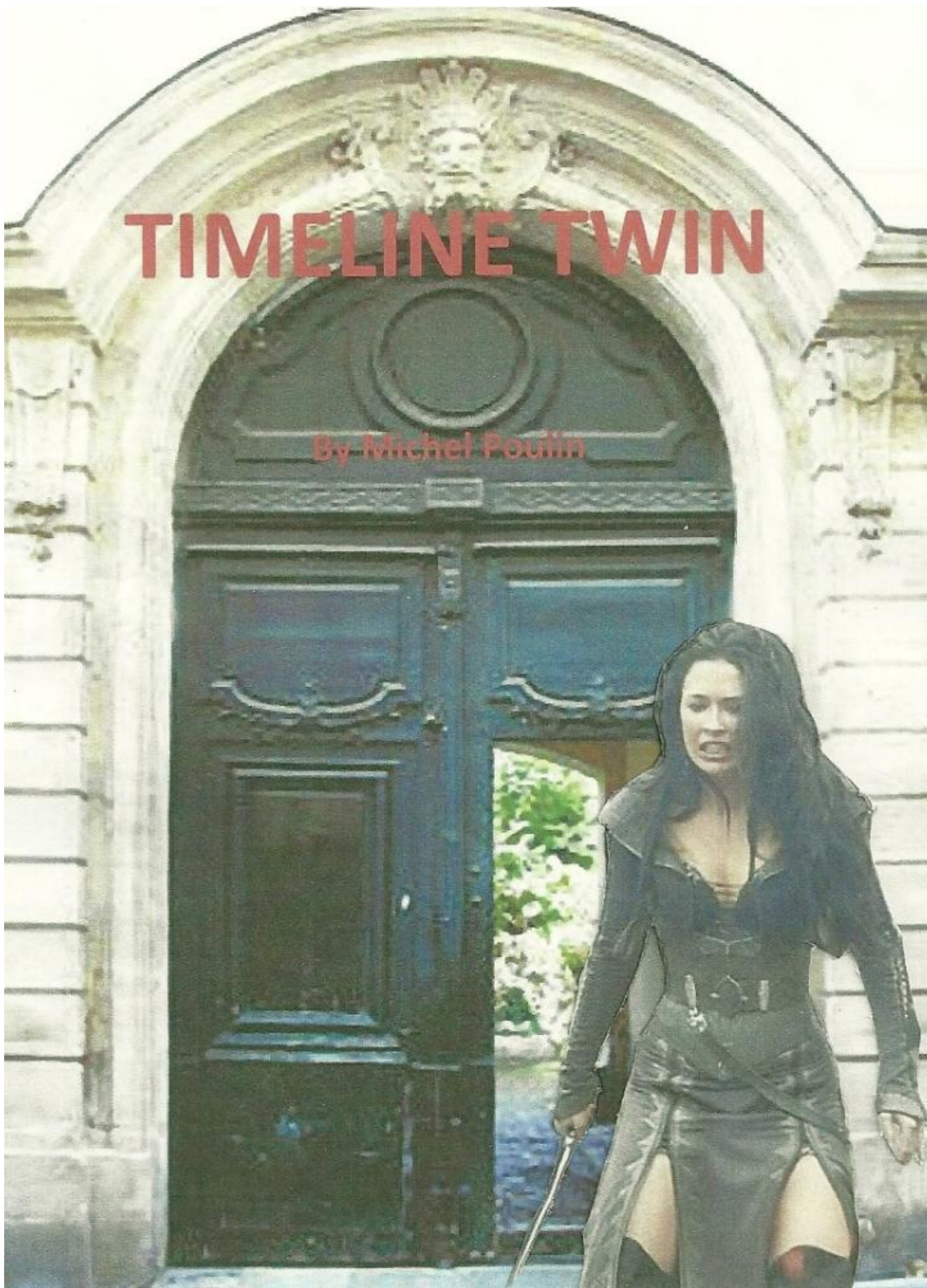


# TIMELINE TWIN

By Michel Poulin



# **TIMELINE TWIN**

**A FANTASY AND HISTORICAL/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 novel is the sixth installment in a collection of novels depicting the adventures through time of members of the Time Patrol, an organization originating from the 34<sup>th</sup> Century. It was originally meant to be the last novel of the series but, with the draft's length growing to near unmanageable level, I decided to split the draft in two. TIMELINE TWIN will thus be followed by TO THE SANDS OF MARS, which will become in effect the last novel of the collection. Those novels should be treated strictly as novels about alternate realities and historical fiction. 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. While Nancy Laplante 'A' died in 2019 'A' while reporting on a war in Northern Iraq, her young timeline twin, Nancy 'B', is ready to take over from her, while Ingrid Dows 'C', timeline twin of the adopted daughter of Nancy, continues to serve with distinction in the United States Air Force in 1953 'C'.

**Cover picture:** Nancy Laplante 'B', dressed in a travel outfit of the mid 17<sup>th</sup> Century, standing in front of the carriage entrance of the Hôtel de Brinvilliers, at number 12, Charles-V Street, Paris.

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## **CHAPTER 1 – A LAST GOODBYE**

**10 :18 (Montreal Time)**

**Saturday, February 23, 2019 ‘A’**

**Sainte-Famille Cemetery, De Montbrun Street**

**Boucherville, South Shore of Montreal**

**Province of Québec, Canada**

Thankfully, the weather was fair on this freezing February morning, with the rays of the Sun mitigating a bit the sub-zero temperature and with no wind to make the air even colder. Still, the dozens of men and women, with a few children among them, that were coming out of the convoy of cars and limousines inside the cemetery were all well bundled in winter coats, hats, boots and gloves. Many also wore sunglasses to protect their eyes from the glare of the Sun reflecting on the thick layer of snow. All were silent and had sad or downcast expressions on their faces as they converged on a large polished headstone, in front of which a rectangular hole had been dug in the frozen ground, with a mound of earth nearby. Numerous flower crowns and bouquets were already laid in front of the headstone. The scene would have been typical of most funerals except for the presence in force of the municipal police, which was busy keeping at a respectful distance a small army of reporters and paparazzi, many of which were holding cameras equipped with telephoto lens.

Angelina Jolie, with the help of her husband Brad Pitt, gathered together their six children, now ranging in age between ten and seventeen, after coming out of their limousine and walked with them towards the hole in the ground. She could already distinguish at least three different groups of people that had come to attend the funeral of Nancy Laplante. One, of which Angelina was part of, consisted of over twenty actors, actresses, film directors and studio executives from Hollywood, all of which had worked with Nancy Laplante on film sets or had befriended her. Another, smaller group, was made up of CNN executives and reporters, including Anderson Cooper and Christiane Amanpour, plus a few war reporters from around the globe. The third, and by far the largest group, was a most heteroclitic one and was probably making the reporters and

paparazzi present wondering who those people were. There were men and women, most looking fit, young and tough, plus more than a few teenage children. Angelina however guessed who they were when she recognized the so-called 'boyfriend' of Nancy Laplante, Mike Crawford, in reality her husband. Fourteen year-old Zahara, walking besides Angelina, also recognized him and pointed at a huge, towering teenager standing besides Mike Crawford.

"Mom, I see Herakles, besides Nancy's husband. I also see Eli and David, plus Saint Mary Magdalene, David's mother."

Angelina couldn't help hesitate then and cut her step as she stared at the small Semitic woman holding the hand of a teenage boy with curly brown hair and brown skin. She had been told by her children on their return from the Jerusalem of 1948 'B', where Nancy Laplante had brought them temporarily for their own safety, about Nancy's family there and about a few other people, including a Miriam of Magdala that was actually the one known in the Bible as Saint Mary Magdalene, and about her son from Jesus, David. Still, to see such an historical figure here and now was quite a shock to Angelina. Her eyes then returned to the said Herakles, who was at least as tall and powerful physically as Mike Crawford, but who still had a juvenile face.

"How old was this Herakles when you met him in Jerusalem, Zahara?"

"He was thirteen then and he was really kind and nice. Maybe a few years have passed for him since then, Mom."

Angelina nodded her head at that, understanding what her adopted daughter, an ex-Ethiopian refugee, meant. Very few people in this time period knew that Nancy Laplante had been a time traveler and that two parallel timelines existed apart from this world. Angelina and Brad would not have known about that either, save for a completely unpredictable fluke. A ship hijacking eleven months ago off California had caught them and a small crowd of other Hollywood celebrities at the mercy of a gang of merciless pirates bent on emptying their bank accounts. That hijacking of billionaire Roman Abramovich's yacht had also put in jeopardy the 31 children of those celebrities, including Angelina's six children, who were aboard the MV ECLIPSE at the time. The pirates had hoped to use the children to pressure their parents into revealing their bank account numbers and access codes but Nancy, who had been one of the guests of Roman Abramovich, had brought the children to the safety of 1948 'B' Jerusalem, at the cost of revealing herself as a time traveler. She had then slaughtered the pirates and saved Abramovich and his guests. Angelina, like Brad and the other adult guests, had

been stunned and shocked by the stories told to them afterwards by their children, returned by Nancy to the yacht once the pirates were all dead or captured. She had however accepted to keep Nancy's secret, after hearing her pleas to that effect.

Now that Zahara had warned her about the presence of at least a few members of Nancy's family at the funeral, Angelina started scrutinizing more closely the faces of those who were part of the third group of mourners. She was no historian, but she was well educated and read and knew that Nancy had been reigning as the Queen of Jerusalem in 1948 'B', so looked for known people from the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Her eyes soon caught on a young woman of medium height in her twenties who wore a conservative black dress and coat and a black hat with black mesh face veil. Angelina's blood shot to her brain when she tentatively recognized the woman as a young version of Queen Elizabeth of England. Two persons to the left of Elizabeth, an overweight man in his fifties with thick curly gray hair and wearing sunglasses also attracted Angelina's attention. It didn't take her much time to recognize him, as she had seen photographs and portraits of him in numerous Israeli and Jewish homes, offices and museums. Still, her knees nearly went weak when she made up the man as being David Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel, as he appeared at about the time of Israel's declaration of independence. Even more shocking was the man standing near Ben-Gurion, a huge and intimidating-looking man with a long scar on his left cheek.

"A SS officer, standing besides Israel's first prime minister..." Whispered Angelina to herself, making her husband Brad look at her with confusion.

"What did you say, Angie?"

"Please keep a straight face and your voice low, Brad, but we have a few visitors from the past in that group to the left of the headstone. Zahara recognized two of Nancy's sons, plus Saint Mary Magdalene, while I just recognized a young Queen Elizabeth of England, Prime Minister David Ben Gurion of Israel and Otto Skorzeni, SS commando officer extraordinaire in World War 2."

While he didn't speak out loud or exclaimed himself, Brad eyed with growing shock the group designated by his wife before whispering to her.

"My god! You are right, Angie. I think that I also recognize Hanna Reitsch, the celebrated Nazi female test pilot from World War 2, besides Skorzeni. Those people are taking a hell of a lot of risks in showing up publicly like this, especially with all those paparazzi present nearby."



Angelina couldn't help throw a dubious look at Brad at his last words.

"And how do you expect ignorant morons like those paparazzi to know enough about history to recognize those people, especially when they don't have any reasons to think that they come from the past?"

Their argument was cut short by the arrival in the cemetery of three big black SUVs of the kind Hollywood action movies were so fond of using. The reporters and paparazzi crowd immediately pointed as one their cameras at the three vehicles as they rolled inside the cemetery, finally stopping behind the other vehicles of the mourners already present. The municipal police agents also became noticeably more nervous and vigilant as six tall, fit men in dark suits and overcoats and wearing sunglasses came out of the SUVs, forming a box besides the middle SUV before another man came out of that vehicle. He also wore sunglasses and a black overcoat, but was clearly a lot older than the six men waiting for him. Channing Tatum, who was standing with his wife Jena and their little daughter near Angelina and Brad, sucked his breath in.

"Holy shit! It's President Bill Clinton! The reporters will go bonkers on this." As the reporters and paparazzi clicked picture after picture of him as he walked with his Secret Service escort towards the headstone and waiting mourners, Bill Clinton gave a sad look at the hearse parked nearby and in which Nancy Laplante's coffin was still in. His arrival was the signal for six big men from the crowd of mourners to walk to the hearse and start pulling out the coffin, then carrying it towards its intended resting place. As the coffin was gently put down on the straps laid over the hole in the ground, Bill Clinton started doing the tour of the mourners, with the CNN group first to be visited, followed by the Hollywood group. He kept his words few and his emotions guarded with them, but was still visibly sad. In truth, while not an American citizen, Nancy Laplante had rendered some stellar services to the United States in the past few years, not the least one being her killing the head of the Taliban movement, Mullah Omar, in Pakistan, and the rescue of CNN's star anchor Anderson Cooper on the same occasion. As a daring war reporter, Nancy had also helped the American public understand better what was really at play in a number of festering wars and smoldering conflicts through her CNN reports and analysis, something that had often helped the current President of the United States, Hillary Rodham-Clinton, in passing her foreign policy message to the American public. Then came the time to Clinton to go speak with the members of the last group.

First presenting his condolences to Mike Crawford, Bill Clinton was presented by the latter to five teenagers and one stunningly beautiful young woman, named as being the children, either adopted or natural, of Nancy Laplante. Clinton couldn't help stare up in wonderment at sixteen year old Herakles, who towered over him and had much wider shoulders.

"Just sixteen, you said?"

The teenager, who had kind manners and a soft voice, gave him a sad smile while nearly crushing Clinton's hand, even though he didn't seem to make it on purpose.

"Yes, Mister President. My name means 'Hercules' in Greek."

"Uh, I see!" Said Clinton, not daring to ask for more details before continuing down the line of mourners. Two teenagers, a boy and a girl, who were holding hands with a young woman in her thirties, next caught his attention. He first exchanged a kiss on the cheek with the woman, who presented herself as a friend of Nancy and who was named Sylvie Comeau. Sylvie then presented the two children, whose prominent brow ridgelines, elongated craniums and nearly non-existent chin had attracted Bill Clinton's curiosity.

"May I present you my adopted children, Kin and Ani, Mister President?" Said Comeau before lowering her voice to a whisper and bending over to speak in Clinton's ear. "They are Neanderthal children. I saved them 52,000 years ago, after their parents and the rest of their group were killed by cave hyenas."

With cold sweat breaking on his forehead, Bill Clinton stared in silence at the children for a couple of seconds before speaking.

"Pleased to meet you, Kin and Ani."

"Thank you, Mister President. You were very kind to come to Nancy's funeral." Replied in an articulate voice the boy, surprising Clinton. Seeing his expression then, Sylvie Comeau cut in, still keeping her voice low.

"They have an I.Q. in the mid 90s, Mister President. Neanderthals were actually about as intelligent as the average modern man. You could probably say that you met some politicians in Washington that were more obtuse."

Despite the circumstances, that remark made Bill Clinton smile with amusement.

"You are probably right about that, madam. Saving those children was a most kind act indeed. You are to be commended for your compassion and open mindedness."

"Thank you, Mister President."

The next person in line to attract Bill Clinton's attention was Elizabeth Windsor, whom he recognized quickly enough, making him bow to her and kiss her hand.

"Your Majesty!"

"Actually, my proper title now would be 'Your Highness', Mister President. My sister Margaret is sitting on the throne where I come from. Nancy told me about how caring to your people you proved as a president."

"And I must say in turn that your, uh, twin, is doing a remarkable job as Queen of Great Britain, Your Highness."

"Thank you, Mister President. Could you pass my respects to your wife, the President?"

"I certainly will, Your Majesty."

After bowing again to her, Clinton went on, now expecting about anything. He also easily recognized David Ben-Gurion, with which he exchanged a few words and nearly freaked out when faced with the big, powerful Otto Skorzeni, who managed to make Clinton's Secret Service bodyguards nervous just by his presence. After shaking a dozen more hands from persons he didn't recognize, he finally went to stand near the headstone with his bodyguards as a rabbi with a thick black beard was about to start delivering Nancy Laplante's eulogy. The rabbi, wearing a skull cap and shawl, shook his hand in turn and presented himself.

"Mister President! I am Rabbi Shimon Huberband. I understand that you asked to deliver part of Nancy's eulogy."

"You are correct, Rabbi Huberband." Said Clinton, already promising himself to google the rabbi's name at the first chance he had to do it. "I didn't know that Nancy was Jewish."

"In another place and time, she was. I believe that you already know from her historical documentary on the life of Yeshua of Nazareth that you and your wife saw that Yeshua made her one of her disciples, correct?"

Again, cold sweat broke on Clinton's forehead on hearing that.

"Uh, the copy of the video documentary she loaned to us didn't mention that little fact, Rabbi Huberband. Jesus Christ really made her one of his disciples?"

"And one that he was very respectful of, if I understand well. Nancy also saved the lives of countless thousands of Jews in the past. I was one of those Jews she saved

and, now that I am the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem in her time, I simply could not refuse the honor to deliver the eulogy for my queen.”

“I see! As her spiritual leader, you are entitled to deliver first your part of her eulogy, Rabbi Huberband.”

Huberband then shook his head slowly, his face most somber.

“Pardon me for correcting you, Mister President, but I was not her spiritual leader. Only The One deserves that title, as she was her Chosen.”

Huberband then looked at the rest of the assembled mourners and started speaking in a calm, strong and solemn voice.

“My friends, we are assembled here to pay our ultimate respects to a truly exceptional woman, a woman who saved or helped countless others through her acts of bravery and compassion. She was the kind of person of which we see only a few through the centuries, a person whose name deserves to be remembered and cherished for eternity. Nancy Laplante transcended the boundaries of nationalities, races and religions, as she was simply a human being of the most wonderful kind. She didn't care if those she helped were white or black, poor or rich, Christians or Muslims, as long as they were good, decent people. Many, through their intolerance, bigotry or evil thoughts, hated her and wanted her ill, but she overcame their hatred and often brought justice to those evil men, for the greater good of all. Her ultimate act in life, so typical of her, was to protect from harm two little children, using her body as a shield so that those children could live. That last act resumed perfectly what made Nancy Laplante such an exceptional person, with bravery allied to selfless sacrifice and care for others.”

More than a few mourners, including Angelina Jolie and many other women present, cried silently as Huberband delivered his eulogy, which he kept short but eloquent. Then came the turn of Bill Clinton, who gravely looked at the others present.

“My friends, I couldn't possibly praise Nancy Laplante better than Rabbi Huberband just did. As a friend and as ex-President of the United States, I could not possibly refuse to come honor such a woman as Nancy Laplante. On top of all that she did, she was also a Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient, a fact that by itself justified my presence here. However, beyond coming to present the official respects of the government of the United States to a true heroine and wonderful human being, I came to say a last goodbye to someone I came to admire and respect greatly. Apart from saving many lives in the past years, she fought the forces of evil, hatred and intolerance with unparalleled bravery, daring and skill. She also helped inform all in this world about the

true costs and horrors of war, thus promoted in her own way the cause of peace. She was both the ultimate soldier and the ultimate peacemaker. May her memory live forever, Amen!"

Once Bill Clinton was finished, the employee from the funeral home that was present took it as the signal to push a small lever, releasing the tension on the straps supporting Nancy's coffin and making it lower slowly in its grave, at the same time as a recorded bagpipe version of 'Amazing Grace' started playing on a portable radio/CD player. Many of the mourners prayed silently or cried as the coffin disappeared inside the hole. Once the coffin was at the bottom, two cemetery employee removed the straps and pulley systems, allowing mourners who wished to do so to use shovels provided by the cemetery to each pour some earth on top of the coffin. Mike Crawford, a tall, handsome and physically powerful man with short black hair and green eyes, who was apparently in his mid thirties, then made an announcement in a strong voice.

"Thank you all for coming to pay your last respects to Nancy, my friends. Now that this burial ceremony is over, you are all invited to attend a last reception in her honor at the nearby WelcomInns Hotel, where a reception lounge has been rented by me. Maps with indications to the hotel have already been given to your drivers, while my own car will take the lead and guide you to it. I hope that you will all be able to come. We may now drive off to the hotel."

Holding her two younger children by the hand, nine year old twins Vivienne and Knox, Angelina Jolie returned with the rest of her family to their rented limousine, which had been provided courtesy of Mike Crawford at their arrival in Montreal. The convoy of mourners, with ex-President Clinton's motorcade jumping near the head, then slowly rolled out of the cemetery under the cameras of the reporters and paparazzi crowding around the gate. As Angelina had expected, some of those paparazzi ran back to their cars in order to follow the convoy and continue to take pictures. Angelina sighed with exasperation, then had a last look at Nancy's grave, where the two cemetery employees were busy filling back the hole containing her coffin. More tears came to her eyes as she remembered the good times they had together in the too few years they had known each other. Nancy had proved to be a friend on which Angelina and her family could count on, while Angelina had done her best to help Nancy when she had been distraught

at being forced to leave Montreal and come live in California. In fact, most of the mourners that came today had a debt of gratitude towards Nancy.

Angelina and Brad already knew where the WelcomInns Hotel in Boucherville was, as Mike Crawford's invitation to the funerals included arrangements for both the local transportation and hotel rooms, with the Jolie-Pitt getting rooms and suites at the WelcomInns, like apparently most of the other American mourners, save for ex-President Clinton. While being of rather modest size by Los Angeles standards and not being what an Hollywood celebrity would call a true luxury hotel, it was a modern, comfortable and most decent establishment that had proved more than acceptable to Angelina. Bad tongues would have said that Angelina could not live in anything but the best but, in truth, she could do with about anything, having experienced many atrocious living conditions in the past while acting as a United Nations goodwill ambassador to refugees. Now, calling the Boucherville's WelcomInns Hotel a Third World facility would have been grossly unfair, as it would actually satisfy about the most demanding American or European tourist. It also had the benefit of being well situated, being located near an exit to the main highway linking the cities of Montreal and Quebec and also being only a few kilometers from Montreal itself and its international airport. Lastly, it had the advantage of being right in Boucherville, less than three kilometers from the cemetery where Nancy was now buried. Mike Crawford, who had apparently been told a few things by Nancy about her relationship with Angelina, had also included in his invitation letter a few suggestions in terms of places to eat, places that Nancy had in fact spoken about in the past. Angelina smiled on seeing her children throw interested looks at a modest pizzeria restaurant as their limousine turned on De Mortagne Boulevard and passed in front of the 'ORLANDO' restaurant. After having Nancy tell her many times about how much she liked a calories-soaked and definitely not pretentious-looking Quebec specialty called 'poutine', along with smoked meat sandwiches, and having herself tried poutine by herself during a past trip to Montreal, Angelina had brought her six children and Brad to the ORLANDO for an early supper yesterday after arriving from Los Angeles. To her amusement, her children had loved the recipe, essentially French fries topped by grated cheese and hot brown gravy that could also include a variety of toppings that went from chopped chicken, sausage bits and chopped pork meat to smoked meat. Her older sons, seventeen year-old Maddox and fifteen year-old Pax, had also been pleased when a large group of female teenage students from the nearby

high school had walked in for a snack, dressed in their school uniforms, which included short pleated skirts. Both Maddox and Pax had later pronounced the standard of the local girls to be 'very nice', while a near riot had broken in the restaurant when the teenage girls had recognized Angelina and Brad after a moment of uncertainty. Angelina smiled even wider as she thought about that rather wild but fun family supper time, as no professional reporter or photographer had been around to spoil the fun.

The convoy of mourners arrived at the WelcomInns Hotel after less than fifteen minutes, with two local police cars coming along to escort ex-President Clinton's motorcade. As the mourners came out of their vehicles and entered the hotel, to be immediately guided to a ground floor reception lounge, police agents took position at the lounge's entrances and in the hotel lobby, to deter paparazzi from coming in and causing trouble. A large, good quality photograph of Nancy, taken of her while she was wearing her typical war reporter's outfit in some Middle East war zone, sat on an easel at the entrance, framed by flowers. Immense sadness returned to Angelina as she stared at the framed photo for a long moment. She was suddenly conscious that someone else was standing beside her and she turned her head, only to recognize Christiane Amanpour, the veteran CNN international correspondent and anchor, who had tears rolling on her cheeks.

"I still can't believe that she is gone." Said weakly Amanpour when she saw that Angelina was looking at her. "She seemed nearly indestructible."

"We all die one day, Miss Amanpour. Nancy did it the heroic way, while protecting children."

"I know! Still, such a loss is hard to accept."

Angelina nodded, then gently touched Amanpour's forearm.

"It indeed is. Let's go in: I am sure that Nancy would want us to have some good time discussing together despite of this."

"You are right, Miss Jolie."

"Please, call me simply Angelina. Can I call you Christiane?"

"Yes, of course."

Both entered the lounge, where Mike Crawford greeted them near the entrance with handshakes and kisses on the cheek.

"Thank you for coming to this reception. The bar is a free service, so feel free to have what you want, especially since you won't need to drive."

Christiane Amanpour, who was no empty head, looked at him for a moment after shaking hands and then spoke in a near whisper.

“Tell me the truth, Mister Crawford. You were more than just Nancy’s boyfriend, right?”

Mike hesitated only for a second before nodding his head.

“I was in fact secretly her husband, Miss Amanpour. She didn’t want to subject me and our children to the mad publicity that had started to follow her.”

“Could I meet your children later on, Mister Crawford?”

“I would be pleased to do so, and please call me simply Mike.”

Angelina and Christiane then had to move, as more mourners were entering the lounge. As she looked around her, Angelina was suddenly aware that the more historically known persons she had recognized at the cemetery were nowhere in sight. She quickly understood that they must have skipped the reception, in order not to risk being recognized by the members and staff of CNN, who didn’t know that Nancy had been a time traveler, contrary to most of the actors and actress that had been saved by Nancy on the MV ECLIPSE and were present in the lounge. Christiane Amanpour, for one, would have surely recognized David Ben-Gurion and Elizabeth Windsor, once they had taken off their hats and sunglasses. Joining up with Brad and their children, Angelina went to get a drink and some hors d’oeuvres at the bar and buffet tables, then started to mix in with the others to exchange souvenirs and stories about Nancy.

On her part, Christiane Amanpour, still feeling sad and depressed, got herself a drink before going to join a group formed by Anderson Cooper, Bill Clinton and Parisa Kosravi, CNN’s Vice-President for International News and Christiane’s direct superior at CNN. The group quickly swell afterwards, with Jennifer Garner and Ben Affleck joining them first, followed by Hugh Jackman and his wife Deborra-Lee. After a few minutes of quiet discussion, Christiane noticed that most of the actors’ children had congregated in one corner of the lounge, talking with a group of children seemingly led by a huge teenager. Intrigued, Christiane excused herself with her group and went towards the children, stopping a few paces away from them and sitting down at a table to discreetly look at them. The big teenager, actually the size of a very large and tall professional wrestler but still definitely not an adult, looked at her after only a few seconds, scrutinizing her in turn. Christiane then felt a funny sensation inside her head, as if someone was tickling her brain. The teenager, who could be about seventeen or



eighteen, then came to her and nodded politely his head to her while pointing an empty chair at her table.

