, speaking up loudly: she most probably had been at the least deafened by the nearby explosion.

"NANCY, YOU CAN GET UP AND LET US TAKE THE GIRLS... NANCY!... NANCY!"

Only then did Wahid see the blood covering one side of Nancy's neck.

"Oh God, please, no!"

He saw numerous holes in her tactical vest made by the impact of fragments, some pieces of shrapnel even sticking out of the Kevlar fabric. Taking her limp right wrist, Wahid searched for a pulse as Yusuf was freeing the older girl pinned under Nancy, then picked her up in his arms and ran back behind cover as yet another mortar bomb exploded inside the village. Tears came to Wahid's eyes when he couldn't find any pulse. Turning gently Nancy on one side, freeing at the same time the crying toddler girl, he saw that her green eyes were opened, frozen by death. Wahid started weeping as a

pair of Kurdish fighters who had run out of a house arrived at a run, intent on bringing the toddler girl to safety. The Qatari looked up at them, tears rolling on his cheeks.

“She is dead! Nancy Laplante is dead!”

16:56 (New Zealand Time)

Sunday, November 20, year 2989 Before the Common Era (B.C.E.)

Hills north of the future site of the city of Auckland

New Zealand

“Can you please slow down, Nancy? My feet are killing me!”

Nancy Laplante ‘B’, already tall for a girl of thirteen, turned her head and smiled to David, the son of Miriam of Magdala and Yeshua of Nazareth. While one year older than her, David was however much shorter than her, being the offspring of a Jewish couple from the 1st Century, a time when the average Middle East man stood less than 160 centimeters. In contrast, Nancy ‘B’ already stood 178 centimeters, not far from the full 183 centimeters she would be once a fully grown adult. She was already an accomplished athlete, having been raised and trained all her life at the secret base of the Time Patrol, located in the 3rd Millenium BCE on the future site of Auckland, in New Zealand.

“You have to toughen up a bit, David.”

“Maybe, but I don’t intend like you to become a temporal agent. I only want to become an artist and a musician, remember?”

“And? Look around at this magnificent scenery and tell me that it doesn’t inspire you.”

David, a thin boy with brown skin and curly brown hair, had to recognize that Nancy was partly right: this corner of New Zealand was nearly like paradise on Earth, with a near perfect climate year long and a varied and beautiful geography. David knew that Nancy preferred to train outdoors instead of using the well-equipped gymnasium of the base, except for her bodybuilding training sessions. With her intense physical training, her balanced diet and her exceptional genetic pool, the result was a tall young athlete of Olympic caliber full of health. Nancy ‘B’ was already an Olympic level gymnast, an expert shot, a black belt in Juko, the mixed martial art developed by her adult timeline twin, a dangerous fencer and a first class horse rider. She had also started to develop the sensual curves for which Nancy ‘A’ was justly famous. Some even said that she had

also the same sexual appetite than her older twin. Nancy 'B', who had stopped for a moment to allow David to catch up, noticed with a smile how the eyes of the boy detailed her body, molded in a short sport leotard.

"We are close to the beach, David. We could go swim a bit and wash away the sweat from our hike."

"Uh, okay!"

The two teenagers, Nancy 'B' in the lead, walked for another 300 meters, going down a gentle slope before arriving at a magnificent sandy beach with blue, clear waters. Nancy undressed as soon as she arrived near the water, smiling to David.

"So, are you going to swim with your clothes on, David?"

While he was only fourteen, David remembered his past incarnations, thanks to Nancy 'A', who had opened the past memories of all the members of the Time Patrol aged eight and above. He thus knew more about sexuality and sexual techniques than the majority of normal adults. He had also seen Nancy 'B' and many other girls naked before. He thus hesitated only slightly before undressing and then running in the water to join Nancy. They had been swimming and playing in the water for about ten minutes, with Nancy 'B' becoming more and more audacious with David, when Nancy's wrist videophone buzzed. Sighing with annoyance, Nancy opened the cover of her videophone, unmasking its viewing screen and activating it. The face of her mother, Susan Laplante 'B', then appeared to her. Her sad expression and reddened eyes alarmed Nancy at once.

"Mom, what is going on? You've been crying?"

"Nancy, I will need you to come back to the base at once: your twin sister is dead."

"WHAT? NANCY, DEAD? HOW?"

"She was doing her job as a war correspondent in 2019 'A' when she was killed by a mortar bomb in Kurdistan. Come join us at the medical center. The Time Patrol has managed to temporarily take her body, so that her special implants can be taken out before an autopsy in the 21st Century could find them."

"I am on my way, Mom: I am presently on a beach one kilometer from the base."

Nancy then closed her videophone cover. The enormity of what she had just learned took a few seconds to fully hit her as she came out of the water with David. She then burst out in tears and sat down on the sand, crying the loss of her big sister, who had

been her idol and model. David, who was also crying, passed an arm around her shoulders.

“I thought that Nancy would never die.”

“She...she was not immortal, David. She had said so many times. The One had told her that this life would be her last incarnation, that she would then become an angel, like your father Yeshua.”

“That is correct, little sister.” Said softly a voice they knew well. Raising their heads, Nancy ‘B’ and David saw Nancy ‘A’, wearing the white hooded robe she often wore as Overseer of the Holy Land of Palestine. She was standing in the sea, with water up to her ankles, and looked at the two teenagers with tenderness. Nancy ‘B’ got up slowly, unable to believe her eyes.

“Nancy, is it really you?”

Nancy ‘A’ shook her head slowly in response.

“No! I am Nataï, the spirit that inhabited the bodies of Saraï, Johan of Arc and Nancy. I am made of pure spiritual energy and can take any form I want, like now. I can also travel at will through time and space. The One judged that the mission of Nancy ‘A’ was too important to be abandoned simply because of her death. He thus sent me to take her place and continue her mission.”

“Can you really be like Nancy?” Asked in a trembling voice Nancy ‘B’. “Can you be warm and sensitive? Can you eat and drink and enjoy life like Nancy could?”

The angel smiled gently in response.

“I can be everything that Nancy was...for eternity. I am also in you and will guide you in your own destiny. You will eventually take the place of your timeline twin, but for that you will need the help of The One. Do you accept to become a Chosen of The One, with the responsibilities that it implies, young Nancy?”

Nancy ‘B’ hesitated only for a second before replying in a firm voice.

“I accept!”

The angel nodded her head in solemn acknowledgement.

“I am certain that you will honor The One, little sister.”

THE SIXTH BOOK IN THIS SERIES, ‘TIMELINE TWIN’, WILL BE PUBLISHED IN 2014.

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