“Could I speak with you, miss?”

“Of course! By the way, I am Christiane Amanpour, and I worked with Nancy at CNN.”

“Nancy told me about you, miss.” Said the teenager before sitting and then presenting his hand for a shake. “Herakles Sirtis-Laplante. I was adopted by Nancy when I was eight.”

“You are quite a big boy, Herakles. How old are you?”

“I am sixteen years old, miss.”

Christiane was left stunned for a moment as she stared at the 190 centimeters plus teenager, who was all muscles and had to weigh at least 130 kilos, without any visible fat.

“My god! How could you be so big at your age, Herakles?”

The teenager then shrugged in response.

“It is quite a long story, miss. But enough about me. Mike told me that you wanted to meet Nancy’s children. Would you like me to present my siblings to you?”

“Very much so, Herakles, but shouldn’t your father do this?”

“He already approves of my initiative, miss.” Replied Herakles while pointing at Mike Crawford, who was some distance away and talking with five other persons. Christiane saw Mike look at her and Herakles and then nod at the teenager, who smiled in turn at the news anchor.

“You see?”

He then looked at some of the other teenagers nearby and signaled them to join him at the table. Christiane felt her heart accelerate as three prepubescent teenagers, two boys and a girl, came to sit at their table, followed soon by two young women. Christiane’s eyes were attracted in particular to two of the prepubescent teenagers, a boy and a girl who were obviously twins and bore more than a passing resemblance to Nancy, both having green eyes and black hair as well. Herakles kept his voice low as he presented in turn the newcomers, starting with the twins, who were tall for their age.

“May I present to you first Patrick and Suzanne Laplante-Crawford? They are nine year-old and are twins from Nancy and Mike. Then you have eleven year-old Eli, who was adopted at birth by Nancy.”

Herakles then pointed at the two young women.

“As for Tera and Ingrid, they were adopted as teenagers by Nancy. She did all this very discreetly, not wanting to attract the attention of her enemies, like the Taliban and other religious extremists and the Israeli Mossad, on us. It was not easy to hide her pregnancy when she was expecting Patrick and Suzanne, but Nancy somehow managed it. We have been living with Mike all that time, with Nancy visiting us frequently. It was the price to pay to make her feel safe about us. You must know how unrelenting the Israeli Mossad had been about trying to kill her.”

“I know!” Said Christiane, some bitterness showing in her voice then. She personally knew of three attempts by the Mossad at either capturing or killing Nancy, while she could think of another two unexplained incidents involving Nancy that could be attributed to the Mossad. Still today, Nancy was officially called a supporter of terrorists by Israel, even though nobody else believed those charges. Spurred by the Mossad accusations, many Jews in Canada and the United States that followed without question Israeli policies had treated Nancy with hostility, making her life more difficult even in Montreal. For the life of her, Christiane could not understand why the Israeli government had been so hostile to Nancy, as its accusations against her didn’t make any sense. To add to that, Muslim extremists around the World that were either linked to the Taliban or Al Qaeda or were sympathetic to those groups had been after Nancy, who had a death fatwa on her head pronounced by the late Mullah Omar. At least, Nancy had the last laugh in that matter, as she had killed Mullah Omar in Quetta, Pakistan, while rescuing Anderson Cooper from the clutch of the Taliban. An announcement by Mike Crawford then took Christiane out of her thoughts.

“Mister President, ladies and gentlemen, I have arranged for a short presentation on Nancy before we start lunch proper. If you may sit down facing the flat screen installed in the rear left corner of the lounge...”

Staying with Nancy’s children, Christiane simply pivoted her chair around to face the said corner, where a large flat plasma screen connected to a laptop computer sat on a table. Going to stand besides the screen and computer, Mike Crawford looked somberly at the assembled mourners.

“What you will see is a short video montage showing moments of Nancy’s life and some of her main accomplishments, be they as a Canadian Army reserve officer, as a war reporter or as an actress. In her short, five year career as an actress, Nancy played in a total of six films: CROSSROADS; AVENGERS 2; DANCES WITH SHADOWS; LA DAME DE PARIS; HIGH TIME TO KILL and OUT OF THE SHADOWS.

Those films earned her two Oscars, plus two nominations to Oscars, including the nomination for best actress in a drama for the 2019 Oscars, which will be presented in a few days from now, for her leading role in OUT OF THE SHADOWS. As a war reporter, Nancy won numerous journalistic awards during her eighteen year career with either CONFLICTS MAGAZINE or CNN. As a military officer, she earned numerous service, peacekeeping and bravery medals, including the Canadian Medal of Bravery and the Afghan Medal for Valor. She also earned the United States' Presidential Medal of Freedom, given to her by President Clinton in 2018, following her rescue of Mister Anderson Cooper in Pakistan. A copy of this short video will later be given to CNN, which will be free to use it at will. You will then be able to come view the medals and awards won by Nancy, which are set on the table besides this screen. I hope that you will like the presentation.”

Mike then started the video and came to sit at Christiane's table beside his children.

The video, while only a few minutes long, proved to be well made, incorporating a few still pictures taken during Nancy's childhood and early military career, plus short clips showing her at work as a military officer or war correspondent in various war zones and acting parts from the films in which she was featured. Her incredibly daring stunt dive from the top of the main tower of the new World Trade Center, made as part of the movie CROSSROADS in 2014, didn't fail to draw breaths around the lounge, as it always did to audiences watching it. The video ended with the short clip taken by the Al Jazeera news crew that had been witness to her death in Kurdistan, showing Nancy covering two little Kurdish girls on the ground with her body as mortar bombs were falling around her. Many, including Christiane, Mike and his children, had tears on their faces or were crying at the end of the clip, which showed Kurdish militiamen and Al Jazeera reporters extracting the two Kurdish girls from under Nancy's body, with the last scene being a close-up of Nancy's dead face. Mike took the time to console his children before returning besides the flat screen and speaking in a half-choked voice.

“Nancy is now gone, but her memory will stay with us, forever. I would like for us to make a last toast to Nancy before we have dinner.”

Everybody scrambled for their drinks before Mike raised solemnly his own glass.

“TO NANCY! MAY HER SPIRIT LIVE ON!”

“TO NANCY!”

**13:51 (Montreal Time)**

**Room 216, WelcomInns Hotel**

**Boucherville**

Brad Pitt shook hands with Mike Crawford on entering Mike's room with his family, noticing that Ingrid and Herakles were also present in the room.

"So, what's up, Mike?"

Mike Crawford waited until Angelina Jolie had closed the door behind her last children before speaking in a sober tone.

"I wanted to inform you of a few points of Nancy's last will that are of interest to you and Angelina, Brad. First, know that she is leaving me her condo in Santa Monica, while her condo in Boucherville and her lakeside cottage in the Laurentians, north of Montreal, are given to Sylvie Comeau, one of our agents who originates from Montreal. While I do not plan to live all the time in the Santa Monica condo, me and Nancy's children will use it from time to time to spend some off time in this century. Your children and my children will thus be able to see each other fairly frequently."

"That's great news, Mike!" Replied Brad, smiling with genuine pleasure. "I know that my kids had a great time in Jerusalem with your kids, particularly Zahara."

The Ethiopian girl reddened with embarrassment at the hidden meaning of that remark, while Herakles smiled to her, making the others giggle. Mike waited until the giggling was over before continuing, looking straight in the eyes of Brad and Angelina.

"Brad, Angelina, you were possibly two of the best friends Nancy had in this century. Also, contrary to her friends at CNN, you knew that she was a time traveler. In a confidential part of her last will, Nancy stated that she wanted to grace you and your children with ultimate gifts and charged me with giving them to you."

Under the curious eyes of Angelina, Brad and their children, Mike retrieved a long box hidden under the bed and put it on top of the mattress before opening it, revealing a short sword and a dagger, both of obviously ancient manufacture. Grabbing first with both hands the short sword, which was in a leather scabbard with carrying sling, Mike brought it to Brad and presented the weapon to him, taking first the sword out of its scabbard.

"This bronze short sword was retrieved by the Time Patrol at the site of the city of Troy and actually belonged to the Trojan hero Hector, whom Achylles defeated in single combat. As the actor who played the role of Achylles in the movie 'TROY', Nancy

wanted you to have this sword. You will excuse the rather beaten up state of the blade: it was used by Hector to parry some of Achylles' blows before he was killed by the Greek hero."

Brad, his eyes opened wide with awe, took the sword and examined it with near religious fervor before smiling to Mike.

"This is a truly incredible gift, Mike. Such an historical treasure... I wish that I could thank Nancy in person for this."

Mike had a mysterious smile then but did not reply to that, instead going back to the cardboard box and grabbing the dagger in it, bringing it to Angelina, who was now dying with expectation. Like the short sword, the dagger had its own scabbard, but it was clearly a mostly ceremonial weapon, contrary to Hector's sword, and its handle was exquisitely inlaid with gold and precious gems. The long, wide bronze blade proved to be inlaid with silver, with Egyptian hieroglyphs engraved on it, when Angelina took it out of its scabbard after accepting it from Mike, who then spoke in a solemn tone.

"This ceremonial dagger belonged to Queen Cleopatra of Egypt and was retrieved by us after she committed suicide in her palace. Nancy knew of your fascination with knives and blades and thought that it would be a most fitting gift for you."

Angelina was left speechless for a moment while she and her family looked with admiration at the bejeweled knife.

"I...I don't know how to properly thank your for such a fantastic gift, Mike."

"You don't need to, Angelina: it is truly little compared to the friendship you showed to Nancy. This leaves me with one last gift to give to you and your entire family. One Time Patrol member will show up here to serve as guide as soon as you can go pack some of your bags and come back here to go to Jerusalem 'B' for a week-long vacation trip there."

The Jolie-Pitt children erupted in happy shouts and jumped up and down on hearing that, while Angelina and Brad were left stunned for a moment. Brad then thought about something and spoke in a sober tone.

"Mike, that is a fantastic offer, but we have both work and study schedules that leave us little spare time. Disappearing for a whole week will be hard to hide to others in Hollywood."

His objection brought a smile to Mike's face.

"Brad, we have become masters at managing time, literally. Once you will leave this room for Jerusalem 'B', no more than ten apparent minutes will pass here until you come back from your week in Jerusalem. We call this 'hidden time' and we constantly use it when we go on missions to the past or the future, like Nancy did. Just pack the minimum you will need for a week in Jerusalem and surrounding places, and plan for warm weather: you will arrive there in May. I will be waiting for you here."

The Jolie-Pitt didn't have to be told twice and left, excitedly going back to their suites to pack a few suitcases. They were all back as a group less than twenty minutes later in Mike's room, with the big American locking the door behind them. He then pointed the empty space in front of the sofas of the relaxation corner of his suite.

"Please stay away from that empty space for the moment: a time scooter is about to appear, to start shuttling you and your bags to Jerusalem 'B'."

Barely containing their excitement, the adults and children of the family patiently waited by the side of the designated area. They nearly all jumped backward from the surprise when a compact, wheelless vehicle suddenly appeared out of thin air in a brief flash of white light above the carpet, to then gently lower down to rest on the floor. A long transparent canopy then slid open, revealing three bike-like seats arranged in tandem, with a piloting station at the front. Angelina and Brad suddenly felt blood rush to their heads when they could detail the teenage girl sitting at the controls and wearing a gray, body-fitting uniform.

"NANCY?"

The teenager shook her head slowly, a somber air on her face.

"I am not the Nancy you knew, Angelina. Rather, I am her young timeline twin, born in Timeline 'B'. The Nancy you knew saved me and my parents from assassins in Montreal when I was just a newborn, then brought me to the past, where I have been growing and training at the base of the Time Patrol. I am now thirteen and have been training for years to eventually become a field agent of the Time Patrol. I will be most happy to serve as your family guide during your visit to Jerusalem 'B'. It is the least I could do to friends of my big twin."

## **CHAPTER 2 – TET**

**13h03 (Indochina Time)**

**Thursday, January 15, 1953 'C'**

**Bac Ti Airfield, suburbs of Hanoi**

**Tonkin, Indochina**

While he already knew about the age of Major General Ingrid Dows, Vo Nguyen Giap was still shocked by her impossible youth for her rank. She could not be much more than 25 years old. He also had to concede that she was as beautiful as she was said to be, with an angelic face, big blue eyes and reddish brown hair falling to her neck. Standing a good 175 centimeters, with a graceful body and long, shapely legs, Dows dominated him by a half-head. Despite her youth, Giap was however acutely conscious that this young woman had proved herself to be a fearsome combat pilot, as well as a brilliant tactician and strategist. With her air wing based in Da Nang, she had succeeded in utterly crushing and turning around a Chinese invasion force of over a quarter million soldiers, on top of exterminating the whole higher level Communist Chinese political leadership by a daring, masterful bombing raid on Beijing. All that, plus her surprising openness and political acumen, had convinced Ho Chi Minh to accept her terms for a peace accord in Indochina. In return, Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh were going to be able to participate in a coalition government that would soon take over from the hated French colonial administration. Giap, coming at the head of a column of trucks carrying thousands of French prisoners of war due to be freed today, was in Bac Ti in order to supervise an exchange of prisoners, as mandated by a recent ceasefire agreement. Getting that ceasefire accepted by some of his more hardline Communist collaborators had not been easy for Ho Chi Minh, who now fully realized that he could not afford to reject this opportunity for peace and independence for Vietnam. The reception of Dows' conditions for a ceasefire and peace agreement at the Viet Minh field headquarters near Cao Bang had triggered some fierce and bitter objections from the more hardcore communist leaders of the movement. In desperation, and fearing that a golden opportunity could be lost because of political and dogmatic intransigence, Ho Chi Minh had turned to the one moderate he fully trusted: Giap. Together, using Giap's soldiers,

who were overwhelmingly hoping for a quick and honorable peace, Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap had conducted a surprise purge of the hardliners, including Ho's three closest collaborators, Le Duan, Truong Chinh and To Huu. Now free to act as he wished, Ho Chi Minh had then lost no time in implementing the conditions for a ceasefire, including this prisoner exchange.

Dows saluted crisply Giap as the latter stopped in front of her, to then speak to him in perfect Vietnamese.

"Welcome to Bac Ti, General."

Giap returned her salute, then shook hands with her while speaking to her.

"And it is an honor to meet with such a meritorious adversary, General Dows."

"Please, General, do not think anymore of me as an enemy. I, like you, want to see an independent and prosperous Vietnam able to live in peace."

"I must say that the recent turnaround in American policies concerning Vietnam surprised me, General Dows. Many in Washington were firmly against leaving any future political role to the Viet Minh in Indochina."

"Many people in Washington still are opposed to the idea of having some Communists being part of an independent Vietnamese government, General. However, President Dewey decided to follow my advice rather than theirs."

"This must have created many political enemies for you in Washington, on top of attracting on you the unhealthy attention of the French secret services."

"Well, I am in fact debating if I should acquire the services of a food taster." Replied Ingrid in a joking tone. "But enough about me. How many French prisoners of war did you bring in your convoy, General?"

Giap turned around to look at the trucks of his convoy, who were now maneuvering to park in a series of long lines in an empty zone of the airfield, guided in this by American military policemen.

"I have in my convoy 3,866 French prisoners, all that the Viet Minh had in our camps in the Tonkin. I am still assembling for transport the remaining French prisoners we have inside Laos and Cambodia. And how many Viet Minh prisoners did you bring out of French prisons?"

It was Ingrid's turn to look at a large group of trucks and buses parked a hundred meters away and guarded by French soldiers.



"I was able to assemble all the Vietnamese prisoners of war and political detainees I could find in French prisons across Indochina. This includes 428 prisoners of war, 4,510 political detainees and 1,896 prisoners accused of acts of terrorism by the French. I must warn you that I expect many of those ex-prisoners to request to stay here in Hanoi, in order to be reunited with their families. My soldiers will take care of providing them transportation to their respective homes then. I can guarantee you that these people will not be further threatened by French authorities. The French prisons are now empty of everything but common criminals and will stay so, including the Hao Lo Prison. American soldiers are now posted at the entrances of those French prisons and have orders to free on the spot any prisoner brought in under accusations of political activities."

"And the French accepted that?" Asked Giap, truly surprised, attracting a malicious grin on Ingrid's face.

"Let's say that I told the French that they could put their objections somewhere, General. With all American military and financial support cut off on President Dewey's orders, the French were left with no choice but to start withdrawing right away their forces from Indochina. In fact, a good quarter of the French troops stationed in Indochina have already left the country, to return to either France or to the French African colonies from where they came from. By the way, I am sorry for what happened to your wife Quang Thai at the hands of the French so many years ago. I was able to locate her grave in the cemetery of the Hao Lo Prison. I can guide you to it after this exchange of prisoners is completed, so that you can arrange to dig her coffin out and transport her remains to her native town of Vinh."

Giap looked at her with wide eyes, emotionally shaken by those words. Tears then started rolling on his cheeks.

"You...you would do that? Why?"

"As a simple act of humanity, General. The Tet new year celebrations are in one month and your wife deserves to be able to rest near the bones of her ancestors. Consider this as a proof of goodwill on my part...and a low blow to the French secret services for having briefly tortured me with the intention of then executing me in secret."

Giap then shook again her hand warmly, sincerely moved.

"Thank you! Thank you from the bottom of my heart, General Dows. I will certainly go with you to the Hao Lo Prison after this exchange."

"In that case, let's start without delay, General. International Red Cross representatives are already present and will supervise the prisoner exchange. There are also reporters and press photographers of various nationalities present, but my soldiers will keep them some distance away, so that we can proceed quickly."

The prisoner exchange ended up taking a good three hours, mostly because of the need to properly identify and sort the large number of prisoners. Many of the French ex-prisoners also necessitated immediate hospitalization, due to their poor state of health and to the obvious ill treatments they had been subjected to. As the prisoner exchange concluded, Ingrid did a short joint declaration with Giap to the press representatives before inviting them to leave the airfield. Once alone with Giap near the Viet Minh trucks now full of liberated Vietnamese, Ingrid signaled for her M20 armored command car to come forward before facing Giap again.

"General, I can now lead you to the Hao Lo Prison, as promised. If you want, you can designate eight of your soldiers and a light truck to accompany us."

"I will certainly take your offer, my friend." Replied at once Giap before shouting a few orders to his soldiers. One truck with eight soldiers inside soon came forward to line up behind Giap's jeep and Ingrid's M20. Ingrid then gave the order to her driver to roll as the convoy with the liberated Vietnamese started to leave the airfield, heading towards Cao Bang, the location of the Viet Minh headquarters near the Chinese border.

Giap, who had elected to ride with Ingrid in her M20, stayed silent during their trip to the Hao Lo Prison, which would become in another timeline and another war the so-called 'Hanoi Hilton' of sinister reputation. Ingrid, understanding Giap's state of mind, respected his silence and spoke only when they arrived at the prison's entrance, to give a few orders to the American marines who surrounded the two rather nervous French soldiers standing guard there. The small convoy then entered the courtyard of the prison, stopping finally by the side of a cemetery filled with hundreds of wooden crosses. No French guard dared stop Ingrid when she led Giap inside the cemetery, followed by the eight Viet Minh soldiers and by two American female MPs carrying shovels. Ingrid finally stopped in front of a particular cross and read aloud the inscription on it.

"Dang Thi Quang Thai, communist agitator. Died September 8 of 1941. General, do you have a way to recognize the remains of your wife if you open her coffin?"

Giap had to swallow hard before he could reply to her.

“Yes! She had two fillings on her top left molars.”

“In that case, do you wish that we dig out her coffin now, so that you could positively identify her and then go back to Cao Bang with her remains?”

At Giap’s nod, Ingrid signaled her two MPs to come forward with their shovels, but Giap then stopped them with a hand signal while looking at Ingrid.

“Please let me and one of my soldiers do that job, General Dows.”

“As you wish, General. Pass your shovels to the General, girls.”

Ingrid then stepped back with her two MPs, keeping a respectful distance while Giap and his soldier dug up the coffin. After a few minutes of digging, a rotting, flimsy wooden coffin was extracted from the grave and put down besides the hole, with Giap then forcing the lid open with the help of a bayonet. Looking at the remains inside and opening the skeleton’s mouth, the Viet Minh general was suddenly struck with uncontrollable grief and had to sit down besides the coffin, crying shamelessly. Ingrid barely stopped herself from going to him, not wanting to break such an intimate and tragic moment. After a couple of minutes, having gained control of himself, Giap got up on his feet and gave an order to his soldiers, who then closed back the coffin and picked it up to carry it to their truck. Giap rejoined Ingrid as the coffin was being carried away, a look of gratitude on his face.

“I will never be able to thank you enough for this, General Dows.”

“Help create a just peace and that will be enough for me, General. Vietnam needs peace now. It also needs to forget its hatreds and differences if it wants to prosper in the future. My armored car will escort you until you are able to join up with your convoy.”

“Thank you again, General Dows. You truly are an exceptional woman.”

“I just do my best to stay human while doing my duty to my country, General.”

Replied Ingrid soberly.

### **19:43 (Indochina Time)**

#### **Detention block, Military Police guardhouse**

#### **Da Nang Air Force Base, Annam**

The young and beautiful Vietnamese teenager, who was sitting on her cell’s bed and was dying of boredom, looked with surprise when Ingrid came to her cell and

unlocked the door herself. No MP or soldier was with her in the corridor of the cell block as she entered the cell.

“What is going on, General? What do you want from me?”

“I came to fulfill a promise I made to you after your arrest, Dinh Thi Hoa: peace is coming to Vietnam, so I am freeing you.”

The sixteen year-old ex-prostitute and Viet Minh spy got up slowly from her bed, having difficulty believing her.

“The war is over? How?”

“I managed to convince Ho Chi Minh to put down his weapons in exchange for a place for the Viet Minh in a new Vietnamese government of coalition led by Emperor Bao Dai. Don’t worry about the French: according to the terms of the accord I arranged, all of their forces must leave Indochina within four months and they will lose any political control they had on your country when the new government of national salvation will be proclaimed in three weeks. National and regional democratic elections will then be held by this coming Summer.”

Hoa was speechless for a moment, then started crying, prompting Ingrid in hurrying to her and gently taking the teenager’s face in her hands.

“Believe me when I say that I am as happy as you to see peace come back to a soon to be independent Vietnam, Hoa.”

“My parents are dead, killed by the French, while I lost my honor by working as a prostitute, even if that was to support the cause of the Viet Minh.” Said the Vietnamese girl while still crying. “What will I do now? I don’t want to be a prostitute again and nobody will want me after this.”

“You will not need to return to prostitution, Hoa. You are young and you were well educated. You also speak fluently three languages, including English. If you are interested, I am ready to offer you a position as a translator and Vietnamese language teacher on my base.”

Hoa looked at her with incredulous eyes.

“You...you would be ready to do that, even though I was ready to help sabotage your planes?”

“The past is the past, Hoa. The Tet will come in a month: let’s forget our hatreds and divisions and let’s work together to help Vietnam prosper in peace.”

“And the United States, what does it win in that peace?”

"Peace itself! We will not have anymore to face the prospect of a long future war in which we would lose tens of thousands of our soldiers. Only Communist China and the Soviet Union are now left as a threat to our forces in Indochina, but we managed to reign in that threat...for the moment."

Joining her graceful hands to those of Ingrid, Hoa thought over her situation for a moment while staring into her eyes. She finally nodded her head, to Ingrid's satisfaction.

"I accept your offer, General. When will I start working as a translator?"

"Tomorrow morning. You will work with the public affairs officer of my air wing. At first, your work will consist in translating in English articles from the local newspapers, until Vietnamese language classes can be organized. You can sleep in my quarters tonight, until I can arrange for a room of your own on the base tomorrow."

Overwhelmed by so much goodness from a woman she had considered an enemy, Hoa lowered her head and started to cry again, making Ingrid hug her to comfort her.

"The nightmare of war is over, Hoa. Now, it is time for you to enjoy life: you deserve it. Grab your things and follow me."

Grabbing the suitcase that contained all of her remaining belongings, mostly clothes, Hoa left her cell and followed Ingrid to the office of the duty MP officer, where she was officially registered as being freed. Going out of the brick guardhouse with Ingrid, Hoa took place with her suitcase in the back of a jeep waiting in front, with a blond American woman in the driver's seat. Ingrid then presented in English her driver to the Vietnamese teenager.

"Hoa, this is my military driver, Sergeant Denise Bateman. Sergeant Bateman, this is Dinh Thi Hoa. She will start working as a translator tomorrow at the public affairs office of the base."

Hoa exchanged a guarded handshake with Bateman, a blonde in her twenties who possessed generous curves.

"Happy to know you, Hoa." Said the blonde while examining her quickly from head to toe. Hoa didn't reply, still overwhelmed by today's events.

Hoa was silent during the trip to the officers quarters of the base, looking eagerly at the base, which seemed fairly quiet at this time. The jeep finally stopped in front of one of the doors of a long, one-storey wooden building with a covered porch. Ingrid unlocked the door for Hoa, who entered with her suitcase and found herself inside a

small lounge. Following Ingrid, Hoa then went in an adjacent bedroom with private bathroom. She looked at the large bed, the dresser, the closet and the small work table and chair that were the only furniture in the bedroom.

“I must say that your quarters are modest in view of your rank, General.”

“I am not materialistic one bit and am accustomed to simple living conditions, Hoa. Do as if this is your home tonight. You are also welcomed to use the shower. You don’t have objections to sleeping in the same bed as me, I hope?”

“Not at all, General.”

Ingrid nodded her head, then pointed her work table, on which a few books were lined up against a wall.

“I must go take care of a few things tonight. If you get bored, you are welcomed to read through the books on my table. I should be back in a couple of hours.”

“I will manage, General. Thank you again for your goodness.”

“You’re welcomed, Hoa.” Replied Ingrid, smiling, before going out and returning to her jeep. She looked with malice at her driver as she sat in the front passenger seat.

“What do you think of her, Denise?”

“She is quite young, and also very beautiful, General.”

“Jealous?”

“Envious, really: she looks very appetizing indeed.”

Ingrid giggled and, checking first to see if anyone was looking at them, discreetly put her left hand on Denise’ right upper leg.

“Don’t worry, Denise: I still like very much your services.”

“And me your comprehension, General.” Replied Denise, knowing that both were playing a risky game indeed as two members of an armed force that didn’t tolerate fraternization between officers and junior ranks and tolerated even less lesbian and homosexual relationships, even when it involved bisexual persons.

## **21:52 (Indochina Time)**

### **Major General Dows’ quarters**

#### **Da Nang Air Force Base**

Ingrid smiled when she found Hoa in bed, reading the book she had published after the Second World War about her career as a fighter pilot.

“I see that you found a book that interested you, Hoa.”

The teenager, wearing her underwear and lying in a semi-reclined position, raised her nose from the book and gave her an envious look.

"I must say that your career would make many girls dream, General. You succeeded in many things that most women would consider out of reach."

"That's because I was lucky enough to be adopted by a woman that taught me that nearly nothing is impossible to someone who makes the necessary efforts and sacrifices."

"I would have loved very much to have met that Nancy Laplante. She seemed to have been a fascinating woman."

"She was, on top of being most tolerant and having a huge heart. If you will excuse me for a moment, I will go have a shower."

Hoa, returning to her reading, discreetly glanced at Ingrid as the latter was taking off her clothes besides the dresser, to then walk naked into the bathroom. Ingrid returned in the bedroom twenty minutes later, still naked, then slipped under the bed sheets and lay besides Hoa with a sigh of contentment.

"What a day! I really need a few hours of sleep."

"You have to wake up early, General?"

"At dawn. You can call me simply Ingrid in private, instead of 'General'. You can continue reading if you want: the bedside lamp's light doesn't bother me."

"Thank you...Ingrid."

Hoa then soon found herself in a half-darkened room, with Ingrid asleep besides her. The teenager thought for a moment about the irony of that scene: only a few days ago, she would have used such an occasion to try to kill Ingrid while she slept. Now, she owed her a new life in an independent Vietnam.

**14:38 (Moscow Time)**

**Thursday, January 22, 1953 'C'**

**Politburo conference room**

**Kremlin, Moscow**

**U.S.S.R.**

Vyacheslav Molotov, Assistant Vice-Prime Minister of the Soviet Union and member of the Politburo, the most powerful political organ in the U.S.S.R., could see that Joseph Stalin was in a foul mood. That didn't surprise Molotov in view of the recent

events in Indochina and China, but that did nothing to reassure the ex-foreign affairs minister. Normally, when Stalin was angry, heads rolled, often many heads. The fact that both Molotov's influence and power had been in decline for many years added to his anxiety today. Looking around the long table, Molotov examined discreetly the body language and expressions on the faces of the dozen or so generals, admirals and marshals that had been summoned to this special meeting of the Politburo to discuss the situation in Asia. As could one expect from a collection of men that had climbed the ladder of power in a state as brutal as the U.S.S.R., those general officers were apparently impassive. However, more than one had moist hands or glanced discreetly at Stalin and at Lavrentiy Beria, the minister for security and the ex-chief of the secret police, now called the MGB. Stalin then opened the discussion by speaking in a firm tone to the other men around the table.

"Comrades, what happened last month in Indochina and in China is nothing less than a humiliation for the Soviet Union and a disaster for the cause of world communism. Apart from identifying and punishing those responsible for this fiasco, we will have to decide today how to counter the imperialists in Asia and elsewhere. Comrade Bulganin, you and your generals had ample time to analyze the causes for the defeat of our air force and invasion force. What are your conclusions?"

Nikolai Bulganin, the minister of defense, wiggled nervously in his chair before opening a file on the table in front of him and answering the old dictator.

"Comrade Stalin, I am pained to have to say that the Americans managed to develop in utter secret a series of revolutionary aircraft, which our own aircraft encountered over Indochina in December. The new American F-83 fighter-bomber in particular proved to be murderous. The F-83 is capable of top speeds of about three times the speed of sound, is very heavily armed, including guided air-to-air missiles, and has a very long range. As for the new B-50 heavy bomber, it also proved to be supersonic, with a huge bomb-carrying capacity."

"Is that B-50 able to deliver a nuclear bomb over transcontinental distances?" Asked pointedly Stalin. Bulganin then looked at one of his air marshals.

"Marshal Zhigarev?"

Zhigarev, the head of the Soviet Air Force, hid under the table his left hand, which was shaking nervously. He was very much aware that he was literally risking his head today and that he made a perfect sacrificial lamb for Stalin.



“Comrades, I regret to say that the American B-50 CONDOR can, according to my experts, carry a minimum of one atomic bomb from the continental United States to the U.S.S.R. and back. Worst, its top speed basically makes it immune to interception by our actual fighters.”

Stalin, like the other members of the Politburo, flared up at those words, while his eyes threw lightning bolts.

“And such a bomber was developed and put into service without us hearing a thing about it? What was the GRU<sup>1</sup> doing?”

Bulganin took on him to answer the last question from his master.

“General Vatukin could only give me evasive answers on that subject, Comrade Stalin. I then relieved him of command, along with Colonel Mishenko, the head of the North America section at the GRU.”

Stalin nodded his head at that, partially satisfied: both of those men were already dead in his mind.

“That will not help us much in countering that new threat to the motherland, Comrade Bulganin.”

“True, Comrade Stalin, but that threat is still minimal, actually. In fact, the American air units that opposed us in Indochina constituted practically the only American units to be equipped with those new planes, according to our best intelligence. We believe that the Americans have in service to date only two operational squadrons of B-50 heavy bombers and at the most three squadrons of F-83 fighter-bombers. Further, the person responsible for developing all those new planes, Major General Ingrid Dows, personally led in combat those squadrons in Indochina. This reinforces our belief that those American squadrons in Indochina are actually operational test units, with a very limited quantity of new aircraft in service.”

Stalin’s eyes narrowed as he mentally analyzed that information.

“And how much time before the American Air Force gets large quantities of those new planes?”

“Four years at a minimum, maybe more, Comrade Stalin. The production capacity of the American aeronautical industry does not allow them to do it faster, unless they switch to wartime production, something we would detect at once. Those new

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<sup>1</sup> GRU : Soviet military intelligence.

planes are very sophisticated and also very costly to produce. Training the ground support crews for them will take a lot of time as well.”

“And our own aeronautical industry? What can it produce quickly to counter those new American aircraft?”

Bulganin suddenly started to sweat profusely, a wave of fear coming down on him.

“Uh, I am afraid that even our most advanced projects could not compete with the American F-83, Comrade Stalin. Please understand that General Dows used technological information from the future in order to develop the F-83 and the B-50.”

“THEN LET’S GET THAT DAMN INFORMATION FROM THE FUTURE, DAMMIT!” Exploded Stalin, banging his fist on the table. He then looked at the head of the MGB, the Soviet secret police, and pointed an index at him.

“Comrade Ignatyev, since the GRU proved incapable to do its job properly, I am putting you in charge of finding everything you can about those new American aircraft. I also want you to eliminate in an anonymous manner that young General Dows: she has already caused us way too many problems.”

“My services will get on those cases right away, Comrade Stalin.” Promised Semyon Ignatyev, the man in charge of dirty jobs for Stalin. The latter then looked again at Bulganin and at his collection of general officers.

“The Soviet Union will not wait for those American imperialists to become truly unbeatable in the air before reacting, gentlemen. We wanted since 1944 to take control of Eastern Europe, in order to create buffer states and thus prevent any new invasion of the motherland. Well, now that we also have the atomic bomb, we will not let the British or the Americans intimidate us again with their nuclear weapons. I want our strategic plans for an invasion of Eastern Europe to be reviewed and updated at once, so that our forces could be ready within a year at the most to take the Baltic states, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania.”

Vyacheslav Molotov stiffened on hearing that: as the ex-foreign minister, he was probably the one present best able to appreciate the military and industrial potential of the West, and particularly of the United States. He also knew the real state of Soviet power, which hid behind an impressive military façade a weak economy and a general state of poverty and backwardness. He however didn’t dare object to the orders of Stalin, knowing that any man that would contradict him now would sign his death warrant. Already seriously shaken, Molotov was further shocked on hearing the next order from Stalin, given to Semyon Ignatyev.

“Comrade Ignatyev, I believe that now is a good time to effect a purge of the Jews in the Soviet Union, as we discussed about in the last months. By deporting en masse our Jews towards Palestine, we will create there new problems that will not fail to mobilize the attention and the assets of both the Americans and the British. This could thus only help facilitate our invasion of Eastern Europe. Comrade Vyshinsky and his foreign affairs ministry will assist you by giving to the operation the appearance of a mass voluntary emigration by our Jews towards Palestine. Use this occasion as well to get rid of the Jews that are in our various work camps.”

Molotov nearly cracked then but barely managed to keep an impassive appearance, as Stalin glanced at him to see how he was reacting to his last order. Molotov’s wife, a Jew, had been arrested on orders from Stalin in 1948 under trumped up accusations and then condemned to forced labor in a work camp in Siberia. Despite the fact that he had not dared oppose Stalin in 1948 to protect his wife, Molotov still loved Polina, whom he had married thirty years ago. Glancing discreetly around the table, Molotov saw that Beria, who had many Jews among his aides and collaborators, also appeared alarmed for a very short moment before regaining his composure. With a cruel smile, Stalin continued to give directives and ask questions around the table, putting in motion his future invasion plans.

As soon as the meeting was over, Molotov gathered his papers and put them back in his briefcase, then returned to his official office, his face inscrutable. As soon as he could sit behind his desk, with the door firmly closed, he burst out in tears of despair. He now knew that he would never see his wife again. Polina was going to be either summarily executed or deported for life to Palestine. Molotov had in the past decades been a participant in the purge, execution or deportation of millions of Soviet men, women and children, and this without any visible remorse. Polina was however something else, having been the only person in which he had ever been able to confide without fear of being betrayed. The fact that he had abandoned her in 1948 and had accepted to divorce her without trying to defend her was still weighing on him. A knock on his door surprised him as he finally was able to control his tears. Wiping first his tears with an handkerchief and adopting back his usual stony expression, Molotov shouted for the person to enter, making the head of his secretary appear in the half-opened door.

“Comrade Assistant Vice-Prime Minister, Vice-Minister Beria wishes to see you.”

Taken aback at first, Molotov then nodded his head.

“Very well, let him in!”

Molotov got up from his chair and went around his desk as the small, thin man with round spectacles and half bald head entered. The ex-head of the secret police went to him with a smile and an offered hand, speaking loudly enough for Molotov’s secretary to hear him.

“Aah, my dear Vyacheslav Mikhailovich, I am in need of your vast diplomatic experience to enlighten me about a few points concerning Palestine.”

Molotov, who had always been suspicious of Beria, still shook his hand and pointed a comfortable sofa.

“Then, make yourself at ease, Lavrentiy Pavlovich.”

Molotov sat in a second sofa near the first one and looked into the eyes of his visitor, lowering his voice to a near whisper.

“And what do you want exactly, Lavrentiy Pavlovich?”

Beria also lowered his voice and bent towards his long time rival for power in the Kremlin.

“Vyacheslav Mikhailovich, you know very well that I have many Jews among my friends and collaborators, while I know that you still love your dear Polina. I believe that we thus have a mutual interest in countering this project to purge the Jews in the Soviet Union. I personally believe that we would lose through that purge a multitude of talented people, people that our country can ill afford to lose. There are already too many incompetents running this country, incompetents that owe their positions solely to their political contacts. To purge an appreciable portion of our competent managers and administrators would be an absurdity.”

“Comrade Stalin was however very clear concerning his orders for that purge.” Shot back Molotov, who was still not ready to trust Beria. The latter nodded his head.

“He was very clear indeed. He was also very clear about his intent to launch an invasion of Eastern Europe within a year. Now, considering your past experience and knowledge about the industrial power of both Great Britain and of the United States, do you think that we could really win such a war?”

Molotov carefully examined Beria’s face before answering him.

“No! Many in the Kremlin may consider President Dewey to be soft and sentimental, but he will oppose our invasion with all the might of the United States. As for our armed forces, while our soldiers are brave, too many of our generals are

incompetent or unimaginative. Our utter defeat on the Indochina front showed that too well. Our chances to defeat an allied western coalition are nearly zero, in my opinion.”

“That’s what I thought as well. Many other members of the Politburo also think like me...and you.”

“Were are you leading at exactly, Lavrentiy Pavlovich?”

Beria then seemed to take a major decision then and lowered further his voice.

“That things can’t continue the way they are now, Vyacheslav Mikhailovich. Comrade Stalin is dragging our country to its destruction with his project to invade Eastern Europe, on top of committing a huge mistake with this purge of the Jews. Can I count on you on those two points?”

Molotov was tempted to reject this suspicious offer from Beria, but the fate of Polina still preoccupied him a lot. He also had been afraid for years that Stalin, whose paranoid mind didn’t like the presence of others with significant power, would eventually purge him.

“I am with you, Lavrentiy Pavlovich.”

### **17:34 (Indochina Time)**

**Friday, January 23, 1953 ‘C’**

**Hotel in view of Da Nang Air Force Base**

**Da Nang, Annam**

“Okay guys, it’s enough for today. The Sun will go down soon and activity on the base is near zero.”

The man standing behind a powerful telescope mounted on a tripod and equipped with a top notch camera nodded his head and straightened with a sigh, to then massage the small of his back with his hands. He next stepped back from the partially opened window of their hotel room.

“Two weeks spent observing this damn base and filming those American planes. Do you think that we now have enough material, boss?”

The British M.I.6<sup>2</sup> agent who directed the small observation team looked in response at a tall and thin man in his late forties wearing thick glasses and who had been using a pair of binoculars.

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<sup>2</sup> M.I.6 : British intelligence services.

“What do you think, Doctor? Do you have enough information and pictures now to be able to study the design of these American planes?”

The aeronautical engineer from the AVRO aeronautical company made a smirk before answering.

“We have all that we could hope to see from a distance. I would have loved to study those planes from up close, especially one of those F-83s. What a fantastic machine!”

“Unfortunately, the security around those aircraft is way too tight, Doctor Herford. From what you saw, what do you think now of those American aircraft, particularly compared to our own aircraft?”

The British aircraft concept engineer slowly sat down, looking both thoughtful and preoccupied.

“Honestly, I believe that our combat aircraft are completely outclassed by these new American planes. What we see from this room is at the least ten to twenty years ahead of our most recent models. While the Republic A-3 THUNDERBOLT II attack aircraft and the North American F-10 FALCON are relatively conventional in their designs, their powerful engines make them very capable and dangerous combat aircraft. Their Douglas C-152 GLOBEMASTER tactical heavy transport has on its part an unrivaled transport capacity, which I evaluate at a minimum of sixty tons of cargo carried over intercontinental distances. It is also able to use short, rough unprepared airstrips, from what we were able to hear. The Boeing C-200 VOYAGER, along with its air refueling tanker and electronic reconnaissance and command variants, is at least as impressive. Its civilian airliner variant, the Boeing 717, is said to be about to enter service with various American airline companies, something that could impact severely our own airlines and aircraft manufacturers. With a 400 seat capacity, intercontinental range and near transonic top speed, the Boeing 717 crushes even our new Vickers VC-20, with which we were hoping to gain World dominance in terms of air travel services. The Convair C-100 MERCURY, while much smaller and with a shorter range than the Boeing C-200, is an excellent mixed cargo/passenger short and medium haul transport aircraft, of which we have no equivalent. As for the Bell C-10 THUNDERBIRD vertical takeoff cargo plane, it is in my mind an absolutely brilliant concept. The R.A.F. could only dream of possessing such a transport and rescue aircraft.”

“What about the Northrop B-50 CONDOR heavy bomber and the Lockheed F-83 EAGLE fighter-bomber?” Asked the M.I.6 agent. The AVRO man lowered his head in apparent discouragement.

“Those two planes are at least twenty years ahead of anything we’ve got right now. We would be incapable of intercepting them if they attacked Great Britain, especially if they used the same low altitude attack profile they used against Beijing. Our BLOODHOUND surface to air missiles cannot engage supersonic targets at low altitude.”

The British agent tightened his jaws in frustration and anger at those words.

“Bloody hell! How could have we let the Americans take such a technological advance on us?”

The aeronautical engineer raised his head, giving him a bitter look.

“How? You can blame our damn conservatism and our bloody paper pushers at the Air Ministry, Mister Golding. These damn bureaucrats are more preoccupied about enforcing their stupid regulations and sacrosanct procedures than to let our engineers work unencumbered. I personally saw two very promising projects cancelled because of objections from the Air Ministry and timidity from our directors board at AVRO. As for our R.A.F. air marshals, they are in my opinion nothing more than a bunch of old men without imagination who cling to outdated concepts.”

“And you are going to tell me that the Americans don’t have their share of myopic bureaucrats and brainless generals, Doctor?”

Obviously stung by that reply, the engineer got up from his sofa and pointed at the air base visible through the window, raising his voice in anger.

“At least they have General Dows and they were intelligent enough to let her work freely. Now, they have what they need to dominate the skies for the decades to come!”

### **11:03 (Indochina Time)**

**Monday, January 26, 1953 ‘C’**

**Headquarters of the Joint Task Force – Indochina**

**Da Nang Air Force Base**

Ingrid was going through the pile of paperwork filling her ‘IN’ basket, a job she hated but that was necessary to do for a commander of her level, when her chief of staff,

Lieutenant Colonel Mary Hiller, knocked on her door and entered. Ingrid noted at once the wide grin on her face, along with the document in her left hand.

“What do you have for me, Mary?”

“Some very good news...for all of our girls. We just got this from Washington via telex.”

Taking the document offered by Hiller, Ingrid saw that it was a long message sent by Secretary of Defense Dwight D. Eisenhower and countersigned by General Omar Bradley, the Joint Chief of Staffs. It had been sent to all the units and bases of both the Army and the Air Force around the World. The subject title alone made her heart jump.

“New regulations concerning the female personnel of the Army and Air Force. Damn, I must read this in detail! Thanks for bringing it to me, Mary. Have copies of it posted in the various messes and barracks on the base.”

“Right away, General.”

Before Hiller was even out of her office, Ingrid started to read carefully the message with a mixture of hope and anxiety. To date, American female service members could only serve in a limited number of segregated female units, supposedly to protect them from acts of sexual harassment. That policy had as a result severely restricted the choice of postings available to women in the Air Force, which in turn limited their chances for promotion and advancement. Her own past experience of Washington did not reassure Ingrid about the fairness of any new rules coming from the Pentagon.

After six minutes of reading, Ingrid put down the message on her desk, feeling reassured. Her female personnel would now be able to marry, have children and be posted to all the bases of the Air Force. Female administrative sub-units under the supervision of a female officer were going to be formed on each Air Force and Army base that were predominantly male, with those sub-units regrouping for administrative supervision purposes all the women on each base. The female officer in charge of each sub-unit, usually the highest ranking woman on the base, would in turn signal any instance of sexual abuse or harassment through an independent chain of command linked to a female senior officer who would be part of the Judge Advocate General Office of either the Air Force or Army. There were also provisions and new regulations concerning maternity leave and temporary work assignment during pregnancy periods. Ingrid would have preferred ideally that the separate chain of command for reporting sexual harassment and abuse would not have been necessary, but she was too much of



a realist not to think that the arrival of small groups of women on large bases full of men would not cause attempts by men to profit from those women. Another major point of the message was that the existing female units, like the 99<sup>th</sup> Air Wing, which Ingrid had commanded during both World War 2 and the Korean War, would be kept intact and would be used as initial posting units for new female service members, so that they could gain some experience and rank in a safe social environment before being posted to mixed sex units. As for the female officers of a rank equal or superior to major, they were immediately eligible to all the positions in the Air Force and the Army. A long list of units, bases and stations followed, split according to their status as either exclusively female or mixed gender. Only locations housing solely members of some combat trades closed to women stayed off limits to female members.

Ingrid was thoughtful for long minutes after reading the message, weighing its practical implications for her and her women. The lives, as well as the careers of her female service members, were certainly going to be profoundly changed by these new rules, especially by the one permitting to marry and have children. Competent and impartial officers were going to be needed for that new administrative chain of command, which was named 'Female Personnel Administrative Division of the Air Force', to be headed by Brigadier General Jacqueline Cochran. On that, Ingrid already had a good idea about who to use: female combat veterans who had been declared medically unfit to serve in frontline units due to war wounds. Unfortunately, there was no shortage of such officers, as the 99<sup>th</sup> Air Wing had paid heavily in blood for the glory it had gained up to now. On a strictly personal point of view, this message was finally going to allow her to realize a dream that she had since last December.

**10:28 (Indochina Time)**

**Tuesday, January 27, 1953 'C'**

**Orphanage of the Sisters of Christian Charity**

**City of Da Nang, Annam**

"INGRID!"

The little five year-old Vietnamese girl left her toys and ran to the door of the large playroom when she saw Ingrid, who had just entered with Mother Thérèse, the old

French Catholic nun in charge of the orphanage. Ingrid opened her arms and crouched to receive her, kissing her on both cheeks and speaking to her in Vietnamese.

"Hello, my beautiful little Hien. How are you today?"

"Well, Ingrid. Will your visit be a long one?"

"It will depend on you, Hien. I have an important question for you, but we must first go to the office of Mother Thérèse."

"Oh, okay!"

Taking Hien by one hand, Ingrid walked with her down the hallway, following Mother Thérèse. The short trip appeared a long one for Ingrid, who was burning to ask her question to the charming little girl she was holding by the hand. Once in the office of Mother Thérèse and with the door closed behind her, Ingrid crouched in front of Hien and smiled to her.

"Hien, think well before answering me. Would you like for me to become your new mother?"

Tears of joy appeared almost at once in the almond eyes of the little girl. Her own voice strangled by emotion, Hien nodded her head before hugging Ingrid, wrapping her two short arms around her neck. She was finally able to speak after a few seconds, her voice still partly strangled.

"Yes, I want that!"

Ingrid, now also in tears, kissed her on the cheeks and forehead.

"Thank you, Hien. I promise to devote myself to you and to make you as happy as I humanly can. You can now return to the playroom, while I discuss with Mother Thérèse the administrative modalities of adopting you."

Hien kissed her again before running out, in a hurry to announce the good news to her little comrades. Mother Thérèse watched her go with a tender smile before looking at Ingrid.

"You really made that child happy, General. May God bless you."

"God already blessed me, Mother Thérèse." Replied Ingrid in a mysterious tone. "Do you see any major obstacle to this adoption?"

"None, General. I have a very good relationship with the local Vietnamese administration and you should receive an official certificate of adoption within a week. Unfortunately, there are thousands of war orphans and the official bureaucracy thus greatly simplified adoption procedures in the last couple of years."

“Excellent! Could I ask you another favor before I fill my adoption request? I would need to find a trustworthy person as a nanny for Hien, so that she could care for her while I do my duties in Da Nang or am out flying. Ideally, that person should be able to speak English, as well as Vietnamese, on top of being kind with children.”

“I will see who I can find, General. Now, let’s fill your adoption request form for little Pham Ti Hien.”

Filling the adoption forms took less than half an hour, after which Ingrid went to see Hien for a few minutes before leaving the orphanage and returning to her base. Mother Thérèse, happy for little Hien, watched through her window as Ingrid’s jeep drove away, thinking about who she could ask to become Hien’s nanny. As she turned around to grab her telephone, she suddenly froze and opened wide her mouth and eyes, while a melodious voice spoke to her.

“No need to call, Mother Thérèse: I am here to take care of our little Hien.”

### **08:11 (Indochina Time)**

**Wednesday, January 28, 1953 ‘C’**

**Headquarters of the Joint Task Force – Indochina**

**Da Nang Air Force Base, Annam**

“General, telephone call for you.”

Ingrid, who was discussing in the operations center with Lieutenant Colonel Gertrude Meserve the flight schedules for her fighter-bombers, excused herself and walked quickly to the telephone receiver offered by the duty officer.

“Major General Dows speaking!”

“General, this is Sergeant Martin, at the main gate. A young woman is here with a little Vietnamese girl and says that she wants to see you. She says that a Mother Thérèse is sending her.”

“Already?” Said Ingrid, agreeably surprised. “That woman is Vietnamese or French?”

“Uh, I would say that she is probably Arabic, General. Her name is Sarah Ur.” The duty officer saw with alarm Ingrid’s knees bend under an apparent shock, while her face reflected stunned disbelief.”

“Are you okay, General?”

“Uh, yes, Captain.” Said hesitantly Ingrid before speaking in the receiver. “Drive Miss Ur and the little girl to the headquarters building, Sergeant. I will wait for them there.”

“Understood, General.”

Ingrid, now thoughtful, put down the receiver and returned to Gertrude Meserve, finishing her conversation with her before going to post herself at the entrance of the headquarters building, both anxious and impatient.

She did not have to wait long before a jeep driven by a female MP arrived and let out Hien and a young woman with tanned skin wearing a blue and gold Arabic dress and sandals. The young woman, in reality a teenager close to twenty, was very beautiful and was clearly of Semitic origin. She was small, no more than 152 centimeters tall, but had a graceful body that attracted the eyes of the two male MPs guarding the entrance of the building. Ingrid happily took Hien in her arms as Sarah Ur took out of the jeep two suitcases and Hien’s tricycle, which she had received as a gift on Christmas. Ingrid smiled to Sarah and, Hien still in her arms, shook hands with her.

“Welcome on this base, Miss Ur. Let’s go to my office: we will be more comfortable there to discuss the terms of your employment.”

“I will follow you, General.”

Entering the building, the trio walked to Ingrid’s office, with the latter closing and locking the door behind her before facing Sarah and speaking in English, which Hien didn’t understand yet.

“Nancy ‘A’ is dead. Are you Nancy ‘B’?”

“No! I am Nataï and The One sent me. Officially, I am here to care for Hien, which I will do with diligence, but I am here in reality to support you. Know that some in the Imperium ‘C’ want to eliminate you, to give a chance to the British Empire to survive and prosper and thus pave the way for the future birth of the Imperium. What they don’t know or refuse to contemplate is the fact that the British Empire is condemned in advance by its own weaknesses and failings and will fall by itself, unless the Imperium actively helps it.”

“And why would The One get mixed in a simple human conflict after all these millenniums of watching us without intervening? Why worry so much about me? I may be one of his Chosen but I will eventually die, like any other human.”

The angel in human form looked gravely at her, sadness on her face.

"Ingrid, know that the nuclear holocaust of 2052 'A' did more than nearly exterminate Humanity in the original timeline. It also deeply traumatized The One, who saw over eight billion anguished souls merge back with it within a few weeks. The involuntary travel in time of Nancy 'A', by creating a new timeline, also created a double of The One, a double that then merged with the original One. That new, reinforced spiritual entity saw in Nancy 'A' a hope for a better world, but human folly led to another nuclear holocaust, this time in 1977 'B', which created eventually the Imperium 'B'. That second holocaust increased the distress felt by The One, but the intervention of the Time Patrol in 1942 'B' gave it back hope, by avoiding a nuclear war in 1977 'B' and erasing the Imperium 'B'. However, the murder by the Imperium 'B' of one Nancy Laplante in 1941 'B' created a third timeline, a new Imperium and a new One. That third One also linked and merged with the two previous ones. This timeline you are part of is now approaching a crucial point where the future of the British Empire, and that of the Imperium 'C', will be decided. Unfortunately, the Imperium 'C' will not want to let its destiny in the hands of the British of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The Imperium 'C' also knows that its existence will depend on a nuclear war in this century that will let the British Empire in control of the rest of the World. Well, The One is not ready to be passive this time and let yet another nuclear war devastate Humanity again. He has started to manifest himself publicly in Timeline 'B', in order to help Humanity along a more peaceful path. As a Chosen, you represent The One in Timeline 'C' and your long term goal will be to counter the expansion of the British Empire and to stop it from triggering a genocidal nuclear war."

"And the Imperium 'C', who will take care of it? I don't have the means to oppose an Imperium fleet."

"That is why I am here, Ingrid. If the Imperium breaks the rules and decides to militarily intervene in this century, then I will help the Time Patrol counter it. I will also stop the Imperium or anyone else from assassinating you."

"Am I really so crucial to the history of this century, Natai?"

Sarah made a gentle smile at her question.

"Why do you think that The One took you as a Chosen for this timeline? You already have started to seriously put in question the dominance of the British Empire, on top of bringing peace to this country, and that solely thanks to your intelligence and initiatives. Some in the present British government are already thinking about eliminating you, as a matter of fact. By enhancing the power and influence of the United

States while promoting an end to racism and bigotry in your country of adoption, you are creating the conditions needed to avoid a future nuclear war. The One is proud of you and will not abandon you.”

“And Hien? Does she know who you really are?”

“Not yet! I told her that I am one of your old Jewish childhood friends that you knew in Berlin and that my family took refuge in France and then Lebanon because of the Nazi persecutions against the Jews. My story is that, after the war, my family moved to Indochina but was subsequently killed in a Viet Minh terrorist bomb attack. My French passport says that I was born in Iraq on June 13 of 1933, near the town of Ur.”

“That should be adequate as a cover identity. Do you actually have a passport or other identity papers with you?”

The angel smiled and took out of her sleeve a French passport that she presented to Ingrid for examination.

“As you can see, The One can be an excellent forgery expert when needed. To be able to manipulate matter and energy at will, on top of being able to travel through time and space, allows many things.”

Ingrid nodded her head as she leafed through the passport, which appeared completely authentic and carried various visa stamps, including for Lebanon, Palestine and Indochina. She finally gave the document back to the angel and switched to Vietnamese.

“Well, I believe that you will be perfect for the job, Sarah. I believe that there is still a small room available in the barrack reserved for the local female employees. Please follow me with Hien: I will have you officially recorded and given a pass.”

Using the services of Denise Bateman to drive them around, Ingrid escorted Sarah and Hien to the building housing the administrative and personnel services of the base, to make sure that their processing went without a glitch or delay. Once a room was obtained for Sarah, along with security passes and ration cards for her and Hien, Ingrid gave to Sarah a sizeable sum in local currency, so that she could go in town in Bateman’s jeep in order to acquire a new wardrobe for Hien, who was in serious need of new clothes. Ingrid then returned to the headquarters building to continue going through her paperwork and study the military situation in and around Vietnam. Even though the Viet Minh had officially laid down its arms and was negotiating its position in the new government of coalition to come, China and the Soviet Union still constituted a threat to

the region. China in particular was being shaken by ferocious internal political squabbles but the various pretenders to the still empty top leadership positions, mostly heads of provinces and top generals, all had one point in common: that of promising revenge for the American bombing raid on Beijing. Ingrid thus could not afford to grow complacent. The fact that the other American forces in and around the Pacific had only reacted in a lethargic way to the last month of furious military activity in Indochina, not launching a single air raid in support of the task force in Da Nang, save for the Navy carrier group cruising off Vietnam, also worried her. She in fact had fired to Washington a blunt message to that effect, asking for better support from other American forces in the Pacific. She was however still waiting for a response on that from General Bradley. As for the Soviets, they seemed to have understood that the game wasn't worth the candle anymore, but had not yet tried officially to declare an end to the hostilities between them and the American and French forces in Indochina. That last fact was however to the taste of Ingrid. A dozen Soviet pilots, including Captain Lydia Litvyak, were presently detained as prisoners of war in the United States and would be held there until a formal peace could be signed with the USSR. Ingrid was hoping that the aging soviet dictator, Joseph Stalin, would die soon, something that would give a chance to those captured Soviet pilots to return home without being treated like traitors by the Soviet secret police. Ingrid had met the timeline twin of Lydia Litvyak at the main base of the Time Patrol, which she visited regularly via discreet, prearranged pickups by time scooter, and counted her as a friend. The thought that Lydia Litvyak 'C' could be jailed and brutalized in some Siberian work camp made her sick to her stomach.

Ingrid met again Hien and Sarah in her quarters at the end of the afternoon, once her day of work was done. She smiled on seeing the happiness evident in Hien after her day of shopping and let the little girl show her what she had chosen. Ingrid nodded her head in approbation when Hien showed her a beautiful children's Chinese red silk dress, embroidered with gold and silver.

"You will be truly adorable in that dress, Hien. Save it for the coming celebrations for Tet<sup>3</sup>, in two weeks."

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<sup>3</sup> Tet : New Year in Vietnam. The most important and popular holiday in the country, calculated according to the lunar calendar. In 1953, Tet fell on February 13, in the Year of the Dragon.

"We will celebrate Tet here?" Asked Hien in her little voice, showing surprise.  
"Americans celebrate Tet like us?"

"No, they don't, Hien, but I do. Look, there is something that you should know about me."

Ingrid then spent a good ten minutes to explain her souvenirs from past incarnations to Hien, using words as simple as possible. The revelation that she had been a Vietnamese man two centuries ago particularly impressed the little girl. Pressing Hien in her arms, Ingrid kissed her tenderly on both cheeks, her eyes moist.

"I love you, Hien, and I promise to do everything to make you happy from now on."

The next two weeks passed in a blur, with Ingrid spending a lot of her time personally driving the political negotiations to form a Vietnamese government of coalition while checking on the progressive withdrawal of French military units from the country. She also reviewed personally the hundreds of requests for new postings coming from the women of her air wing, who were now free for the first time since 1942 to choose from more than a handful of female segregated units. The Summer months were the traditional time for new military postings and Ingrid was resolved to do her best to help advance the military careers of her old comrades in arms. She pushed in particular for widespread promotions for her women, who had long been held back in rank due to the previous lack of authorized positions. Some of her old comrades were in fact a full two ranks below what Ingrid believed to be the one they richly deserved to have. She however knew that many in the Pentagon would do their best to thwart her efforts with the various promotion boards, being still adverse to the presence of women in the Air Force despite all the years of meritorious services from the said women. That fight for fair promotions and decent postings would probably keep her busy for the few coming months. As for her own career, she was too busy consolidating peace in Vietnam and taking care of her subalterns to worry about it right now. She was sure anyway that President Dewey, who held her in near awe, would push her cause when time would be due. Another thing that kept her busy was the fact that she was still officially the Air Force Director of Aircraft Development Programs, a job she had to hurriedly pass on to Brigadier General Boyd in Muroc Air Force Base after she had been designated as commander of the Indochina task force barely two months ago. So far as she could make out, Boyd had done an outstanding job in temporarily taking over her



responsibilities there and Ingrid now had plenty of precious lessons and performance data about how her new aircraft types had fared in combat, lessons and data that she now took the time to report on and send back to Muroc and Washington. One point that she did stress among others was that the civilian variants of her new military transport aircraft types were now more than ready to be offered to American airline companies. Apart from the fact that this would finally open to the American public at large quick, affordable and comfortable air transportation on a world scale, Ingrid also hoped that this would help hammer a few nails in the coffin of the British Empire, by cutting some of its present technological dominance in many domains. In that, President Dewey was too happy to support her, having had like many Americans enough of the British condescendence and aloofness towards its old allies. In particular, the British refusal to help during the Korean War in 1948 had not been forgotten in Washington.

### **14:28 (Vietnam Time)**

**Friday, February 21, 1953 'C'**

**Da Nang Air Force Base**

**Republic of Vietnam**

Brigadier General Lewis 'Chesty' Puller, Deputy Commander of the Joint Task Force – Indochina, was waiting with Ingrid and a good dozen other senior officers in front of the passenger air terminal of the airfield when the plane transporting Vice-President Earl Warren appeared in the distance, low in the sky and on approach to land. As the plane grew closer, Puller couldn't help fix it with surprise.

"But, surely the Vice-President didn't come here in a bomber? Isn't that a B-50 CONDOR?"

Ingrid smiled at that while she also looked at the long, svelte aircraft with giant clipped delta wings.

"That's not a B-50, Chesty, but rather its supersonic airliner variant, as produced in its V.I.P. presidential transport version, the VC-5000 CAESAR. There is as well a commercial transoceanic airliner variant, the C-5000 SUPERLINER, able to carry 210 passengers across the Pacific at a cruising speed of close to Mach 3. This will make quite a news flash around the World: this is the first official user flight of the VC-5000. The British are liable to choke on their false teeth on seeing it."

"My God! It certainly looks fantastic."

They continued observing the approach of the VC-5000, with the crowd of local and international reporters and press photographers taking picture after picture of it. The big but slick aircraft finally landed on the main runway, then started rolling along taxiways towards the passenger terminal. Ingrid nodded her head with satisfaction on seeing the sky blue and white paint scheme of the presidential fleet, with 'UNITED STATES OF AMERICA' and the presidential blazon painted on the fuselage side: Vice-President Warren was certainly doing his best to show the United States in its most impressive livery for this first official visit to the just proclaimed new Republic of Vietnam. Once it had stopped in front of the terminal and had shut down its four big turbo-ramjet reactor engines, a belly access ramp opened up and lowered in front of the nose landing gear. As Ingrid and Chesty walked towards the access ramp and past the honor guard party, Vice-President Warren appeared at the top of it, prompting a military band to start playing the STARS AND STRIPES. Warren returned the salutes from the officers on the tarmac and went down the ramp to go shake hands with Ingrid and Chesty, with Ingrid greeting him first.

"Welcome to Da Nang, Mister Vice-President. May I present you my deputy commander, Brigadier General Lewis Puller?"

"Pleased to meet you, General Puller." Said Warren before looking back at Ingrid. "You and your people in Da Nang did a superb job indeed here in Indochina. You accomplished nothing less than a miracle."

"I would not have been able to do much without the outstanding aviators, Marines and soldiers under my command, Mister Vice-President."

"And your people will be amply rewarded for their valor, General. A USO troop came with me, along with a congressional delegation and a group of selected reporters, and they will take care of entertaining your personnel during the next few days. I also intend to distribute both medals and promotions around before I return to the United States."

"That will certainly be well appreciated, Mister Vice-President. Would you like to review the honor guard?"

"With pleasure, General!"

Flanked by Ingrid and followed by Puller and two Secret Service agents, Warren walked to the front rank of the honor guard party, which stood at rigid attention with

shouldered rifles. He then noticed with some surprise the unusual composition of the honor guard, dressed with clean combat uniforms: it was composed of three distinct platoons, one from the Marine Corps, one from the Air Force and one from the Army. The Air Force platoon was also an all female one, complete with M2 carbines with bayonets fitted.

“I must say that this is the first time that I see a mixed gender and mixed service honor guard, General Dows.”

“It was meant to reflect the joint service nature of my task force, Mister Vice-President. All of our services contributed to our success in Indochina and paid a price in blood, including the Navy.”

Warren nodded his head somberly on hearing that.

“There is unfortunately always a price to pay in war. Thankfully, your masterful strategy kept our own losses to the bare minimum, General Dows.”

Warren was then mostly silent as he reviewed the ranks of the honor guard, exchanging a few words with members who were particularly well decked with military medals. In that he was nearly stunned to see how many bravery and campaign medals the women of the Air force platoon wore, which was at least equal to the amount the men of the Marine and Army platoons wore.

“My God! Your people are true combat veterans, General.”

“The men from the Marine platoon belong to the Fourth Marine Regiment, the famous ‘China Marines’, Mister Vice-President. The women of the Air Force platoon all are veterans of the original 99<sup>th</sup> Composite Air Group that fought in Guadalcanal in 1942, then went on to fight in Papua-New guinea and the Dutch East Indies before fighting in the Korean War. As for the men of the Army platoon, they all fought at least in Korea, with many of them also fighting in the Second World War, Mister Vice-President.”

“So much valor in such a small group.” Said Warren, making Lewis Puller puff up with pride, like Ingrid.

After they had finished reviewing the honor guard, the group went to join up with the other passengers of the VC-5000 in front of the air terminal, where a few jeeps and two buses were also waiting. Suddenly seeing two persons she knew in the small crowd, Ingrid excused herself for a short while with Warren and went first to hug a resplendent Marilyn Monroe, earlier known to her as Corporal Norma Jean Dougherty,

who wore a short cotton dress on which were pinned four military medals, including the Bronze Star with 'V'.

"Marilyn! It is so nice to see you again. I see that you are still proud of your past military service. How is your career as an actress doing?"

"Quite well!" Replied with a warm smile the young woman, whose hair was dyed blond. "I have one of the main roles in a comedy that hit the theaters last month in the United States and I also just finished filming another movie. And you, how is life treating you?"

"Very well indeed! I just adopted officially a week ago a small, five year-old Vietnamese orphaned girl. Wait till you see her: she is adorable."

Marilyn, who always had loved children, looked at her with her mouth opened, envious.

"Good for you! I can't wait to see her. What is her name?"

"Hien! I will be able to present her to you tonight, after supper. You will excuse me if I can't speak much more with you right now: I have a big cheese to take care of."

Marilyn giggled at her choice of words.

"I understand. Go right ahead, Ingrid."

Peeling off from the actress, Ingrid then went to briefly speak with a handsome man in his thirties, who grinned to her at her approach.

"Ingrid! You look as beautiful as ever."

"And you are also as handsome as ever, John." She replied to John Fitzgerald Kennedy, with whom she had conducted a sulfurous relationship in 1948, when she was stationed in Washington as special counselor to President Joseph Martin. That relationship had made a lot of people talk but nobody, even John F. Kennedy himself, knew that she had used as well that relationship to heal with her powers John from the Addison Disease that had afflicted him since his youth. Since they were in the presence of many reporters and photographers who had come with the Vice-President's delegation, she stayed at a chaste distance and simply shook hands with John.

"By the way, congratulation for winning your election as a senator for Massachusetts."

"Thank you, Ingrid. It is however a small achievement compared to what you managed to do here: to stop a war and defeat a communist invasion, on top of eliminating the top Chinese leadership. Your detractors in Washington are eating crow lately."

"I am truly pained to hear that." Said Ingrid, visibly not upset one bit. "Well, I will see you after supper, once the Vice-President will have finished with me."

"I can't wait until then, Ingrid."

With the congressional delegation, USO troupe, reporters and aides taking place in the two buses with their luggage, Ingrid rode with Vice-President Warren in her jeep, while Chesty Puller gave a lift in his jeep to Lieutenant General Whiteman, the representative of General Omar Bradley, the Chief of the Joint Staffs, and to James Grover McDonald, a State Department representative. The small convoy then drove off towards the visitors quarters of the base, where it stopped long enough to let out the newly arrived and their luggage. While most of the newcomers stayed behind, Warren, Whiteman and McDonald got back in the two jeeps with Ingrid and Chesty, driving next to the headquarters building of the joint task force. Going to Ingrid's office, the group sat there in a pair of sofas facing each other, with Chesty sitting besides Ingrid in one of the sofas. The latter nodded with deference at Warren and spoke softly.

"I suppose that you would like a briefing on the latest state of political and military affairs in Vietnam, Mister Vice-President?"

"Later, General Dows." Said politely Warren, surprising both Ingrid and Chesty. "I would like first to discuss with you another crisis in the making somewhere else in the World."

"Another crisis, Mister Vice-President?"

"Yes! In Palestine, to be more precise. As you may already know, the British, after clinging tenaciously to Palestine all these years despite the guerrilla war opposing them to the Jewish underground, have finally bowed to the pressure from various United Nations members, including the United States, and have announced that they will relinquish their mandate on Palestine. The problem is that they just announced that they would withdraw their troops and administrators from Palestine next month, much earlier than anyone had anticipated. I suspect that their hasty departure is meant as a payback for the pressure they had endured, by throwing us off balance and possibly precipitating an escalation in the fighting between Jews and Arabs there. The potential for a bloody conflict in Palestine between the Jews and the Arabs is thus higher than ever, and this despite the official partition plan already approved by the United Nations' Security Council. The President and the State Department are now scrambling to find a solution

to that potential crisis and your name has popped up as a possible person able to prevent or at least mitigate it.”

“Me, Mister Vice-President? But, I just barely finished helping direct the formation of the new Vietnamese government of coalition and the first national and regional public elections are still over two months away. There is still so much to do here.”

“I know, General Dows, but the fact that you could accomplish so much so fast against apparently impossible odds is one reason why your name popped up. You happen to speak both Hebrew and Arabic, I believe?”

“Correct, Mister Vice-President.” Answered Ingrid, now feeling edgy, not liking the idea of possibly having to leave Vietnam before all of its internal problems had been dealt with properly. Warren nodded, pleased by her answer.

“Excellent! You would thus indeed be an ideal person that we could send to Palestine to deal with the crisis there.”

Ingrid gave him a cautioning look then.

“Mister Vice-President, I believe that simply sending someone to mediate between the Jews and the Arabs in Palestine won’t be enough. The hatreds and suspicions there date back from a long time, from well before the British inherited their mandate on Palestine at the end of the First World War. Once the British are gone, then you can expect the local Arabs, with the probable military help of the Arab states around Palestine, to try to crush the Jews and prevent the formation of a Jewish state. Have you reviewed the ATHENA files covering the future of the Middle East as it happened in Nancy Laplante’s history, Mister Vice-President?”

Warren nodded, his face becoming most somber.

“Yes, and it is one of the reasons why President Dewey sent me here to talk to you about Palestine. He has no wish to see that kind of bloody mess happen in our own time. To be perfectly honest with you, General Dows, the President is also under tremendous pressure from the Jewish lobby in the United States to do everything possible to help the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine and to protect it from any Arab attack.”

“Then, allow me to also be honest with you, Mister Vice-President. The problems in Palestine will not only come from the Arabs: the Jews will also cause their own part of troubles. Nancy spoke with me a number of times about the future state of Israel, which she had visited often and reported on many times in her timeline, and she

cautioned me about the excesses to be committed by the Jews against the Arabs still living in their portion of partitioned Palestine. Those excesses, which included forced deportation of Arabs and ethnic cleansing of many Arab villages and towns under the guise of military counter-offensives, were painted over for decades by the Jewish leadership and were still being mostly denied in Nancy's time as late as 2012, especially in the United States. Granted, the Arabs were no innocent virgins either in this business, but this is to say that simply talking will not do in Palestine. The guns will come out as soon as the British will leave there and it will be ugly, unless we somehow manage to defuse the situation. Now, with this said, what does President Dewey expect from me? To protect the future Jewish state in Palestine no matter what happens there, or to go there and try to be fair with both the Jews and the Arabs? I have to warn you that, if he expects me to go to Palestine and close my eyes to excesses committed by the Jews there, then I will refuse that job, Mister Vice-President. Whatever the proponents of the Jewish state may say, the Arabs of Palestine are human beings and have rights, like any other human beings. I will not be a willing part to their despoliation or forced deportation."

While Warren hesitated for a moment at her words, the State Department man seemed pleased by her declaration.

"General Dows, I must say that your words are definitely to my liking. I am one of the few at the State Department who are not ready to give a blanket mandate to the Jewish leaders in Palestine and to let them treat the Arabs as they wish. If given a free hand, do you think that you could defuse that situation and avoid a bloodshed in Palestine?"

"Mister McDonald, it will take a lot more than a pretty-looking mediator to prevent a bloodshed in Palestine. What it will take is a military force powerful enough to separate the combatants there, prevent atrocities against civilians, both Arabs and Jews, and keep at bay the Arab armies around Palestine. That will take at a minimum a brigade-sized force supported by at least one or two squadrons of combat aircraft. In fact, if we really want to prevent any ethnic cleansing to happen, then we will need on the ground something approaching a fully equipped division."

While McDonald took that in stride, Warren visibly winced.

"A full division for Palestine? I seriously doubt that we will be able to send such a force, or that the President will be able to convince the Congress to approve such a move."

Ingrid looked gravely at him, but kept her voice even.

“That is the price for safeguarding the future of Palestine for both the Jews and Arabs there, Mister Vice-President. At a minimum, I possibly could do the job with a brigade of good troops, but I will also need a free hand once there, without political interference from the Congress or from the State Department.”

“Aren’t you presuming too much about what you are entitled to, General Dows?” Replied in a reproachful tone Lieutenant General Whiteman, the representative of General Bradley. Ingrid in turn gave him a near contemptuous look.

“General Whiteman, I am simply asking for the minimum tools needed to fulfill a nearly impossible task. President Dewey had enough confidence in me to act against the advice from his Secretary of State and to give me plenipotentiary powers here, and it paid off handsomely. On the other hand, I got next to no support from the rest of our forces in the Pacific, save for the Navy, while I was under Soviet and Chinese attack. The Pentagon is thus in my mind ill-placed to question my needs. If I am to be sent to Palestine to prevent trouble there, then I will need plenipotentiary powers and a suitable military force capable of imposing peace if need be. Sending me to Palestine with insufficient forces and authority would only set me up for failure.”

While Whiteman glared at her but did not reply at once, Earl Warren seemed to take a decision then and nodded his head.

“Very well, General Dows. I will relay your requirements to the President once I am back in Washington. You may now brief us on the situation here in Indochina.”

“With pleasure, Mister Vice-President.” Said Ingrid with a smile, happy to be able to leave the thorny question of Palestine aside for the moment and return to what she had been working so hard lately to achieve.

### **19:53 (Vietnam Time)**

#### **Officers’ quarters, Da Nang Air Force Base**

Hien, who was being dried by Sarah Ur after her shower, ran to Ingrid while still naked when the latter entered her quarters with John F. Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe. Crouching at once, Ingrid greeted her with open arms and then straightened up, raising her adopted daughter in her arms while kissing her on the forehead. The little girl spoke reproachfully to her in Vietnamese while pouting.

“Your supper went on forever, Ingrid.”



"I'm sorry, my love, but I had many things to discuss with the Vice-President, important things that could impact many people. I brought with me two good friends of mine. Their names are John Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe."

"Hello!" Said Hien in Vietnamese to the two visitors in her tiny voice, making Marilyn in particular grin.

"She is so cute! I am jealous, Ingrid."

"Thank you, Marilyn." Replied Ingrid, puffing up with pride. "Hien doesn't speak English yet, but she can speak French, on top of Vietnamese. She is now five years old."

"She can speak two languages at five?" Said John. "I am impressed!" Sarah then walked in the small lounge, prompting Ingrid in presenting her.

"John, Marilyn, may I present you Hien's nanny, Sarah Ur. She is an old childhood friend of mine that I recently met again here."

"Sarah Ur... That sounds Arabic, no?" Asked John, making Sarah nod as they shook hands.

"I am in fact an Iraqi Jew whose parents went to live in Germany for a few years before being forced by Nazi persecutions to move to France, then to Lebanon. They finally moved to Annam but were killed in a Viet Minh terrorist bomb attack last year. Hien also lost her parents to a terrorist bombing."

Sarah then gently took Hien from Ingrid's arms.

"Come, Hien: I will finish preparing you for the night while Ingrid talks a bit with her guests."

Both John and Marilyn followed Sarah and Hien with their eyes as the 'nanny' went back in the bedroom with the little girl. Marilyn in particular looked envious at seeing the obvious love bond between Ingrid and Hien. Her own childhood had in fact been mostly devoid of such love. She had never known her father, who had left before her birth, and her mother had spent most of her adult life in various psychiatric facilities. Marilyn herself had as a consequence been raised in a succession of orphanages and foster homes. Some of her foster families had been kind to her, while she had also experienced abuse in others. She now saw between Hien and Ingrid something she had sorely missed in her early years. Even her marriage at sixteen had crumbled quickly, with her young husband unable to cope with the constant requests from her for attention and love. Since then, most of her lovers had turned out to be too possessive or to be only interested in having sex with her. A notable exception had been Johnny Hyde, her

old impresario who had died a few months ago. Johnny had been crazily in love with her and had offered her marriage a number of times. On top of tremendously helping her career in Hollywood, Johnny had conducted himself more like a father than like a lover with Marilyn and had left her a comfortable bank account before his death, something that had stopped Marilyn from having to worry about how to make ends meet.

“She is truly beautiful, Ingrid. She must make you very happy.”

“She indeed does, Marilyn. But let’s sit and talk: there is much I want to talk about.”

With John and Marilyn sitting in the lone sofa of her lounge, Ingrid sat in an easy chair facing the sofa. John was the first to speak again.

“So, now that you have your cute Hien, do you plan to marry sometimes soon?”

To his surprise, Ingrid shook slowly her head at once.

“No! I may now have the right to, thanks to the new regulations concerning servicewomen, but I have no wish to find myself relegated to the role of a simple housewife. I love flying too much for that.”

“But, who will take care of your new daughter while you are doing your job?”

“Sarah will watch her for me, John. I truly loved my late husband Ken while we were living in the Philippines, but I quickly grew tired of staying home like the good service wife I was supposed to be, so I took flying lessons and kept busy outside of our home until the war broke out. Tell me, John: if you ever married me, would you be ready to abandon your political career in order to let me continue my own career as a military pilot?”

“Uh, no!” Answered honestly John, starting to see her point. “I am too ambitious for that, even though I would marry you in a heartbeat: you are truly a one-of-a-kind girl.”

Those last words brought a gentle smile on Ingrid’s face.

“Thank you, John. I truly appreciate those last words...and your honesty. In truth, even if I would find a man I loved that would accept to stay home, the poor guy would then most probably be ridiculed by other men as being some kind of effeminate patsy.”

“You’re probably right about that, Ingrid.” Said Marilyn, jumping in the conversation. “In a way, adopting that sweet little girl probably ensured that you will stay officially single until you retire from the Air Force.”

"What do you mean, her being 'officially single'?" Asked John, intrigued. Ingrid answered for Marilyn, amusement on her face.

"She meant that I could still have a man at home, but not officially as a husband. It could be done, but I bet that it would make many people talk in my back."

"You would win that bet for sure." Said John, wringing his hand and making a face. "Do you know how much you make people in Washington talk about you?"

"No!" Replied Ingrid while resting her chin on her fists and fixing John. "And what are they saying about me, if I may ask?"

"Uh, not only good things, I am afraid. While more than a few members of Congress admire your professional prowess and swear by you, many more still grumble at seeing a young woman wear the stars of a general officer. As for the various media commentators and other Washington busybodies, you are either some kind of sexy wonder girl or a confirmed sinner with a possible multiple personality disorder, thanks to your business of remembering your past incarnations."

Ingrid's smile then turned into a grin.

"Well, I am certainly a sexy girl, John. As for being a confirmed sinner, you could personally attest to that, I believe, as I practiced my sinful ways on you in the past. As for a possible multiple personality disorder, I will say only that I am Ingrid Dows, an American Air Force officer, and that I will always do what is in the best interests of the United States."

"Well said, Ingrid!"

They conversed for another few minutes, discussing their respective lives and future goals until came the time for Ingrid to put Hien in bed. Covering the little girl, who now wore a pajama, with a bed sheet, Ingrid kissed her tenderly on the forehead.

"I still have to discuss a bit further with my guests, but I promise to join you in bed soon, my little treasure. Good night, Hien."

"Good night, Mommy." Replied in her tiny voice the little girl, warming the heart of Ingrid. Closing the light on her way out and closing the door behind her, the latter sighed as she sat back in front of her guests.

"Adopting Hien was the best thing I ever did: I have never felt happier since I took her."

"And I am happy for you, Ingrid." Replied John. "It is obvious that the love is mutual. Well, I wouldn't want to keep you longer from joining your cute Hien. Besides,

even if my trip on that fantastic VC-5000 was incredibly short, I still can feel the effect of the change in time zones. Since the day tomorrow will be heavy with official receptions and political meetings, I think that I will go retire to my room now.”

“I think that I will do the same myself.” Added Marilyn, repressing a yawn. “I will need to be in shape in order to help the USO girls entertain your Marines tomorrow, while you accompany John and Vice-President Warren on their meeting with Emperor Bao Dai.”

The three of them got up from their seats and exchanged hugs and goodbyes before John and Marilyn walked out of Ingrid’s suite. Locking the door behind her departing visitors, Ingrid then turned to face Sarah Ur, who had just come out of the bedroom. She bowed in respect to the angel before speaking in Old Sumerian.

“With the Secret Service agents protecting Vice-President Warren standing guard nearby, I doubt that anyone will try anything against me tonight, Nataï. You may return until tomorrow morning to Jerusalem ‘B’, to take care of Nancy’s children. By the way, how are they coping with her death?”

“They are still sad about it, but they are good, brave children and I believe that they will go over it with time. I however must confess that, even with all my powers as an angel of The One, it is hard for me to be as warm and motherly as Nancy was with them.”

Ingrid nodded, understanding what Nataï meant. Even though the angel belonged to a truly superior plane of existence, her nature by itself made her often feel distant and remote to others, despite all her goodness. Nataï then spoke further.

“For that reason, I have encouraged Mike Crawford in starting to do as Nancy did: namely to live two lives, one in the distant past at the main base of the Time Patrol, the other in Jerusalem ‘B’, besides his children. I also encouraged young Nancy ‘B’ to visit Jerusalem more often. Eventually, when she is more experienced and older, she may as well replace me as Hien’s nanny...once the worst threats against you have been dealt with.”

“Nancy ‘B’, as Hien’s nanny? But, she can’t change shape: she would be recognized at once, no?”

“She already holds a few powers from The One, which she received through me, Ingrid. One of those powers is the ability to shift her shape to that of any of her past incarnations. With her combat training from the Time Patrol, she will be more than able to protect Hien and it would be a duty that I believe she would truly like.”

Ingrid nodded, surprised but convinced.

“Nancy ‘B’ has powers? I didn’t know. I however agree with you, Nataï. She would be a perfect nanny for Hien. Thank you again for taking care of Hien in the meantime.”

“Caring for such a sweet little girl is a reward by itself, Ingrid. If all human souls would be as gentle as hers, then The One would be pleased indeed. I will be back by six o’clock tomorrow morning. Good night, Ingrid.”

“And a good night to you as well, Nataï.” Replied Ingrid while bowing, even though she knew that in reality the angel never slept. Nataï then disappeared from where she stood, leaving Ingrid alone in the lounge. She didn’t move for a few seconds, thinking over what the angel had told her, then went into the bedroom and quietly undressed. Once naked, she slipped under the bed sheet and glued herself to the back of Hien, who was sleeping on her right side, putting her left arm around her adopted daughter. She then quickly fell asleep, a feeling of contentment and happiness in her.

### **08:03 (Vietnam Time)**

**Saturday, February 22, 1953 ‘C’**

**Main tarmac, Da Nang Air Force Base**

**Annam, Republic of Vietnam**

Waiting for the reporters, politicians and entertainers from Washington to be assembled in front of her F-83 EAGLE fighter-bomber, Ingrid then started speaking in a strong voice while looking at Earl Warren.

“Mister Vice-President, as indicated by the schedule of activities you were given, we will now proceed with a presentation of the various aircraft types in service in my joint task force, following which you will be able to enjoy a short trip by air to the Bay of Ha Long, one of the natural beauties of Vietnam. The reporters present will be allowed to take pictures of my planes, and this with the express permission of the Chief of staff of the Air Force, General Vandenberg. Hopefully, seeing those photos will help convince the Soviets and the Communist Chinese that continuing to fight us in Southeast Asia is a losing proposition.”

“And on which type of aircraft will I fly, General Dows?” Asked Warren, visibly liking the program.

“On a Bell AC-10 THUNDERBIRD, Mister Vice-President. That’s the same type that I used last year to rescue those shipwrecked survivors off the California coast.”

“Excellent! And the other members of my delegation?”

“Members of the Congress will travel with you and your Secret Service agents, along with a few selected reporters. The other reporters will travel in a second AC-10, along with the members of the USO troupe. The only exceptions to this program will be Miss Monroe and Senator Kennedy, who will ride in the back seat of two F-83 fighter-bombers. Miss Monroe, as a decorated veteran of the 99<sup>th</sup> Air Wing in World War Two, has earned the back seat of my own F-83, while Senator Kennedy, as a decorated Navy veteran who served in the Solomons during the Guadalcanal campaign, will fly in the F-83 of my regular wingman, Captain Shirley Slade. I am sorry if I can’t offer you a seat in a F-83, Mister Vice-President, but your age and state of health precluded that.”

While Marilyn Monroe and John Kennedy beamed with anticipated joy, Warren smiled and nodded his head.

“I understand, General: my heart is disappointed but my back is reassured by your decision. How dangerous is the present enemy air threat?”

“It still exists, but is weak, especially if we don’t approach Chinese territory. Our planes will anyway be fully armed and ready to defend themselves.”

“Even my aircraft?”

“Yes, Mister Vice-President! However, your pilot has orders to avoid combat and to withdraw to safety at the first sign of danger. You will understand that I can’t take any risks with your safety.”

“I suppose that Agent Burton, the head of my security detail, will agree with you on that, General.”

“I believe so, Mister Vice-President. Well, let’s start the tour now, so that we can take off soon. First, here is the Lockheed F-83A EAGLE, the fastest and most powerful fighter-bomber in the World. It can reach speeds close to three times the speed of sound and has enough range to strike Beijing from Da Nang. Despite its large size for a fighter-bomber, it is very agile and is heavily armed, being able to carry up to ten tons of armament, including air-to-air missiles.”

“But, General,” shouted a reporter, “we can’t see any armament on this plane, apart from what appears to be the muzzles of four guns.”

Ingrid smiled with malice at that remark and raised her right arm while looking at Elizabeth Gardner, sitting in her F-83, parked alongside Ingrid’s plane.

"Appearances can be deceiving, mister. CAPTAIN GARDNER, PLEASE DEPLOY ALL YOUR WEAPONS!"

Under the incredulous eyes of the reporters and other visitors, the doors of eight weapons bays opened under the belly of Gardner's plane and an intimidating assortment of bombs and missiles appeared, extending out on their weapons pylons while four retractable rocket pods extended out from under the wings. All the reporters present frantically took pictures as she spoke again.

"As you can see now, the F-83 EAGLE has everything needed to destroy enemy targets, both in the air or on the surface. It is also equipped with sophisticated radars and sensors that allow it to fly at night and in bad weather. It has a crew of two: a pilot and a radar officer that also helps guide missiles. To date, the F-83 has a combat record of 67 enemy planes destroyed in air combat, for no losses on our side. It also destroyed on the ground 94 enemy planes and over sixty anti-aircraft guns. The F-83 has been approved for series production and has started reequipping select interceptor and fighter-bomber squadrons of the Air Force. Next, we will go inspect the Northrop B-50 CONDOR supersonic heavy bomber..."

The Sun was high in the sky when Ingrid completed the presentation of her planes. With Marilyn Monroe and John Kennedy having already changed into flight suits, Ingrid let her public affairs officer, Captain Marion Dietrich, describe to the visitors the tour they were about to take and went to put on her own flight gear. Marilyn Monroe, smiling with anticipation while waiting besides Ingrid's F-83, eyed the 158 small flags painted on the side of the cockpit, which denoted all the air victories credited to Ingrid during her career as a fighter pilot. As they were about to climb in the F-83, Marilyn showed to Ingrid a small photo camera.

"Uh, I know that there are many secret things in your plane, Ingrid, but could I take a few pictures during our flight?"

"As long as you don't take pictures of the inside of your cockpit, I don't mind. However, make sure that you put the retaining strap of your camera around your neck: the centrifugal force during turns could rip your camera out of your hands. Climb in the back seat and I will explain to you the emergency procedures in case of ejection."

"Yes, General!" Replied on a joking tone Marilyn while saluting Ingrid militarily. Ingrid in turn patted her bum.

"Move your pretty little ass, miss, before I insert a boot in it."

Both women giggled before climbing the two access ladders hooked to the left side of the cockpit. Ingrid took a minute to help Marilyn strap in on her seat and to explain to her what to do in case she had to eject, then went to sit in her own seat. Looking at Shirley Slade's F-83, parked to the right of her plane, she saw that she and John Kennedy were already in the cockpit. She could also see the two AC-10s assigned to the excursion close their rear cargo ramps, having taken in their passengers, including Vice-President Warren. Starting in turn her two big J-58R turbofan-ramjet engines, Ingrid gave the signal to the three other planes of her formation to line up behind her and started rolling towards the main runway along a taxiway. While Shirley Slade's F-83 followed on the taxiway, the two AC-10s actually performed very short takeoffs from the taxiway, climbing quickly in the sky and providing quite a thrill to their passengers. Once at one end of the main runway, the two F-83s put on their afterburners and took off in an ear-splitting noise to join up with the two AC-10s.

Pushed back in her seat by the vertiginous climb of her F-83A, Marilyn enjoyed every second of her flight, having dreamed of such a moment for years. Once the four aircraft were in formation, they turned towards the Northeast, heading for the Gulf of Tonkin and the Bay of Ha Long. Marilyn used the few minutes of the outbound flight to take pictures of the other planes with her camera. While she obeyed Ingrid's directive about not photographing the inside of her cockpit, she examined visually the instruments around her, impressed by the technological level evident in the cockpit.

"The newspapers say that you were the brain behind the development of all our new planes. Is that true, Ingrid?"

"I did specify the basic concepts to be used and refined a few of the solutions, yes. However, hundreds of engineers and dozens of test pilots did most of the work to develop and fine-tune our new planes, especially concerning their engines."

"Are you a qualified engineer, Ingrid?"

"I obtained an aeronautical engineer's diploma from the M.I.T. in 1948. Depending where I am posted after Vietnam, I will eventually get a masters' degree in aeronautical engineering. Vice-President Warren told me yesterday that President Dewey has more big projects for me in the future. Talking of the President, how is my political stock in Washington these days?"

Ingrid didn't miss the short hesitation before Marilyn answered her.



"You are very popular with the American public in general, Ingrid, but I would be wary of quite a few politicians and media commentators in and around Washington. Do you know a certain Senator Joseph McCarthy?"

"I heard about him, yes."

"Well, from 'the best communist killer' during the Korean War, you have now crumbled in his eyes to that of 'valet of Ho Chi Minh' and he is saying to all that would listen to him that you are more loyal to Vietnam than to the United States. Unfortunately, many people listen to him around the country. I am sorry to have to give you bad news."

"Never be sorry for saying the truth, Marilyn. You did well to warn me about him. In fact, I was expecting one day to become the target of his rants and accusations: I am probably too socialist in my outlook for his taste."

The rest of the flight to the Bay of Ha Long was spent in silence, the two women each thinking about what the future had in store for politics in the United States. Ingrid finally pointed the horizon ahead.

"The Bay of Ha Long is in sight, Marilyn. You will soon be able to take some truly splendid pictures."

Concentrating her attention ahead, looking over the top of Ingrid's helmet thanks to the fact that her seat was higher than hers, Marilyn was able to see a huge bay containing dozens of rocky islands with vertical cliffs emerging from the sea like giant teeth. With Ingrid losing altitude and speed, the actress was soon able to take some nice pictures of the rock promontories.

"You are right about this place, Ingrid: this is truly magnificent. I never saw the likes of this before."

"With luck, Vietnam should be able to develop a profitable touristic industry and this bay is going to be one of its jewels. Another attraction worth the visit is the imperial palace in Hue, which you will be able to visit this afternoon with Vice-President Warren and me."

"Then, I certainly will bring my camera there."

The four planes had been overflying the bay for maybe three minutes when a voice came out of the radio tuned to the day's tactical frequency.

"Lady Hawk, this is Owl Three, over!"

Ingrid pressed at once the radio transmission button, located on the side of her double engine throttles, answering the call from the Boeing EC-200R WAVEMASTER electronic reconnaissance and command aircraft on station high above the Gulf of Tonkin.

“Lady Hawk here! Send your message!”

“From Owl Three, the destroyer USS IRWIN just sent a distress signal. It has been torpedoed and is under attack by Chinese Mig-15 fighters and gunboats about forty miles to the west of Hainan Island. Can you render assistance, over?”

Ingrid couldn't help swear in her oxygen mask then: with a famous actress and a congressman riding the back seats of her two F-83s, she was ill-positioned to react to that demand.

“Owl Three, from Lady Hawk: I have two civilian V.I.P.s aboard my two fighters and can't risk them in combat. I am also escorting Air Force Two at the moment. You better call instead the fighters on scramble alert in Da Nang, over.”

“NO! GO RIGHT AHEAD, INGRID, AND DO AS IF I WAS NOT THERE!” Shouted at once Marilyn on the radio frequency, surprising the radar operator on the EC-200R.

“Lady Hawk, who just spoke on the radio?”

“That was my passenger, Marilyn Monroe. Marilyn, I can't risk you in combat like this.”

“Bunk! American sailors are in danger and need you and your wingman. I personally accept the risks of that mission.”

John Kennedy's voice also came on the radio then.

“Ingrid, I also assume personally the risks of this intervention. Go help our sailors and forget that we are aboard your planes.”

That erased any hesitation Ingrid had. Both Marilyn Monroe and John Kennedy were decorated war veterans who knew what combat implied.

“Thank you, John and Marilyn. Owl Three, give me an initial heading and distance, plus a short situation report, over.”

“Understood, Lady Hawk. Take heading 115. The USS IRWIN is 65 miles away from you and is sinking by the stern after being hit by two torpedoes. Five Mig-15s and seven fast torpedo and gun boats are still attacking it and shooting at our sailors in the water, over.”

"Understood, Owl Three! Sly Witch, follow me at full power! Air Force Two, return to Da Nang at once with your wingman to bring your passengers to safety, then join me at the location of the IRWIN, over."

The pilot of the AC-10 transporting Vice-President Warren answered her at once.

"Air Force Two understood! I am turning back for Da Nang now."

Now feeling less worried, Ingrid pushed her engines to maximum power while turning towards the Southeast, quickly accelerating through the sound barrier.

In his seat aboard his AC-10, Earl Warren saw through his window the two F-83s abruptly turn and accelerate away, disappearing from sight in mere seconds. His own plane was starting a wide turn when the copilot of the AC-10, a young female lieutenant, came to him.

"I am sorry, Mister Vice-President, but we will have to cut this trip short and return you at once to Da Nang, for your own safety."

"Why? What is going on exactly? I just saw our two escort fighters speed away."

"They were answering a distress call from one of our destroyers cruising in the Gulf of Tonkin which is under attack and sinking, Mister Vice-President. The two passengers in our F-83s volunteered to assume the risks of combat for themselves but General Dows ordered me to return you to the safety of Da Nang."

Warren was conscious at once that all the eyes aboard, be they those of members of Congress or of reporters and photographers, were now fixed on him. He looked at the rescue basket suspended to its winch mechanism forward of the main cabin, then at the multi-mission pods fixed to the wings before looking back at the copilot.

"Is our destroyer in grave danger?"

"It received two torpedoes and is sinking. It is also still under attack by Chinese fighters and armed patrol boats, Mister Vice-President. Our two F-83s are on their way to chase away those fighters and patrol boats and permit our duty search and rescue aircraft in Da Nang to intervene."

"How many sailors are there on the IRWIN, Lieutenant?"

"I don't know for sure, Mister Vice-President. Maybe 200 to 300 men."

"And your rescue plane, how many men can it pick up?"

"About forty, Mister Vice-President. Maybe fifty if it cuts on the safety margin."

The senior Secret Service agent charged with protecting Warren didn't like the direction the conversation was going and cut in, his voice firm.

"Mister Vice-President, General Dows was right: you can't be risked in combat." Warren in turn fixed him with a hard look.

"I know that you only are doing your duty, Agent Burton, but American sailors are probably dying right now, sailors that this plane could help. What will the American people say if we returned to Da Nang now and let those sailors die without doing anything for them? I was one of the first to applaud General Dows when she used her initiative and broke the rules in order to save Americans in danger of drowning off the California coast last year."

"But you are the Vice-President of the United States, sir! You can't risk getting killed!"

Warren nodded his head, still as resolute as ever.

"I am effectively the Vice-President of the United States, which gives me certain powers, including that of giving orders. Lieutenant, I am ordering your plane and your wingman to turn towards that sinking destroyer and to do everything possible to save our sailors."

"Yes, Mister Vice-President!" Replied the copilot, happy, before returning inside the cockpit.

It took only a little more than four minutes to Ingrid and her wingman to get to the site of the USS IRWIN, their F-83s accelerating to a top speed of about 2,800 kilometers per hour before they had to slow down. By that time, Ingrid had the five attacking Mig-15s firmly on her radar screen, which allowed her to line up on her first target as her plane became subsonic.

"Marilyn, things could be rough for the next few minutes. If you want to help me, watch our rear sector and warn me if an enemy fighter approaches us from behind or from above."

"Understood!" Replied at once the actress, her heart beating hard.

"Sly Witch, from Lady Hawk: engage one of the Mig-15 with an AIM-1A as soon as you can, then switch to the enemy patrol boats and do your best to keep them away from our sailors, over."

"Sly Witch, understood!"

Normally, Ingrid would have fired first one of her two radar-guided AIM-1B loaded in her plane. However, those missiles needed a radar officer in the back seat of the F-83 to guide them with their targeting and illumination radar. With Marilyn and John unable to do such a task, Ingrid could thus only use the four infrared-guided AIM-1A missiles that she carried, plus her internal 30mm cannons and her unguided 76mm and 127mm rockets. That was however going to be more than enough to help her cause stinging losses to the enemy.

With the destroyer USS IRWIN now visible on the horizon, with a column of black smoke rising from the ship, Ingrid pointed her plane at one of the Migs, which just had strafed the ship with its 23mm and 37mm cannons. The Chinese pilots, who didn't have a radar in their aircraft, seemed not to have detected her yet when she fired her first missile. The enemy woke up to reality when the Mig targeted by Ingrid exploded in mid-air, disintegrating into pieces. A second Mig blew up a few seconds later, utterly destroyed by the sixty kilo high explosive fragmentation warhead of the AIM-1A fired by Shirley Slade. Switching to her four 30mm cannons, Ingrid shot down in quick succession two more Mig-15s at the price of a few tight turns that made the poor Marilyn see red as the centrifugal force crushed her in her seat. The last surviving Mig then fled eastward, flying towards Hainan Island. Ingrid made a point of chasing it for a moment before abandoning the pursuit and turning away, attracting a protestation from Marilyn.

"Hey, why are we letting that bastard go?"

"So that he could point his lair to us, Marilyn. I have the firm intention to empty that Mig nest later on. Owl Three, this is Lady Hawk. One Mig just fled the combat scene. Follow him on your radars and locate his base. Do the same with any enemy patrol boat that will flee. Once the enemy bases are located, advise Da Nang and tell them to prepare massive air raids on those bases on Hainan Island."

"Owl Three understood! Will do, out!"

"Excuse me, Ingrid." Then said Marilyn in a repentant tone as she understood her friend's plan. "What do we do now?"

"We help Shirley blow up those enemy patrol boats."

"Great! Can I take a few pictures of that fight?"

Ingrid smiled in her oxygen mask.

"Feel free to take all the pictures you want, Marilyn."

On the USS IRWIN, a crew of six gunners that had stayed aboard the destroyer to serve their quadruple 40mm automatic cannon screamed with joy at the intervention of the two F-83s. They then continued firing, resolved to keep the Chinese patrol boats away from their comrades swimming on the surface of the sea or crowded in the few rescue rafts that had been lowered in the water. Nearly the whole rear half of their ship was now under water, with the destroyer progressively taking a steep list from aft. The gunners, whose mount was situated just above the command bridge, now empty of personnel, knew that by staying at their post they risked being sucked to the bottom when their destroyer would disappear for good under the waves. However, they also realized that, if left free to approach the survivors, the Chinese boats would massacre them without remorse or would take a number of them prisoners. After the air raid on Beijing, no American had any illusion about the kind of treatment they would endure if captured by the Chinese. The servants of the quad 40mm mount thus ignored the increasing list of their ship and the waves getting closer to them, chasing with their fire one of the patrol boats trying to approach a rescue raft. In return, the crew of that patrol boat was frantically trying to silence the American gun mount with its 14.5mm heavy machine guns. The American gunners finally won that duel, hitting the patrol boat with seven 40mm shells and setting it on fire. The head gunner switched at once his fire, aiming at another patrol boat that was firing at the two American fighter-bombers flying overhead. Sailor Second Class Steve Carlson, the youngest of the servants, was working like a devil to continue feeding his gun with 40mm clips, ignoring the heat from the nearby fires and the growing list. He could clearly see many of his comrades in the rafts, including a few officers, frantically waving at his gun crew to jump off the ship before it was too late. His five comrades around him however showed no sign of wanting to abandon their gun, so Steve kept feeding clips, vowing not to be the first to leave his mount. The aimer, Petty Officer Second Class Ralph Goodale, had just hit hard another patrol boat when the destroyer shook and a noise of tortured metal made him and the other gunners look aft. Goodale shouted in alarm when he saw large air bubbles emerge from the submerged stern of the ship.

“ONE OF THE WATER-TIGHT DOORS MUST HAVE GIVEN UP. SHE’S ABOUT TO SINK!”

The destroyer effectively pivoted quickly to near vertical, making impossible any more firing from their 40mm mount. Having no other choice now and obeying the ultimate order from Goodale, Steve Carlson and his five comrades dived head first in the water

swallowing their ship. Steve's life vest quickly brought him back to the surface, but he was as quickly sucked down under the waves when the bow of the ship disappeared, on its way to the bottom. Desperately holding his breath, the young nineteen years old sailor swam as hard as he could to get back to the surface. By some miracle, he finally emerged after a long half minute, completely out of breath and exhausted. Gulping air, Steve looked around him, trying to locate one of the life rafts. One of the rafts was by chance already approaching, the sailors in it rowing with their hands. Steve was finally pulled out of the water, spent and shivering, and laid down on the bottom of the raft.

"The...the other servants of the forward quad 40mm mount, did they make it, Lieutenant?" Asked Steve to the assistant engineering officer, who was looking down at him. The officer shook his head sadly in response.

"I'm sorry, son: you were the only one to surface. What your crew did was damn brave."

Bullets from a heavy machine gun then whistled over their heads, making the sailors bend down as much as their could in their raft.

"Those Chinese bastards!" Swore a graying chief petty officer. "They have no respect for the laws of the sea."

They never knew if the Chinese wanted to capture them or simply kill them, as the enemy patrol boat suddenly disappeared in a rain of explosions and water geysers. Two seconds later, one of the two F-83s swooshed overhead, saluted by the enthusiastic American sailors. The three Chinese patrol boats still intact then decided that the game wasn't worth the candle anymore and turned away towards Hainan Island, still pursued by the two F-83s. Two of those patrol boats exploded under the rockets and shells of the fighter-bombers before the planes broke off their pursuit and came back towards the location of the sinking. The planes then climbed to medium altitude and started circling overhead, reassuring Steve Carlson.

"They are going to stay over us."

"Yeah, but for how long?" Grumbled the old chief petty officer. "It will take hours for another ship to show up. These planes will be out of fuel well before that."

"Maybe," replied the assistant engineering officer, "but at least our people will know exactly where to find us. We will just have to be patient, men. In the meantime, let's help the men still in the water."

Their raft filled up quickly with survivors in the following minutes as they pulled men out of the water. A lifeboat had just joined them when the noise of approaching reactors made the sailors look towards the West.

"These are our planes, Lieutenant, right?" Asked Steve Carlson, worried. The officer looked in the distance for a moment before smiling.

"YES! I see two beautiful AC-10 search and rescue vertical takeoff aircraft on approach: help is arriving, guys!"

A concert of joyous screams greeted that announcement. With their moral back up, the sailors hurried to prepare their wounded for priority evacuation as the two AC-10s slowed down to a hover and maneuvered to lower their rescue baskets besides the rafts and lifeboats. One of the sailors suddenly shouted in surprise when he was able to detail the diver standing in the nearest rescue basket.

"HEY, THAT'S A WOMAN!"

After a moment of stunned surprise, the sailors had to recognize that their comrade was right. The first wounded to be put in the rescue basket grinned to the young blonde diver helping to pull him in.

"I must be in paradise."

"True paradise is awaiting you above and you can call me 'Sergeant', Leading Seaman." Replied with a smile the rescue specialist. The sailor didn't understand the first part of her reply until he arrived aboard the AC-10 with six other survivors. Two more Air Force women helped them to the cargo cabin, where the sailors came face to face with eight beautiful young women wearing a collection of short dresses and light tropical clothes. The first wounded opened his eyes wide on seeing a pretty brunette that he had seen before on a cinema projection screen.

"Miss Jean Peters? My god, I'm really in paradise now!"

Turning at an altitude of 5,000 meters over the location of the sinking, with Shirley Slade's F-83 still following her, Ingrid stayed fully alert, alternating her attention between the sky, the surface of the sea and her radar screen. Back in the radar officer's seat, Marilyn was jubilating, both happy and proud.

"You know that I dreamed for a long time of flying a combat mission with you, Ingrid."



"It was my pleasure, Marilyn." Replied Ingrid, sounding preoccupied. "However, something doesn't jive in this incident. Normally, the guns of the IRWIN should have been able to keep those patrol boats away before they could launch their torpedoes."

"Maybe those Chinese aircraft distracted our gunners and allowed the patrol boats to come close." Suggested Marilyn over the intercom.

"I don't know, Marilyn. The IRWIN would then have sent its message before being torpedoed, not after. I will ask Owl Three about this."

A short conversation with the electronic warfare officer aboard the EC-200R, still on station high above the Gulf of Tonkin, didn't bring her an answer.

"Damn! The only message the IRWIN sent simply said that it was under attack and had received two torpedoes, but did not say exactly when it was torpedoed. Fuck it: I'm going to contact our AC-10s, so that they could ask the survivors."

After another short radio conversation and a wait of a few minutes, during which the duty S.A.R. AC-10 from Da Nang arrived on the site of the wreck, Ingrid got an answer that was like a slap to her.

"Damn! The IRWIN was torpedoed BEFORE the arrival of the Mig-15s and of the patrol boats. That could only mean one thing: that a submarine is lurking around. Pass the word to the other planes, Air Force Two: keep an eye open for an enemy submarine, out."

Changing the settings on her surface search radar, Ingrid passed into high definition mode while telling by radio Shirley Slade to assume the air watch. It took only a second before she obtained a weak but constant radar contact. The location of that contact however made her hair nearly rise on her head: it was less than 500 meters away from where the three AC-10s, including the plane carrying Vice-President Warren, were busy fishing out survivors from the IRWIN. Examining the surface of the sea, she soon saw a thin, characteristic wake that made her shout a warning on the radio.

"THIS IS LADY HAWK! I SEE A PERISCOPE ON THE SURFACE AT ABOUT 500 YARDS TO THE EAST OF THE SINKING POINT. AIR FORCE TWO, GET THE HELL OUT OF THERE, NOW!"

In the AC-10 transporting Vice-President Warren, Major Jane Straughan was immediately confronted with a dilemma. Her rescue basket was presently in the water, with her rescue diver in the process of pulling in a wounded sailor. She would thus be unable to leave the scene before raising her rescue basket, something that was going to take at least one minute. As she was about to shout an order to the winch operator to

pull back their rescue basket as fast as possible, a big gray form broke through the surface of the sea 500 meters away and slightly to her right. While she was not an expert in ship identification, the large red star painted on the side of the submarine's conning tower was enough for her.

"MACHINE GUNNERS TO YOUR WEAPONS!" She shouted before activating her radio microphone. "ENEMY SUBMARINE ON THE SURFACE AT TWO O'CLOCK! FIRE AT WILL!"

She then made her plane pivot on the spot, pointing its nose towards the submarine. Her copilot reacted with commendable speed and lined up her gun sight on the conning tower of the submarine, firing their two 30mm cannons installed in limited traverse mounts in the nose as men emerged from a deck hatch and ran to an anti-aircraft gun. With the submarine now unable to pretend that it surfaced only to help the survivors, Straughan selected the 127mm rocket launcher pods fitted to her multi-mission pods and aimed carefully, then pressed the trigger. Normally, a plane or rescue helicopter caught in the same circumstances as the AC-10s would be easy, nearly defenseless targets, which explained the apparent audacity of the submarine's captain. However, the AC-10 was anything but a defenseless aircraft. Before the enemy gunners could man their 57mm mount, they were swept away by a hurricane of exploding 30mm shells. A first salvo of 127mm rockets then slammed in the water and against the submarine. One rocket exploded against the side of the conning tower, blowing to pieces the gunners about to aim the 23mm cannon mount at the top rear of the conning tower. Another rocket exploded just under the surface of the water, against the external hull of the submarine, creating a water leak. Suddenly caught in the cannon and rocket crossfire from the three AC-10s, the submarine quickly absorbed seven direct 127mm rocket hits and dozens of 30mm shell impacts. With his own gunners blown away and with a growing number of water leaks to his pressure hull, the captain of the submarine was the one to face a dilemma now: to stay on the surface and continue the unequal fight with the AC-10s, or to dive with a pierced pressure hull. He finally decided to continue the combat and sent a second team of gunners to man his two cannons. He quickly regretted that decision, with his submarine also coming under attack from above as the two F-83s he didn't see through his periscope dived on him. Ingrid fired just before Shirley, launching twelve 127mm rocket with devastating accuracy. Seven of her rockets hit the deck of the submarine and pierced the pressure hull, creating major water leaks. Shirley's rockets completed the job, splitting open a number of the big batteries of

the submarine and filling the hull with toxic acid vapors. With nearly half of his crew now either dead or wounded and with the air inside his submarine becoming unbreathable, the captain had no choice left but to order his crew to abandon ship. The captain himself was however killed outright by one of the machine gunners of Jane Straughan's AC-10 as he was about to jump overboard. Only nine Soviet sailors managed to jump in the water before their submarine started sinking by the bow.

“THE ENEMY SUBMARINE IS SINKING!”

The announcement over the intercom made the survivors already aboard Warren's AC-10 shout with joy. The Vice-President, who had been totally caught by surprise by that short but ferocious battle, looked through his window and saw the stern of a submarine sticking out of the water at a near vertical angle, with its propellers still turning. The reporters and photographers present aboard, not believing their luck, took picture after picture of the sinking submarine, then crowded Warren to bombard him with questions. The Vice-President signaled them to be silent, then spoke up once they had calmed down somewhat.

“Gentlemen, the only thing that I will say now is that we have a rescue mission to complete. Please take back your seats and let the crew of this plane do its job.”

On a sign from Warren, his four Secret Service agents then made sure that the reporters sat down in the cabin already half-filled with survivors from the IRWIN. Marguerite Higgins, of the Herald Tribune, was licking her lips with anticipation as she frantically took notes in her notepad: this was going to be pure dynamite on the front pages of the American newspapers.

### **17:19 (Vietnam Time)**

#### **Operations center of the Joint Task Force – Indochina**

#### **Da Nang Air Force base**

Ingrid entered the large operations center at a tired pace, her flying helmet under her left arm, to find Vice-President Warren and Lieutenant General Whiteman in conversation with her deputy, Brigadier General Lewis Puller. She went straight to the trio and stopped at attention in front of Warren, saluting him.

"Mister Vice-President, I can now announce to you that there is about nothing left intact of the Chinese naval base and airfield on Hainan Island that served as starting points for the attack on the USS IRWIN."

Warren nodded his head, visibly satisfied.

"Decidedly, you live up to your reputation, General Dows. We were discussing here about the possible retaliatory measures against the Soviets after their torpedoing of the IRWIN. Do you have suggestions on that subject?"

"Yes, Mister Vice-President! First, I must say that the hypocrisy of the Soviets in this conflict, including their use of 'volunteers' manning an imaginary Viet Minh air force, stinks to high hell. I know that the Soviets have the atom bomb and that we don't want a large scale war with them unless absolutely necessary, but Stalin must be made to understand that his lies and treachery will cost him. If not, he will continue playing the same dirty game, with our military personnel paying the ultimate price. Second, I advise that we make the maximum publicity possible over the IRWIN's sinking, and this with films and prisoners to back our story. Let's humiliate the Soviets as much as we can in front of the rest of the World and let's show them for the hypocrites they are. Then let's watch what will be their reactions. If they pretend that we lie, or if they threaten to hit us back, then I would counsel that we sink Soviet warships visiting Chinese ports, to show to all that their threats are empty. Tension between our two countries will certainly rise then, but not to the point where Stalin will dare launch a large scale war or a nuclear strike. We are anyway already at DEFCON 1 in and around Indochina and China, unless the Pentagon lowered the alert level recently."

"We are still at DEFCON 1 for the China and Indochina theaters." Confirmed Lieutenant General Whiteman. That attracted a critical look from Ingrid.

"Then, why is it that our forces in Japan and the Northwest Pacific have not launched a single attack of their own against the Chinese, General? Does my task force have to do everything by itself in the region? And you want me to deal with Palestine on top of that? What is General Clark waiting for as commander of our Far East Forces, while my own people fight and die here?"

"Now hold on, Dows..." Started to say Whiteman, only to be cut off by Lewis Puller, an officer renown to speak his mind bluntly.

"I say that General Dows is fully justified in criticizing the inaction of our Far East Command, General Whiteman. We have lost dozens of soldiers, Marines, airmen and

Navy personnel of this joint task force in this war to date, while General Clark has been doing nothing but sit on his ass in Okinawa.”

“Our planes and ships based around Japan have not launched any attack against the Chinese or Soviets to date?” Asked Warren with visible incredulity and disapproval. Ingrid shook her head then.

“None, Mister Vice-President! However, I must commend the Navy for its precious support to date, a support they already paid for in blood.”

“Decidedly, I will have to raise this point with the President during my next encrypted radio-telephone conversation.” Said Warren, obviously annoyed. “Very well, General Dows: I will take your advice under consideration. What do you have for us tomorrow?”

“For you and your Congressional party, our embassy has arranged meetings with Emperor Bao Dai and with the new Vietnamese coalition government cabinet at the imperial city in Hue. For my personnel in Da Nang, it will be essentially a day of rest and recreation, with the help of your USO group. We are planning a big BBQ party on China Beach, followed by the USO show and by a bathing suit contest, Mister Vice-President.”

“A bathing suit contest?”

“Yes, Mister Vice-President! There will be an open competition for male contestants and another for female contestants. I already have a long list of enthusiastic Marines ready to show their pectorals to my female aviators, and an even longer list of Marines and Rangers waiting to admire my girls.”

Warren couldn't help smile at that.

“Knowing your sulfurous reputation in Washington and in view of your looks, I suppose that you will be part of the women parading in bathing suits, General Dows?”

“Absolutely, Mister Vice-President!” Replied Ingrid, grinning widely.

### **17:06 (Vietnam Time)**

**Monday, February 24, 1953 ‘C’**

**Ingrid's suite, senior officers' quarters**

**Da Nang Air Force Base**

As Ingrid was about to take off the large red and gold ribbon with medal of the Order of Vietnam, First Class, that she had been wearing across her chest over her parade uniform, Hien caressed the bow of the ribbon.

"Is this ribbon important to you, Ingrid?"

"Very much so, my dear Hien. It represents the gratitude of the Vietnamese people for having helped bring peace back to the country. I am really proud of it."

"As you should be, Ingrid." Said Nataï, a gentle smile on her face. "Bringing peace should always be rewarded. Talking of rewards, your faithful comrades from the 99<sup>th</sup> Wing finally got what they earned with their years of hard service."

A wave of emotions submerged Ingrid as she nodded her head at those words. This morning's medals award ceremony had also been an occasion for the announcement by Vice-President Warren of many significant promotions for the women of her old air wing. Her old comrade, Helen Richey, had finally been rewarded properly for her exceptional services with a promotion to brigadier general, thus becoming the fourth American woman after Ingrid, Teresa James and Jacqueline Cochran to attain flag rank. Her old friends Gertrude Meserve, Amanda Stewart, Mary Hiller, Elizabeth Whitlow, Jenny Kawena and Faith Buchner had either been promoted to the rank of full colonel or had been promised a major command next Summer, or both. Even Shirley Slade, her longtime wingman, had been promoted to major and was going to take command of a fighter squadron this Summer. The horizon was finally opening up wide for the women that she had recruited and led into combat in 1942.

The next day, Ingrid got to wish a good trip to Vice-President Warren, who was returning to Washington with his delegation after encouraging talks with the new Vietnamese government, in which Ho Chi Minh held the position of Chief Minister for the Tonkin, and with General Vo Nguyen Giap holding the post of Defense Minister of Vietnam. Ingrid gave a particularly warm hug to Marilyn Monroe as she was about to board the VC-5000 supersonic airliner.

"I hope that I will see you again soon one day, Marilyn. Your visit warmed my heart. You will always be welcome in the midst of your old sisters from the Fifinella<sup>4</sup>."

"And thank you again for that ride in your F-83, Ingrid. It will always be the most intense moment of my life. Be careful and take good care of your cute little Hien."

"I will, I promise, Marilyn."

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<sup>4</sup> Fifinella : Name of the female gremlin drawn to represent the women of the Women Air Service Pilots, or WASPs, during World War Two.

In contrast, her goodbyes with John F. Kennedy were friendly but not as emotional, limited to an handshake and a few words.

“Have a good trip, John, and good luck with your political career.”

“The same for your own career, Ingrid.” Replied John in a sober tone. Ingrid had served him in private late last night a friendly warning about the way he used the women around him and about the impact his chronic infidelity would have on an eventual marriage. John then climbed the forward staircase of Air Force Two behind the other politicians of his group. Ingrid watched the VC-5000 until it had taken off and had disappeared in the sky, then sighed and turned around to return to her headquarters. Her task here in Vietnam was nearly over, but another, equally tricky and difficult one, awaited her far to the West, in Palestine.

### **06:35 (Russia Time)**

**Friday, March 6, 1953 ‘C’**

**Minlag forced labor camp, Inta mining complex**

**Area of Komi, Northwest of the USSR**

Polina Semyonovna Zhemchuzhina, ex-wife of Vyacheslav Molotov, was getting ready for the daily morning roll call when a guard entered her rickety barrack, letting in a blast of freezing wind in the already cold building.

“ALL THE JEWISH PRISONERS WILL COME TO THE ROLL CALL WITH ALL THEIR BELONGINGS: YOU ARE LEAVING THIS CAMP TODAY.”

Polina, a 54 year-old woman prematurely aged by the hard life of a forced labor camp, felt her heart jump with joy at that announcement, while the other Jewish women in the barrack shouted happily. Without daring to tell the others so, Polina was immediately convinced that their liberation was the result of the efforts of Vyacheslav, which she had been forced by Stalin to divorce in 1948 before being sent to this work camp. Forming quickly a bundle with the few worn clothes that were all that she possessed now apart from her identity papers, Polina hurried outside, shivering under the freezing wind. The Sun was not up yet, leaving only the lights of the watch towers of the camp to light up the assembly ground where the male and female prisoners of the camp were gathering in segregated lots. The Jewish prisoners, including Polina, were separated at once by the guards and lined up three-deep in a corner of the yard, where a MGB officer holding a long list called their names one by one. Once the roll call was completed, the Jewish

prisoners were led towards the main gate of the camp and loaded aboard a long file of trucks that were already waiting on the snow-covered road. The trip by truck was short, the Jewish prisoners jumping out once at the railway station that served the mining complex. Polina was put aboard a cattle car with about thirty other women, receiving like the others one loaf of bread, one bottle of water and a wool blanket, with the directive to make her food and water last. All the questions from the prisoners concerning their destination were left unanswered. With a covered chamber pot in one corner of the rail car and a thick layer of hay as their only comfort for the trip, the doors of the car were closed and locked from the outside and the train started moving, taking the general direction of the Southwest.

Making herself as comfortable as possible and using the trip to rest her old body exhausted by the hard work of the Gulag, Polina felt hope rise gradually in her as their train passed through many towns and villages, heading in the direction of Moscow. However, she started to worry on the second day, when their train took a secondary line towards the Southeast. In the afternoon, the train changed lines again, to arrive in the evening in Nijni-Novgorod, 300 kilometers east of Moscow. The train stopped in the station in Nijni-Novgorod only long enough for their guards, who were travelling in a much more comfortable car of their train, to distribute more bread and water and to have the chamber pots emptied. With the doors of the cars closed and locked again, the train resumed its journey into the night, this time towards the South. Not knowing what to think anymore, Polina had a restless night, waking up in the morning when their train entered the Kharkov main station. One of Polina's companions of misfortune, a young woman once married to a Communist Party official who had fallen in disfavor, then cried out with a mix of incredulity and despair in her voice.

"We are going towards the Black Sea. They are going to put us on a ship and deport us."

"Maybe they are sending us to the Caucasus instead." Suggested another woman, making Polina speak at last.

"No! Our train would not have done such a detour since Komi if our final destination was the Caucasus. I believe that Natalia is right: we are going towards the Black Sea, probably to Sevastopol."

"And to go where exactly after that?"



Polin thought for a moment, remembering her sister, who had emigrated to Palestine about two decades ago and who had left the USSR via the port of Sevastopol.

“I believe that they will send us to Palestine. We are all Jewish, after all. What better way to get rid of us without killing us than to deport us to Palestine.”

Those words were like a cold shower for most of the prisoners in her car, with however a few very religious women then thanking God for the chance to finally go to the Holy Land. On her part, Polina went to her corner and rolled up into a ball to hide her tears. She was never going to see again Vyacheslav, or her native Ukraine.

Polina’s suppositions were confirmed that evening, when their train stopped in the main railway station of Sevastopol. A small army of MGB secret police guards then made the prisoners come out of their cars, loading them into a long truck convoy. Being mostly resigned by now, the Soviet Jews didn’t put up any resistance and quietly boarded a large cargo ship docked in the port. Once on the open deck of the ship and before they were led inside, a MGB officer addressed them from the top of the bridge with the help of a megaphone.

“Jews, you will be leaving tonight for Palestine. The Party, in its great magnanimity, has decided to free you and to let you emigrate to your said ‘Holy Land’, where you will be able to rebuild your miserable lives without corrupting anymore the Soviet people with your cosmopolitanism and your Zionism. Know that the Jews of Palestine are about to declare the formation of an independent Jewish state there. You will thus have the occasion to help build that Jewish state according to the enlightened principles of socialism. Ample provisions have been loaded for you aboard this ship, so you don’t need to worry about starving during your trip. Go and redeem yourselves by building up socialism in Palestine.”

On those words, the MGB officer left the ship with his contingent of guards, who however took stations along the quay until the ship had untied its lines. As the cargo ship floated away from the quay and headed for the open sea, Polina had a last look at her native country, tears rolling on her cheeks.

“Goodbye, Vyacheslav! Goodbye, Rodina<sup>5</sup>!”

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<sup>5</sup> Rodina : Mother Russia in Russian.

## **CHAPTER 3 – A NEW TEMPORAL AGENT**

**11: 18 (New Zealand Time)**

**Friday, February 24, 2988 B.C.E. (Before the Common Era)**

**Secret main base of the Time Patrol**

**Future site of the city of Auckland**

**New Zealand**

Farah Tolkonen 'A', a thin, bald giant typical of the citizens of the civilization of the Global Council, which existed in the 34<sup>th</sup> Century of Timeline 'A', noticed at once the preoccupied expression of Mike Crawford 'B' as the tall and powerful American entered her office. Mike was followed closely by the no less tall and powerful Otto Skorzeni 'B' and by the head psychologist of the Time Patrol, Miri Goshenk 'B', a bald giant originating from the now erased Imperium 'B'. The trio of visitors, at Farah's invitation, took place in a sofa facing the easy chair occupied by the Chief Administrator of the Time Patrol.

"Now that we are all together," said calmly Farah, "let's talk about our young and lively Nancy 'B'. Otto, your final evaluation that you sent me yesterday said that she is in your opinion fully qualified to immediately become a Time Patrol field agent."

"That's correct, Farah." Said the ex-SS officer, who was now in charge of the assault teams of the Time Patrol. "Nancy has passed with success all the qualification tests for a field agent, except of course for those grading her use of implants, since she still has no implants. She is a certified black belt in martial arts and is an expert with all known weapons, be they ancient or modern. She is a responsible, serious and disciplined girl and is dedicated to her work. With her I.Q. of 153, she is also of genius level, like Nancy 'A', and she assimilated in near record time all the materiel on the curriculum for field agent training. She has also passed with success two months ago the final examination for a bachelor of robotics engineering at the New Lake City University, even obtaining an honor mention. Right now, despite her young age, she would be considered an elite soldier in any army. The only point where she was not positively brilliant is that she is a competent pilot but not an exceptional one."

Farah nodded her head and then fixed her yellow eyes on Miri Goshenk 'B', the ex-First Lady of the Imperium 'B'.

"Miri, what is your psychological evaluation of Nancy 'B'?"

The beautiful giant, even taller than Farah at 224 centimeters but much stronger and more athletic, like a typical citizen of the Imperium, weighed carefully her answer before speaking.

"Farah, let's not forget that Nancy 'B' is the temporal twin of Nancy 'A' and thus possesses the same body and same mind that made Nancy 'A' such an exceptional woman in all respects. She also has access to her souvenirs of past incarnations, like all our people over eight years of age in the Time Patrol. Those souvenirs cover in her case a total of 92 lives spread over 9,000 years. She thus is much more mature than what one would expect from a girl of thirteen. She has also passed with success all the psychological tests administered to our apprentice agents. The only thing that I could say against her is that she is already quite fond of sex but, hey, that's Nancy Laplante to you."

That remark brought knowing smiles around the room, as Nancy 'A' had been famous, or some in other places would say infamous, about her sexual appetite. Here, at the secret base of the Time Patrol, the social mores reflected the standards of the 34<sup>th</sup> Century rather than those of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Further, the fact that the young teens of the Time Patrol all remembered at least a few centuries of past lives as adults made them sexually active at an age that would have scandalized most people.

"What about her now being a Chosen of The One?" Asked Farah to no one in particular. "We know that Nataï made her a Chosen and gave her some powers, but Nancy has been reluctant up to now to tell us what kind of powers she holds."

"Actually, I find that a positive point." Replied Miri Goshenk. "Most girls of her age that would get such powers would brag at least a bit about them. Not Nancy 'B'. Even though she may actually be a person with immense powers, she has avoided talking about them and has not done any demonstrations of such powers, except for hints that she is at least a telepath and has telekinesis. I can thus say that those powers, whatever they may be, didn't go to her head, denoting a truly disciplined and selfless mind."

As Farah reviewed mentally all the information she had just got, Mike Crawford 'B', the widowed husband of Nancy 'A' who had taken her place as chief of operations of the Time Patrol, spoke up.

“There is also another factor to consider in our discussion concerning the future of Nancy ‘B’, Farah. I am talking of the mysterious d’Orléans Social Foundation, this French charity and social help society established in Paris in 1848 by a young aristocrat named Jeanne d’Orléans. My wife used the services of that foundation quite a few times in Timeline ‘B’ after the end of World War Two, mostly to discreetly do social work that could have been controversial locally, like when she helped the black citizens of Montgomery, in Alabama, to fight off racism. She however stayed very discreet even with me about that organization, something that intrigued me. That finally decided me into doing a discreet inquiry through time, via robotic spy probes, about that d’Orléans Social Foundation and on that Jeanne d’Orléans. Let’s just say that what I learned deeply shook me.”

Opening his laptop computer and pivoting it on his knees so that the others could see its screen, Mike opened a video file and started playing it.

“What you will see is a video taken of the said Jeanne d’Orléans in 1848, at her Paris residence. It is quite self-explanatory.”

Farah, like Otto and Miri, fixed the screen with intense curiosity and opened wide her eyes when she saw a richly dressed young woman, a teenager actually, sitting in a lounge typical of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Paris.

“NANCY?”

“And not any Nancy, Farah.” Said gravely Mike. “According to her apparent age, this can only be Nancy ‘B’. Nancy ‘A’ was already 31 years old when she founded with you the Time Patrol. In 1848, the said Jeanne d’Orléans could not be more than twenty years old. In fact, my investigation in the past revealed that Jeanne d’Orléans was born in 1829 under the name of Jeanne Marie Céleste de Brissac. She is supposedly the daughter of a couple of ruined aristocrats of low lineage who were trying to rebuild their fortune in the Guadeloupe. Jeanne, according to official French documents of the time, married in 1846 in the Guadeloupe Knight Pierre Alphonse d’Orléans. This Pierre d’Orléans is said to have died of a tropical fever in 1847 and then eschewed all his possessions to his young widow, who then returned to France. Once in Paris, Jeanne d’Orléans managed to quickly fatten her fortune via a number of very successful financial speculations and founded a year later her social aid society. In 1953 ‘B’, the d’Orléans Social Foundation is an anonymous charity and social aid corporate entity that secretly controls a financial empire worth hundreds of millions of dollars. According to the files I found in Nancy ‘A’s office, she was discreetly

approached in 1943 'B' in Jerusalem by a mandated representative of the d'Orléans Foundation, who offered her financial support for her humanitarian projects. The details of that offer, made verbally, are however unknown to me."

Farah, like Miri and Otto, let out a sigh, shaken by the implications of all this.

"A time causality loop! Nancy 'B' has a destiny in the past, in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and she doesn't even know about it. Damn, how are we going to tell her that?"

"The fact is that we won't have any choice but to tell her about this...and soon. According to past French registries, Jeanne de Brissac was officially seventeen when she married Pierre d'Orléans in the Guadeloupe. Nancy 'B' is now thirteen and would easily appear to be fifteen or even sixteen to people of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century."

"But, she doesn't have implants yet and never served as a field agent in a single mission." Objected Otto Skorzeni. "To send her alone on such a crucial, long-term mission, without any prior field experience, would be totally irresponsible, if not to say criminal."

"Otto is right about that, Farah." Said gravely Mike. "We must right now think about not only accepting Nancy 'B' as a qualified field agent, but also about giving her occasions to gain field experience before sending her to become Jeanne d'Orléans."

"But, is Nancy even ready to become a field agent?" Replied hotly Farah. "Even with all her training and qualifications, she is still only a child of thirteen. Do we even have the legal right to give such a risky mission to a child?"

Miri Goshenk bent forward in her sofa, fixing her friend and superior with a sober expression.

"Farah, I believe that we are now touching a subject that we should have discussed a long time ago. Basically, can we still call a young teenager with thousands of years of memories from past incarnations a child? Through such souvenirs, a young teenager can recall the sexual lives, personal successes and failures and life lessons of men and women from a multitude of cultures and time periods. According to my experience as a psychologist with the Time Patrol, I am ready to say that such a teenager who has had access to his or her past souvenirs for at least four years and who has reached physical puberty should be considered as a responsible adult. You certainly did notice the fact that the children and young teenagers living on this base have shown a rather, uh, precocious sexuality, even by the very liberal standards of the Global Council or of the Imperium."

Mike rolled his eyes at that, while Otto smiled in amusement.

“Yes! I must say that I would have loved to have had that kind of freedom in my youth. However, my father would have probably given me a memorable spanking if he would have found me with a naked girl at the age of ten.”

“In 1953 ‘B’, in the United States, the public would probably be scandalized to see what is going on in this base.” Added Mike. “More to the point, we all know from past missions that people married at a much younger age in the past than in modern times, mostly due to the high mortality rate and the need to have children early. I believe that Miri is correct on this point, Farah. Let’s treat Nancy ‘B’ like an adult and let’s equip her with field agent implants. As for giving her some prior field experience, I could integrate her in Elizabeth Windsor’s incoming mission in 17<sup>th</sup> Century France.”

Seeing Miri and Otto nodding their heads in approval at those words, Farah then took a decision.

“Very well! I will prepare a surgical intervention for tomorrow morning, to graft in Nancy ‘B’ a set of field agent implants. I will also reserve for her use Pegasus, the robotic horse used by Nancy ‘A’: it is already tuned to the mental waves frequency of Nancy and is accustomed to her behavior. Mike, I want you to go inform Nancy of our decision and to brief her about what you know about Jeanne d’Orléans and her social foundation. Do you want to inform Nancy’s parents or do you wish me to do it?”

“I will take care of that, Farah. I will also advise Elizabeth that she will have a new partner for her mission in France.”

“Excellent! Thank you all for coming. Let’s hope that this will mark the start of a long and brilliant career for our young Nancy ‘B’.”

Leaving Farah’s office with Miri and Otto, Mike stopped for a moment near an elevator and activated his wrist videophone to call Nancy ‘B’. The teenager’s face appeared on the small screen after less than three seconds, smiling to him.

“Yes, Mike? What can I do for you?”

“I would need to speak with you about something very important, Nancy. Where are you right now?”

“I am presently swimming on the main beach of the inner bay.”

“Very well! I will go join you there.”

“You are welcome to join me in the water, you know: the water is nice.”

Mike hesitated for a moment then. Nancy ‘B’s face, apart from her apparent youth, was the same as that of his late wife, whom he had loved passionately. On the other hand,

Nancy 'B' had not hidden her attraction towards the powerful athlete that Mike was. There was however an age difference of 36 years between them, even if the standard longevity treatment of the Global Council made Mike appear to be only thirty years old.

"Uh, thanks for the offer but I must take care of quite a few things. We will talk further on the beach."

Closing the cover of his wrist videophone, Mike let out a sigh of regret as he called up a cabin: He was sorely missing Nancy 'A' since her tragic death three months ago, subjective time. He however knew that he would eventually have to go over her loss and resume his personal life with someone else. Farah Tolkonen 'A', with her sweetness and quiet femininity, came more and more often to his mind as a desirable partner.

Riding the elevator down to the ground level of the giant, 500 meter diameter prismatic sphere that constituted the Time Patrol main base, Mike finally walked out in the open and went towards the beach to the East of the base. The base itself could fly and jump space-time if need be in case it was attacked. The location of the base, apart from being on a land that would not be visited by other humans for another two millenniums, could also be described as a near paradise. The climate was nearly perfect yearlong, without extremes of temperatures, and the surrounding beaches allowed the occupants of the base to swim in clear waters, while the nature around was perfect to practice open air sports. After walking about 600 meters, Mike arrived at the main beach, situated on the shores of Auckland Bay, finding there a dozen members of the Time Patrol and family members either swimming or taking some sun. Mike had some difficulty not starrng at the very beautiful Susanna Berghof, who was lying naked on her back on top of a beach towel and getting suntanned. His male libido was further put to the test when Nancy 'B', seeing him from a distance, came out of the water and walked towards him, a big smile on her face. As per her habit, she had been swimming naked and the curves of her body, while not yet as generous as those of her dead timeline twin, were already very tempting. Measuring 181 centimeters at the age of thirteen and having nearly attained her ultimate adult size, Nancy 'B' wore her silky black hair long and her green eyes sparkled with intelligence and life. She also had the body and the muscles of an Olympic-level athlete, which she was. Like Nancy 'A', she had taken the habit to closely shave her groin and armpits. Mike did his best not to stare at her fantastic body and stopped in the middle of the beach, greeting her with a smile.

"I have a good news for you, Nancy."

Sensing that he would say something truly important, the teenager stopped one pace away and looked soberly into his eyes.

"I'm listening, Mike."

"Me, Farah, Otto and Miri just discussed your request to be recognized as a qualified field agent. I am happy to tell you that you are thus accepted as of today." Mike had to pause as Nancy shouted a scream of joy that made many heads turn around the beach.

"YEAH! AT LAST! And what about my special implants?"

"Farah is scheduling a surgical procedure on you for tomorrow morning. You will then follow two weeks of specialized training in order to learn how to use your implants. That will prepare you in turn for your first mission, which will be done under the supervision of Elizabeth Windsor in 17<sup>th</sup> Century France."

"The France of King Louis XIV and of the musketeers: that should make an interesting first mission." Said Nancy, a big smile on her face.

"There is however more, Nancy, much more." Added soberly Mike. "We found out that, due to a time causality loop we didn't know about before, you have a predestined life in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century."

Mike then took a good four minutes to explain the situation to the teenager, who had become suddenly quite somber at the news of a predestined life. He told her how he had found out about Jeanne d'Orléans and her social foundation. Despite the shock that this caused her, Nancy didn't seem to be discouraged or embittered about her destiny and finally gave him a resolute look.

"This Jeanne d'Orléans seems to spread goodness and compassion around her. There could be no better mission for a Chosen of The One, Mike. I will be happy to become Jeanne d'Orléans."

Mike was secretly relieved by that declaration, having worried that she would have refused to play such a role, something that would have been her absolute right to reject.

"Perfect! Consider your mission with Elizabeth as your ultimate training mission before you go become Jeanne d'Orléans. On that, I can show you the films and documentation I was able to get on her."

"Then let's go back to the base! I am anxious to learn more about her."

Nancy then went to grab her beach towel and her sunglasses before joining back with Mike, who looked at her with some surprise.



“You didn’t bring a bathing suit with you to go swim?”

“No! Why? I left the base in the same dress than I am in now. The Sun will have time to dry my body during our walk back. Let’s go!”

“You little rascal!” Said Mike, smiling in amusement as he followed her. His response made her search for his left hand and then press it firmly.

“Who said that a Chosen of The One had to be prudish, Mike?”  
Mike glanced quickly at the magnificent body of the teenage version of his late wife and spoke to himself in a near whisper.

“And God created the woman.”

## **CHAPTER 4 – D'ARTAGNAN**

**17:51 (Paris Time)**

**Saturday, April 15, 1651**

**Inn of 'Le Lion Noir', Paris**

**France**

Getting off wearily from his horse in the courtyard of the inn, the rider gave the reins of his mount to the inn's stable boy before shaking off some of the dust and dried mud covering his worn clothes and cape. Taking his saddle bags and his weapons with him, he then walked to the entrance of the establishment, careful in the growing darkness not to step on the horse droppings covering the cobblestones of the courtyard. Before entering the inn, though, he made sure that his sword was easily grabbed: in these turbulent times of the Paris 'Fronde Uprising', one had to be wary about who came your way, especially when you worked undercover for Cardinal Mazarin, who was widely hated by both the citizens of Paris and by the aristocratic class. The few confidential letters from Mazarin that he was carrying made him even more leery of strangers. Entering the poorly lit main hall of the inn, he quickly chose a vacant table in an obscure corner and sat facing the entrance: standing in the doorway of an inn was the best way to attract attention.

Scanning the small number of people present in the hall, he was relieved to see no militiamen or soldiers belonging to one of the rebel princes. Only a few bourgeois and travelers were having supper or were drinking wine, with the innkeeper and a young maid in attendance. He couldn't help smile back at a teenage girl who was eating alongside another young woman. The latter was obviously an aristocrat, judging from the quality of her dress. Both of the girls were sitting at the table nearest to his and the smell of the roast meat they were eating was like torture to his empty stomach. Unfortunately, his purse was about as empty as his stomach and the other agent from Cardinal Mazarin who was supposed to give him funds for his stay in Paris and his return trip to Brühl, near Cologne, was not present in the hall. On his signal the

innkeeper came to his table, bending down so that his customer could whisper to him: he was loyal to the Queen and the Cardinal and could be depended on to be discreet.

“Is Monsieur Bartet in his room?”

“Uh, no, monsieur. He is out doing some errands at the moment. I gather that you will be using his room tonight?”

“That’s correct.” Said the messenger, who then paused while twisting one tip of his moustache. “Innkeeper, could you advance me some credit until Monsieur Bartet returns, so that I can eat something.”

The innkeeper looked at him with embarrassment.

“I am sorry, monsieur, but Monsieur Bartet already owes me two weeks of lodging and meals and is still waiting himself for some funds from your employer. With your two other friends here in the same situation, I am about broke myself: this Fronde Uprising is not helping business at all.”

His Gascon temper nearly made the messenger explode in rage and frustration: Cardinal Mazarin may be the one hope for the salvation of the monarchy in France but he was one stingy employer. His only hope now was to see Abbot Basile Fouquet in the morning and ask him for some money. If Mazarin’s right hand man in Paris had something aplenty, it was money. Emptying with resignation his purse on the table, he looked sadly at the few small coins that fell out, all of it amounting to less than one Livre. The innkeeper quickly grabbed the coins and smiled.

“That will be enough for your night’s lodging and some bread and wine, monsieur. I won’t be long.”

Watching the innkeeper go into his kitchen, the messenger noticed that the girl who had previously smiled to him was looking at him with something approaching pity: she must have seen him empty his flat purse on the table. The girl, a very tall one with a very nice chest, green eyes and long black hair, was maybe fifteen or sixteen and was beautiful, making the messenger wish that he could spend a night with her. The girl then whispered in the ear of her mistress, who glanced at him and smiled before nodding her head. The young girl then rose from her bench and went to him, an engaging smile on her face. She was truly a tall one, towering over all but one of the men present in the hall. The deep cleavage of her dress, in line with the current fashion, made her charms even more evident. She positively looked like hell on wheels and her smile was

mischievous. The messenger smiled as he imagined what kind of bed partner she could be. The girl made a quick curtsy before presenting herself in impeccable French.

“Good evening, monsieur. I am Lady Nancy Sommers, lady-in-waiting of Lady Lisbeth of Strathmore. Would you honor us by joining us at our table, monsieur?”

He smiled in anticipated pleasure at the girl: at least his luck had not totally run out.

“I would be delighted to accept the kind invitation of your mistress, mademoiselle.”

Rising to his feet, he eagerly followed the young Nancy to the next table, bowing and saluting with his large felt hat the pretty-looking young woman aristocrat.

“Good evening, milady! I am Charles Ogier de Batz de Castelmore, at your service. May I thank you for your most gracious invitation?”

The discreet but noticeable reaction of the two English women to his name didn't escape Charles, who tensed up at once: somebody able to recognize his name in Paris could represent a potential threat to him. Lisbeth of Strathmore however quickly repressed her reaction and showed him the seat besides Nancy while speaking in good French with a definite English accent.

“You may by joining us for supper, monsieur.” Replied Lisbeth of Strathmore, her blue eyes sparkling with amusement. “It is too rare to have the company of a true gentleman instead of that of ruffians in these troubled times.”

“And how do you know that I am a gentleman, and not a ruffian, Lady Lisbeth?” Lisbeth, aka Elizabeth Windsor ‘B’, exchanged a knowing look with Nancy Laplante ‘B’ before replying to Charles, better known in history under the name ‘d’Artagnan’.

“First, your name is that of an aristocrat and you are wearing a sword. You are thus an aristocrat, probably of low lineage judging by your flat purse. Second, you haven't yet tried to put your hand on the inviting butt of my lady-in-waiting. But please, sit down.”

Despite his suspicions, Charles quickly sat opposite Lisbeth, who signaled the maid to approach.

“Mademoiselle, bring an extra cover and a pitcher of wine for our friend here.” She then turned her attention back on Charles, who was hungrily eyeing the plates of food on the table.

“You look like you rode long and hard, monsieur. Are you on a business trip?”

“Not exactly, milady. I am in Paris to take care of some of my master’s affairs. May I ask what a gentle young lady of quality like you is doing in Paris? I believe from your accent that you are English, correct?”

“Scottish actually, Monsieur de Castelmore. I am from Angus, Scotland, and I came to Paris to escape for a while the depredations of the parliamentary armies. These are bleak times for the monarchy in England, what with the recent defeats suffered by young King Charles the Second in Scotland. Those damn Roundheads<sup>6</sup> are quite barbaric when it comes to dealing with the supporters of the King.”

Charles nodded his head in sympathy: the ferociousness and fanaticism of Oliver Cromwell’s army was well known and feared around Europe, especially after the way they had recently repressed a rebellion in Ireland in a monstrous bloodbath. If there was one thing that the monarchs of Europe agreed on, it was on their hatred of Cromwell and of his army of fanatical Puritan followers.

The innkeeper came in then with the bread and wine already paid by Charles and stood near their table, confused. Charles waived the man away with a smile.

“Keep both the food and the money, innkeeper. I have accepted the kind hospitality of the young lady here.”

Lisbeth shook her head in amusement as the innkeeper marched back into his kitchen.

“You are quite generous for a man who is broke, Monsieur de Castelmore.”

“Wealth comes from the heart as well as from the purse, milady.”

“Well said, monsieur! Ah, here is your plate and wine. Enjoy your supper.”

Charles went at the food with gusto: he had not eaten that well in a long time and was positively famished from his long, arduous trip from Germany. Both Lisbeth and Nancy politely kept silent, nibbling at their own plates while letting him have the best parts from the roast beef and stewed vegetables. He did however drink wine with moderation: he could not afford to get drunk with the precious letters he was carrying. He was halfway through his plate when the noise of a group of men entering the inn made him turn his head. Charles silently swore to himself when he recognized the newcomers as militiamen of the Parliament of Paris. The nine armed men in turn walked straight towards him after a short look around the room, probably because he was the

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<sup>6</sup> Roundheads: Nickname given to the parliamentary cavalymen of Oliver Cromwell

only customer wearing a sword. The leader of the group, a mean-looking man with a pistol in his belt, stopped besides Charles and spoke to him in an arrogant tone.

“You! Who are you? What is your business in Paris?”

To everybody’s surprise, Lisbeth of Strathmore shot to her feet, addressing the militiaman with disdain.

“And who are you to disturb the supper of the daughter of the Earl of Strathmore? This man is in my service. If you have any questions, address them to me!”

Taken aback at first by her forcefulness, the militiaman then got angry and shot back.

“Mademoiselle, the good people of Paris have the last word here, not some foreign aristocratic woman with a fancy title. I will ask questions to whom I choose.”

Charles rose in indignation at the insolence of the man, grabbing his sword and prompting the other militiamen to do the same. Lisbeth’s hand on his shoulder stopped him from drawing his blade, though.

“Do not dirty your sword on him, Charles. It will be the Duke of Orléans who will run him through once Queen Henriette tells him about this.”

The militiaman paled at once at that threat: Gaston D’Orléans, apart from being one of the leaders of the Parliament, was also the brother of Queen Henriette de France, widow of King Charles of England and presently in exile in Paris. With a curt nod, the militiaman turned around and quickly left the inn, followed by his men. A jubilant Charles looked respectfully at the young aristocrat, who still had fire in her eyes.

“Well done, milady! But why did you protect me like this?”

“Because I have no time for parliamentary soldiers, English or otherwise. Long live the King! Now, let’s finish our supper in peace.”

Resuming their supper, Charles spoke in a low voice to Lisbeth, resolved to get to know more about her.

“Earlier, when I presented myself, you and your lady-in-waiting reacted to my name, as if you already knew me.

Elizabeth thought for a moment about her answer. She and Nancy had not expected to meet face to face with an historic character as famous as d’Artagnan during their historical documentation mission, which was supposed to be done in the most discreet manner possible. However, she could possibly turn this fortuitous encounter into something that could help her mission.

“Monsieur de Castelmore, I will tell you a secret. Me and my lady-in-waiting are here in Paris to visit Queen Henriette and to bring her the latest news from England, which are unfortunately not good. We also brought with us some funds to help our queen subsist in Paris and will take any letter she wishes to send to her loyal followers in England. Others before us did the same and one of the letters received in England mentioned you by name as a loyal agent of Cardinal Mazarin and of Queen Anne. We thus are both royalists on a mission.”

Charles nodded his head at that, now understanding how Lisbeth could have known his name. He had in fact brought twice letters from Queen Anne to Queen Henriette two years ago, when he had visited her in the palace of The Louvre.

“Then, I can only sympathize with your cause, Lady Lisbeth.”

“And me with yours, Monsieur de Castelmore. Those civil wars spread chaos and death, weaken both of our countries and profit only the mercenaries who are looting systematically the countryside.”

“Well said, Lady Lisbeth! And what is the official reason of your visit to Paris, if someone asks you?”

“The same as that I gave you first: to escape the depredations of the armies of Cromwell, depredations that are unfortunately too real. Also, since I have lots of time and money in my hands, I thought that it would be a good occasion to finally go see the famous painter, Mathieu Le Nain, and have my portrait and that of Nancy done by him.”

“A good idea indeed, milady.” Replied Charles. “Monsieur Le Nain has done many great portraits for members of the Court, including Queen Anne and Cardinal Mazarin. I believe also that he is in somewhat of a slump right now, what with this Fronde Uprising.”

“Oh, really?” Said Lisbeth of Strathmore, obviously interested. “Then maybe Monsieur Le Nain will be able to start my portrait without delay.”

“Probably, milady.” Said Charles, who then hesitated before asking his next question, wanting to be as diplomatic as possible with his new benefactor.

“Milady, I don’t see any other members of your retinue here apart from young Nancy. Surely you are not traveling only the two of you in these troubled times.”

“Monsieur de Castelmore,” replied calmly Lisbeth while smiling, “Nancy is much more than a lady-in-waiting to me: she is also my friend and bodyguard. I am also quite capable of defending myself.”

“Your...bodyguard?” Said Charles, trying not to laugh in her face. “A teenage girl as an escort for a lady like you?”

“That’s right, monsieur! Who would pay attention to her, except to grab her ass? On the other hand, I would not advise you to try her on, with or without weapons. Her story is quite particular indeed.”

“If you say so, milady.”

“I do, Monsieur Charles. Now, what about yourself? Will you stay long in Paris?”

“Not long I’m afraid, milady. Maybe two days, then I have to ride out again. But if you are staying for a while in Paris, we will probably see each other again: I will have to ride back and forth quite often in the next few months. Will you stay in this inn all the time, milady?”

“We will, monsieur. Be certain that our table will always be open to you.”

Charles bowed to her, pleased by her generous offer.

“Milady is too generous with a lowly stranger like me.”

“It is a pleasure to be able to help you, Monsieur de Castelmore.”

Elizabeth then took a few silver coins from her purse and gave them to Nancy.

“Nancy, go see the innkeeper and arrange for a room and ample meals for Monsieur de Castelmore for the rest of his stay.”

“Right away, Milady!”

As Nancy was going to see the innkeeper, Charles started to protest to Lisbeth that she was doing too much, but was cut off politely.

“Monsieur de Castelmore, consider this as simple courtesy between fellow travelers. Maybe you’ll be able to repay me some day by showing me around Paris.”

“I will be delighted to oblige, milady.”

Nancy returned a few minutes later, a key in her hands. Bowing first to her mistress, she then smiled to Charles.

“If monsieur could follow me, I will show him his room.”

Charles quickly grabbed his saddlebags, which contained all that he possessed, then gallantly kissed Elizabeth’s hand before following the teenager up the wooden staircase that led upstairs to the rooms of the inn.

Charles soon saw with satisfaction that his assigned room was facing that of Isaac Bartet, the agent of Cardinal Mazarin that he wanted earlier on to find. Entering



with Nancy a clean room with a comfortable-looking bed, Charles started putting his things away on the cupboard and inside the dresser of his room. He was however surprised when he saw the innkeeper and his maid bring in a wooden bathtub with some steaming water in it. Nancy smiled to him as the maid went back downstairs with her boss to fetch more water for the tub.

“I thought that it would be a good idea for you to have a hot bath after your long, dusty and muddy trip, monsieur.”

“A bath? Is it really necessary? Doctors say that water attract diseases.”

Nancy then gave him a dubious look.

“The bunch of ignorant twits that pass as doctors here may say that washing is actually bad for health and that body dirt protects from diseases but my common sense and my nose say otherwise. In New France<sup>7</sup>, I bathed every day, yet I am quite healthy, as you can see.”

“You visited New France?” Asked Charles, surprised.

“I was born there, monsieur.” Replied proudly Nancy. “My father was a French fur trapper, while my mother was an English aristocrat of low lineage that had been captured and taken as a slave by the Hurons. My father bought her back from the Hurons, then married her. I can tell you a lot more, but I want first to see you in this bathtub as soon as the innkeeper will return with more water. If that can motivate you, I will be soaping and scrubbing you...everywhere.”

That last sentence convinced Charles to stop objecting to a bath and he finished putting away his meager possessions, which consisted mostly in weapons. Charles waited for the innkeeper to return and finish filling the bathtub, then pushed the door's bolt lock in place after he left. Going then to the dresser, he started to take off his clothes, dusting them off first before carefully folding them as he undressed.

“Nancy,” asked Charles while his back was turned to the teenager, “was your mistress serious when she said that you were her bodyguard?”

“Charles, look at me.” Said the girl calmly. He turned around just in time to hear and feel a thrown knife pass by his right ear and burrow itself in the dresser's door with a thump. Jumping sideways, Charles looked first at the mean-looking blade still vibrating

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<sup>7</sup> New France : Name given to the French colony in North America that would eventually become Canada.

in the door, then at Nancy with both surprise and shock. She looked back somberly at him, standing with feet apart in a defiant stand.

“Charles, I would appreciate if you would take me seriously. I am much more than what I appear to be.”

She then started to take off her dress, soon revealing a pair of short knife scabbards strapped under her breasts, where she could easily grab the blades through her dress' cleavage. Two more knife scabbards, one of them empty, were strapped to the outside of her upper legs. Charles also noticed how athletic and strong the girl was, with a sexy yet well balanced body that reminded him of a few circus acrobat girls he had seen in the past. While her deep skin tan contrasted with the milky skin that was considered a mark of beauty in France, it added to the impression of perfect health and fitness radiating from her. Her groin was also closely shaved, with the skin there nearly as tanned as on the rest of her body. Charles swallowed hard while eyeing her: compared to Nancy, the steamy women of the Fronde who thought of themselves as contemporary Amazons were pale imitations of female warriors. Walking calmly past him, Nancy retrieved her knife from the dresser's door before taking gently Charles' hand and guiding him towards the bathtub.

“Come on, Charles, finish undressing: I already saw many naked men in my life.”

“And how old are you to supposedly have so much experience with men, Nancy?”

Her answer shocked him.

“I am thirteen, Charles. Know that the fur trappers and the Amerindians in New France are much less puritanical than the people of Europe, since they live with nature.”

“Only thirteen? But, you are taller than me!”

“So what? The Amerindians of New France are solidly built people and my paternal grandmother was from the Huron tribe. Fresh air, constant exercise and a balanced diet do marvels for one's health.”

“Decidedly, your story keeps interesting me more and more, Nancy.”

Stepping close to Charles to remove his shirt, Nancy sniffed and frowned in disapproval when Charles raised his arms to help her, exposing his armpits.

“Ooof! A bath will definitely not be a luxury: you sweated a lot during your trip. Okay, step in the bathtub and sit!”

“And you, Nancy? You are not taking a bath with me?” Asked Charles with a wink, making the teenager smile.

“Not with the same bath water as yours, Charles: I’m afraid that it will take a few repeated cycles of soaping and rinsing before you pass muster with me. But I still can scrub your back.”

Using a sponge and pouring some lukewarm water on the back and shoulders of Charles, Nancy started scrubbing him vigorously while speaking.

“So, Charles, what do you want to know exactly about me?”

“Everything!” Replied Charles while admiring her breasts, so close and so tempting. “How did you become the lady-in-waiting of Lady Lisbeth, if you were in New France?”

“I actually left New France at the age of ten, after the death of my father. My mother wanted to bring me to England, where she was hoping to claim back her nobility titles. Unfortunately, she died of a fever during our sea trip and I landed in England alone, where I learned that my mother’s family had been dispossessed for cause of debts. I then had my first piece of luck and met Lady Lisbeth, who took me in her service and helped me continue my education. I already had learned to read, write and count in New France, with my mother educating me as best she could, including about proper manners for a lady. I was thus able to adapt quickly to my new life in Scotland, but I still continued to train hard physically to stay fit and I roamed the local forests to exercise my talents. Unfortunately, the civil war raging in England and the roaming bands of soldiers and mercenaries gave me many occasions to fight and protect Lady Lisbeth.”

Charles nodded his head, suitably impressed.

“Quite an extraordinary story that you have, Nancy. Which weapons are you familiar with?”

“All of them!” Replied without hesitation the teenager, catching Charles off guard. “Lady Lisbeth, who is a true expert with a rapier, taught me fencing, while I already knew how to shoot pistols and muskets, thanks to my father, who also showed me how to throw knives. His hunting partner, an Algonquin, taught me how to shoot a bow and how to fight with a knife and an axe. I also know how to hunt, fish, skin and butcher carcasses and to survive Winter in the woods. And you, Charles?”

“Uh, I can say without bragging that I am an expert fencer and a good shooter. I also am an expert rider. We will have one day to do some practice fencing together: I would like to assess your degree of expertise in it.”

“Soon, maybe. Well, get up now, so that I can scrub your bum.”

Nancy giggled when she saw that Charles had definitely reacted to her nudity.

"It's always good to a girl's ego to see that men react to them. Let's clean that little bird first."

Charles soon found out that cleaning up was half the fun, especially with a girl with the expertise that Nancy demonstrated then with her fingers and tongue.

**07:01 (Paris Time)**

**Sunday, April 16, 1651**

**Inn of 'Le Lion Noir'**

**Paris, France**

Charles sat up in bed at the sound of resounding knocks on his door. Glancing quickly at Nancy, he saw that she had already rolled out of bed and was on one knee while holding one of her throwing knives.

"Charles, open up! It's Isaac!" Shouted somebody in the hallway.

"One moment!" Shouted back Charles before looking at the teenage girl, smiling reassuringly. "Don't worry: he's a good friend of mine."

Walking quickly to the door after putting on his shirt, he pushed open the bolt lock and cracked the door open, a loaded pistol at the ready in his hand in case it was a trap. He saw with relief that his friend and comrade in arm was indeed alone. Quickly letting him in, he closed and locked the door behind him before going to the dresser to put his clothes on. Isaac Bartet looked with delighted surprise at the beautiful naked teenage girl who was now gathering her clothes before speaking to Charles.

"How did an old man like you end up with a young prize like her?"

"What do you mean, an old man?" Protested Charles. "I'm only 38 years old!"

"That's what I meant, old man!"

"Never mind! Where the hell were you last night? If not for the generosity of her mistress, I would have spent the night with an empty stomach."

"I was trying to find a safe way to contact the Queen, that's what! Spies and sympathizers of the princes are watching her very closely these days: they must be suspecting that she is still corresponding with the Cardinal. Unfortunately, those sympathizers also happen to know both of us. Oh, by the way, I have some money for you."

“Not too early!” Grumbled Charles, taking the purse presented by Isaac and checking quickly its content. “That’s it?”

“Hey, you know our employer. Don’t expect to feast at his expense.” Charles sighed with discouragement then. Apart from being dangerous, his job had done nothing to help him fill his purse. His loyalty was not for sale, however. Whatever happened, he would cling with the Cardinal, unlike too many fair weather supporters who had switched sides or conveniently disappeared during the last months.

“It’s a good thing that I met this young English aristocrat and her servant. Without her generosity I...”

An idea suddenly flashed in his mind, making him pause.

“You what?” Wondered Isaac. Charles lowered his voice and got closer to him.

“I think that I found a way to communicate safely with the Queen.” He then whispered in Isaac’s ear for a minute, getting a skeptical look from him at the end.

“Should we really put so much confidence in two strangers?”

“Look, Isaac, they already helped me out once yesterday. That Lady Lisbeth of Strathmore is a staunch monarchist and hates that parliamentary rabble. She would make a perfect messenger between us and the Queen. Who would suspect a total stranger like her?”

“I don’t know, Charles. Those letters are our responsibility. If they get lost or stolen...”

“We can escort them as far as we dare and then watch from a distance.” Proposed Charles. “Do you have a better idea anyway?”

“I guess not.” Answered Isaac, still looking unconvinced. Charles patted his shoulder in encouragement.

“Well, let me dress and we will go down to have breakfast: we think better on a full stomach.”

Isaac took hold of his arm as he was turning towards the dresser and whispered in Charles’ ear.

“How was your young friend?”

“Like a dream. She is half savage, half noble, half English and half French, with a bit of native blood from the Americas in her veins.” Whispered back Charles, a wide smile on his face. “She was right about saying that she is much more than what she appears to be. But enough said about her: let’s go have breakfast.”

Charles and Isaac found Lady Lisbeth having a breakfast of bread and cheese at a table in the inn's main hall. The young aristocrat woman waved at them to come to her table, greeting both with a smile as Nancy sat beside her and cut a piece of cheese for herself. Charles presented his friend then, who bowed and waved his hat in salute.

"I hear that you helped out my friend Charles yesterday, milady. I must thank you both for your courage and for your generosity."

"That was nothing, Monsieur Bartet, I assure you. On the other hand, I was hoping that Monsieur de Castelmore would escort me and my friend around Paris when he will be free to do so."

Lisbeth then smiled maliciously at Charles.

"I am ready to pay well for his services, in money that is."

That made young Nancy giggle. The mention of money did get Charles' attention though, even if he protested it.

"Milady, you do not need to pay me after showing so much generosity already."

"I insist, monsieur!"

"Well, if you really do, could I ask of you a service instead of money, milady?"

"What kind of service, monsieur?"

Charles hesitated for a moment, attracting a knowing smile from Lisbeth.

"Monsieur Charles de Batz de Castelmore, or should I say Monsieur D'Artagnan, you don't need to hide things from me. I am a friend, not a spy or an agent of the princes. Part of the reason I am here is to see if the King and Queen of France will be able to subdue this Fronde Uprising. If they do, then maybe the English monarchy could hope for support from France in its fight against this dastardly Cromwell. I can see things around me, monsieur, and so can my friend Nancy. You arrive from a long trip, then tell me that you must depart soon, to return here on future trips. You are a messenger on a mission, Monsieur D'Artagnan, and from your reaction at seeing those militiamen last evening, I would say that you are not on the side of the Fronde."

Both D'Artagnan and Isaac Bartet tensed up, suddenly on their guard. Lisbeth kept going, her face now somber.

"Messieurs, you have no need to fear me or Nancy. Your cause is my cause. If I would be in the pay of the Fronde, soldiers of the Parliament would have pounded on Monsieur D'Artagnan's door instead of you, Monsieur Bartet. So, what is this service you were going to ask?"

D'Artagnan exchanged a quick glance with Bartet before telling Lisbeth about their problems in contacting the Queen discreetly, careful all the while not to raise his voice. Strangely enough, his request seemed to make both Lisbeth and Nancy happy.

"When I think that I was looking for a good excuse to meet with Queen Anne." Said Lisbeth, ecstatic. "Maybe I will see young King Louis the Fourteenth at the same time."

"In that case," replied Charles jokingly, "don't bring Nancy with you: while young King Louis is only twelve years old, he is rumored to have a keen eye for pretty ladies, to the point that the Queen has a valet following him, with orders not to leave him alone with a woman."

"What a killjoy she is!" Exclaimed Nancy. "I had my first boy at twelve."

"And you never stopped since." Added Lisbeth mockingly. "Alright, Monsieur D'Artagnan, tell me what you want us to do."

**09:50 (Paris Time)**

**Sunday, April 15, 1651**

**Rue Notre-Dame des petits champs**

**Paris**

"Don't forget, milady: this is to be handed personally to the Queen and to nobody else."

Lisbeth took from D'Artagnan the sealed letter presented by him and nodded in understanding before hiding the letter inside her corsage. She was wearing a white and blue court gown and a pearl necklace worthy of her rank. Charles took a moment to admire her and Nancy, who was also wearing a court gown, albeit without the kind of expensive jewelry Lisbeth was sporting.

"You should do just fine, milady. Just one last thing, though. Nancy!"

He then presented his opened right hand to the teenager, who sighed before pulling out from under her dress her four throwing knives. Isaac Bartet, who was standing close to them in the shadowy doorway facing the Palais-Royal, opened his eyes wide at the sight of the blades that Nancy handed over to D'Artagnan. The latter looked at his friend with a knowing smile.

"She is Lady Lisbeth's bodyguard and I can vouch for the fact that she knows how to use these."

Isaac looked at the teenager, who was now walking away with Lisbeth towards the main entrance of the palace, newfound respect in his eyes.

“Damn, why are you always the one to find the rare birds, Charles?”

Lisbeth and Nancy had little difficulty in gaining access to the Palais-Royal, a servant escorting them quickly to the inner courtyard after they presented themselves to the officer of the guards at the entrance. With the forces of the Fronde in actual control of Paris, the Queen Regent had few real powers left and even less to do to spend the time. With the royal revenues either dried up or swallowed by military expenditures, the times of the sumptuous parties and balls were over for the moment, adding to the court's idleness. It was thus no surprise to be received at once by the Queen, who was dying for anything to pass the time.

The servant led both young women through the palace gardens and towards a central fountain where a group of elegantly dressed women were watching a young teenage boy play a game of lawn bowling, applauding when the boy knocked down the wooden pins. A plump woman in her forties and with milky skin smiled benignly as Lisbeth and Nancy performed a curtsy in front of her.

“Please remind me of your name, young lady. I'm afraid that the guard who announced you doesn't know how to pronounce English names properly.”

Elizabeth, being officially the highest ranking visitor, answered first to Queen Anne. Three micro spy probes were flying around the group, discreetly recording the scene for the benefit of the historical documentary they were helping produce.

“Your Majesty, I am Lady Lisbeth of Strathmore, daughter of the Earl of Strathmore, in Scotland. This is Lady Nancy Sommers, my lady-in-waiting and close friend. We are most honored to be allowed to meet with Her Majesty.”

“Fresh faces are always welcome at the court, Lady Lisbeth.” Replied Queen Anne of Austria before presenting the teenage boy, who had stopped playing and had approached, eyeing with particular interest young Nancy.

“This is my son, King Louis the Fourteenth.”

Lisbeth and Nancy bowed deeply, with Louis gallantly kissing both of their hands gently. Both the young king and Nancy had sparkles in their eyes as they exchanged brief smiles, something the queen noticed.



“You will excuse my son, Lady Lisbeth, for he is already very gallant with ladies despite his young age. I suspect that some of my own ladies are not discouraging his early taste for women.”

That made a few of the young women escorting the Queen giggle. Lisbeth smiled in turn.

“That is quite alright, Your Majesty. My own lady-in-waiting also started very early to show interest towards boys.”

As the young Louis’ attention towards Nancy redoubled then, Anne of Austria glanced at the tall teenager, who was standing to the right side and one step behind Lisbeth.

“How old are you, my child?”

“Thirteen, Your Majesty.” Replied respectfully Nancy while bowing. Her answer brought incredulity on the faces of the Queen and of the noblewomen around her, while Louis grinned with contentment: he was looking at a beautiful girl that was nearly the same age as him.

“So tall and strong at thirteen? Your parents must have been very healthy.”

“My father was effectively a solidly built man, Your Majesty. He was a fur trapper in New France, while my mother was an English aristocrat of low lineage that had been captured and reduced to slavery by Huron Amerindians. My father bought her back and then married her. I was born on the shores of the Saint-Laurent River, in New France, and myself lived as a fur trapper, following my parents through the woods. I was ten when my father died and my mother then decided to return to England. Unfortunately, she died at sea and I arrived alone in Portsmouth. That was when I first met Lady Lisbeth, who then took me in her service and brought me to Scotland.”

“Mother, could Lady Sommers stay here a bit, so that she could tell me about her adventures in New France.” Asked at once the young king with an eagerness that made the Queen smile.

“Just to tell you about her adventures, or to let you admire her body, Louis?”

As the noblewomen around giggled at that retort, Nancy stared into Louis’ eyes while giving him her warmest smile.

“If it could reassure Your Majesty, I can play many musical instruments, including the guitar, and also know how to play chess.”

A richly dressed woman of about thirty standing near the Queen then threw a disdainful look at Nancy.

"And how could you so educate yourself while running through the woods of New France, miss?"

Nancy kept a neutral expression as she looked at the aristocrat, whose beauty was spoiled by the stink from her unwashed body. Even for a person of this century, which did not encourage bathing, she stank of old sweat and her yellowish teeth were dotted with the black spots of decay. Queen Anne also didn't seem to appreciate the rude remark of the noblewoman, who happened to be one of the most ardent enemies of royal power and was also a main instigator of the Princes' Fronde Uprising.

"Please pardon the Duchess of Longueville, Lady Sommers: she likes to remind others of her rank and position."

"I take no offense to her remark, Your Majesty." Replied Nancy politely, not wanting to antagonize the noblewoman and thus put at risk Elizabeth's mission. Satisfied, the Queen then looked at the latter.

"So, Lady Lisbeth, to what do I owe you your visit?"

"Your Majesty, I recently arrived from Scotland after a difficult journey through Holland, having to be careful not to fall into the hands of agents of the regicide Puritan, Oliver Cromwell. As you may know, young King Charles the Second is raising an army in Scotland to regain the throne so unjustly taken away from his father. He is however sorely pressed by the armies of the English Parliament and is in dire need of help. He is also concerned about his mother and sister, who are presently living at the Louvres without heat and with little food. Here is a letter from young King Charles, asking for assistance for his loved ones in exile. It took us 46 days to bring it to you, Your Majesty."

Nobody seemed to notice when the Queen tensed up at the mention of the number 46, which was one of the codes used to designate Cardinal Mazarin in their secret correspondence. Coupled closely with the mention of loved ones in exile, it left her no doubt about the real originator of the letter, which she accepted and negligently slipped inside the front of her dress.

"Your devotion to your king is well noted, Lady Lisbeth. However, as you may know, France itself is not without severe problems. I will however see what I can do. Please come back tomorrow morning at the same time and I will give you a letter to bring back to your king."

"Your Majesty is too kind. I will be back tomorrow without fault."

Lisbeth and Nancy then performed a last curtsy before leaving. The Queen, King and ladies of the royal court all returned to their game of bowling, all except for the Duchess of Longueville, wife of one of the leaders of the Fronde of the Princes and a woman of strong resolve. Going to one of her bodyguards nearby, she whispered in his ear.

“Follow those two English women who just talked with the Queen and find out discreetly where they are staying in Paris, then report back to me.”

“It will be done, madame.” Whispered the man back before departing quickly, his eyes on the two women now leaving the inner courtyard. Returning to the side of the Queen, Anne-Geneviève de Bourbon Condé was in time to hear the petulant Anne Marie Louise d’Orléans, Duchess of Montpensier and a young woman of 23 with curly blond hair, exclaim herself.

“My god, did you see the size of that young Lady Sommers? And she was living in the woods of New France? She must have some fascinating stories to tell.”

“Like what? Hunting stories? Any poacher could tell you similar stories, my dear Anne Marie Louise. As for her using the title of ‘Lady’, I doubt that this young savage really deserves it. Even if her mother was a noble, her father was a commoner of the lowest class. Here in France, she would not be entitled to be called a noble.”

“Don’t forget that things are different in England, Duchess.” Replied coldly Anne of Austria. “There, a title can be transmitted from the mother’s side. This girl anyway conducted herself in a most proper manner, even though she could easily have made you swallow your remark.”

That made the young Duchess of Montpensier cluck.

“It’s true that she has the appearances of a true Amazon, Your Majesty. I would truly like to hear her stories about New France. They say that the aborigines there are most ferocious and cruel.”

Anne-Geneviève de Bourbon Condé sighed with exasperation before walking away quickly.

“Stupid young airhead!”

As they came in sight of D’Artagnan and Bartet, who were waiting under a shadowy porch, Nancy got closer to Lisbeth.

“We are being followed. Warn D’Artagnan and his friend away. I will take care of our trail. We will meet at the inn.”

After nodding, Lisbeth kept walking on the side of the street, still followed closely by Nancy. As the two men of the Cardinal were about to leave their hiding place to join her, she spoke up without looking at them.

“We are being followed. Go away and meet me back at the inn. Nancy will get rid of our follower.”

The two men, stunned at first, quickly complied and vanished in the middle of the morning crowd. Guided by discreet orders from Nancy, Lisbeth soon turned into a small, less frequented street. As soon as they turned the corner, Nancy disappeared in a tiny alley between two houses, letting Lisbeth continue alone. The man of Madame de Longueville, following from fifteen meters behind, didn't notice anything until he turned the corner himself. Taken aback at seeing that one of the women was missing, he looked frantically around for Nancy, then decided in frustration to keep trailing the one woman still in sight. Hurrying up in order to cut the distance between them, he was suddenly tripped from behind and fell heavily to the ground. Swearing violently and with sharp pain from his bruised forehead, the man was about to pick himself up and look behind him when someone jumped on his back, taking away his breath. He was then struck hard on the jugular and passed out at once.

### **11:07 (Paris Time)**

#### **Duchess of Longueville's suite**

#### **Palais-Royal, Paris**

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, THEY ESCAPED YOU?” Shouted Madame de Longueville, positively enraged. Her mortified bodyguard, sporting a large bruise on his forehead, cringed.

“I believe that it was that teenage girl, madame. At one time I lost sight of her and decided to follow the aristocrat girl. Then, I was tripped from behind and knocked out by a blow to my neck.”

“ENOUGH! YOU ARE FIRED! GÉRARD!”

“Yes, madame?” Answered the head of her bodyguards, who had stood behind his discomfited man.

“Gérard, those two English girls are supposed to come back tomorrow morning to take delivery of a letter from the Queen. I want you and three men to trail them and find

where they are staying in Paris. Beware of that young servant girl: she may be more dangerous than she appears to be.”

“Don’t worry, madame.” Replied Gérard with assurance. “They won’t get away from us.”

“I do hope so. I smell a plot of the Cardinal here.” Said the blond duchess, still fuming with frustration.

### **15:38 (Paris Time)**

#### **Annexes of the Saint-Germain-Des-Prés abbey**

##### **Paris**

Mathieu Le Nain had a last look at his preliminary sketch, then at Lisbeth of Strathmore, who was still holding her formal pose in front of a curtain drawn across his shop.

“I think that it will be all for today, Lady Lisbeth. We can continue tomorrow afternoon, if you don’t mind.”

Stretching out after being still for long hours, Lisbeth took out a heavy purse and threw it at the painter, who weighed it with contentment: his customers had been few and far between lately. Now he had not one but two well-paying visitors in a single day. The man who had been waiting with the teenage girl outside of his shop stuck his head through the curtain drawn across the door.

“Milady, I will escort you back to the inn while Monsieur Le Nain starts working on Nancy’s portrait.”

“But it will be dark by the time she is finished here.” Objected Lisbeth. “The streets of Paris are not safe at night.”

“Do not worry, milady: I will come back for her after you are safely back at the inn. My friend Isaac is waiting for you there.”

“In that case I accept. See you tomorrow, Monsieur Le Nain.”

“It was a pleasure to have you here today, Lady Lisbeth.” Replied the painter. He was preparing another canvas when the teenage girl who was his next customer entered, smiling at him.

“Monsieur Le Nain, do you do nude portraits, I mean realistic ones? I want something that reflects what I am, not what is considered the standards of beauty here. I want to see myself with a firm, suntanned body, not white and plump.”

Le Nain hesitated a bit: her request was quite uncommon. On the other hand, she was a truly special type of beauty.

“I can try, but since it will not follow my usual technique, I will have to leave your portrait unsigned.”

Nancy looked disappointed for a moment, then looked back at him with a malicious expression on her face.

“Maybe we can discuss that point later?”

“Maybe. If you don’t mind, I will get myself some wine before we start. You can start undressing in the meantime.”

When Le Nain turned his attention back on her, a cup of wine in his left hand, he nearly strangled on his drink: Nancy was not only undressing, she was making quite a show of it as well. Captivated as he rarely had been by a model before, he took a chair and sat, admiring her as she stripped in a lascivious dance that would have damned quite a few abbots he knew. Her body was strong, yet sexy, and she was as supple as a cat. When she was finished, she approached him slowly and glued her nude body against him.

“Do you think that you can paint me the way I am and still sign my portrait?” She asked very softly. Mathieu Le Nain licked his lips before replying.

“It is certainly worth a try. Let’s start now.”

## **20:49 (Paris Time)**

### **Mathieu Le Nain’s painting shop**

#### **Paris**

Nancy looked quite satisfied with herself when she left Mathieu Le Nain’s shop, joining D’Artagnan in the hallway where he had been waiting patiently. She kissed him gently, with Charles returning it eagerly.

“Thanks for waiting for me, Charles. Could I see you tonight?”

“Of course you can! How could I say no to such a beautiful girl?”

“You smooth talker. Let’s go then.”

The streets were very dark when they left the abbey, not being lit by any lamp posts or torches, and with the Moon being at its first quarter and covered by low clouds as well. The air was also cold and damp, making D’Artagnan shiver in his old, worn coat. Seeing him shiver, Nancy got closer to him and suddenly stopped him while enveloping her own

coat around both of them. Next she hugged him and kissed him on the mouth. D'Artagnan returned the kiss, then looked at her lovingly.

"What have I done that was so special to find a girl like you?"

"Well," she said softly with sparkling eyes, "you are brave, strong, handsome and kind. Do I need to say more?"

D'Artagnan stared in silence at her for a few seconds, his heart beating faster. That young girl, who stood taller than him by a slight margin, was quickly winning his heart. Unfortunately, he could offer her little, being not much more than a traveling soldier with no home and precious little money. She seemed to guess his thoughts and smiled gently to him, showing him her perfect white teeth.

"You don't need to worry about the long term with me, Charles. Just live and enjoy the present."

She then kissed him again. That only sealed the spell she was starting to have on him. Gently pushing her at arm's length, he gave her a resigned look.

"Nancy, you are probably the most fantastic girl I ever met. I wish that I could keep you but that would be impossible for the moment."

He then saw a tear roll on her left cheek as she spoke in a hesitant voice, searching for her words.

"Charles, I was also going to say that staying together would be impossible. Only one day ago I thought that you were only one nice man among the many I met before. Now, I don't know what to think."

"We can discuss this at the inn, in front of a good fire. Now, let's get out of those dark, cold streets."

They then continued their rapid walk along the dark and stinky streets of Paris, which were soiled with a mix of excrements and garbage and were populated with beggars and homeless people sleeping on the pavement. The couple was about to turn into the Rue de Seine when D'Artagnan collided with a group of five men in the darkness of the unlit street. The newcomers, who were dressed like swordsmen for hire, swore violently and drew out their blades as one.

"LOOK WHERE YOU ARE GOING WITH YOUR WHORE, YOU IDIOT!" Shouted the man nearest to D'Artagnan, who drew his sword as well.

"Morbleu! I will not let you insult a lady and a friend of mine."

“Please, gentlemen!” Shouted Nancy while interposing herself between D’Artagnan and the five strangers. “There is no reason to fight over this: it was a simple accident.”

“Hey, this is quite a nice thing we got here.” Said the second man of the group. “We could entertain ourselves with her tonight.”

He then tried to grab Nancy’s right arm but she reacted with incredible speed and assurance, grabbing and twisting his left arm and hitting his immobilized elbow with a sharp karate chop. Screaming with pain, the man collapsed to his knees and let go his sword. The four other men were motionless for a moment, taken off balance by her unexpected combativeness. One of them then shouted at her while pointing his sword.

“YOU BITCH! YOU’LL PAY FOR THIS!”

He did only one step before D’Artagnan’s sword stabbed him in the stomach. Understanding that this was now a fight to the death, the three remaining intact men ganged up on D’Artagnan, forcing him into the middle of the street. Nancy then took position besides D’Artagnan, brandishing the sword taken from the man she had disabled. One of the three attackers lunged at her on seeing this but she parried easily his blade, then followed with a slash to the man’s face that left a long cut across his forehead, making him scream with pain while blood blinded him within seconds. Another of the attackers then collapsed, his heart pierced by D’Artagnan’s deadly blade. The last man left standing then fled in panic, leaving Charles to stare with disbelief at Nancy.

“Where did you learn to fight like this?”

“I told you before that Lady Lisbeth taught me.” She replied, deadpan, while throwing away the sword in her right hand. “Let’s leave before the city watch or a patrol of militiamen show up.”

“I will definitely have to do some practice fencing one day with her...and you.” Said Charles as they walked quickly away from the scene of the fight, leaving two dead men and two wounded ones behind.

“You also are really good at fencing, Charles, apart from being a good lover.”

“I try my best,” replied Charles with false modesty, “especially with you.”

She stopped for a moment and pressed him against the wall of a house, her hands on his chest.

“Then prove it tonight, Charles.”

She then kissed him with passion before resuming their walk towards the inn.



They were still pumped up with adrenaline and excited by the time they reached the inn. Passing quickly in front of Lisbeth and Isaac, who were sitting at a table in the hall and sharing a jug of wine, they went upstairs to D'Artagnan's room with near indecent haste. Once in the room, they undressed each other hurriedly before jumping into the bed. Charles, stimulated like he had rarely been before, gave his best, concentrating on Nancy's pleasure. She in turn showed again a depth of sexual experience that was surprising in such a young girl. They went at it two times, caressing and kissing each other between their climaxes. Charles, not a young man anymore, was spent but happy by the time they dressed and went back downstairs to the main hall, joining Lisbeth and Isaac at their table.

"What got you two so excited?" Asked Isaac, looking at Charles and Nancy with amusement.

"We got into a fight with five armed men on our way in, that's what." Answered Nancy. Isaac's and Lisbeth's smiles disappeared at once as she told them the details of their night confrontation.

"Do you think that this encounter was planned?" Asked Isaac, worried about the safety of their covert mission. Charles shook his head at once.

"I don't believe so. They were simply ruffians roaming the streets. They got what they deserved."

"Did you really have to kill those men?" Asked Lisbeth cautiously, attracting an impatient look from Charles. His hot reply was cut off by Nancy, who answered for him.

"Lisbeth, it was them or us. D'Artagnan and me acted in plain self-defense and had no choice."

"Well, nothing that we could do now will bring those men back to life." Said finally Lisbeth with a sigh. "Nancy did try to prevent the fight and they responded by attacking her. Let's relax a bit now. Tomorrow will be a busy day: apart from picking up Queen Anne's letter, I want to pay a courtesy visit to Queen Henriette-Marie at the Louvres. I suppose that you will ride out as soon as you have the Queen's letter, Monsieur D'Artagnan?"

"You are right, Lady Lisbeth. I will probably be back within a week, though." Lisbeth didn't miss the happy smile those last words brought on Nancy's face but didn't comment on that...yet. The teenager then confirmed her assessment when she spoke softly to D'Artagnan while putting her hand on his leg.

“I will prepare a basket of food for your trip, Charles. I will be waiting for your return. Just be careful, please.”

“Lucky bastard!” Whispered Isaac, who then ducked just in time to avoid a friendly slap on the back of the head from D’Artagnan.

Much later, as they were preparing to go to bed, Lisbeth stared into the eyes of Nancy, who seemed to be dreaming about something. She spoke softly, her voice kept low so that nobody else could hear her.

“Nancy, are you having a teenage crush by any chance?”

“I may.” Said weakly the teenager while lowering her head. Lisbeth went close to her at once and passed an arm around the shoulders of the much bigger girl.

“Nancy, you know that this love cannot go on for long. It is an historical impossibility.”

“I know, Elizabeth.” Said Nancy, tears now coming out. “I know perfectly well that D’Artagnan is supposed to enter a marriage of convenience in a few years, live rather unhappily while devoting himself to his duties to France and finally die a glorious death in battle as an old man of sixty. I also know that I am falling in love with him and I am not talking only about sexual attraction.”

“Hell, Joan of Arc falling in love with D’Artagnan. Talk about an explosive love relationship.” Said Elizabeth Windsor, referring to one of the past incarnations of Nancy. “If you ever have a baby together and the French government learns about it in 1953 ‘B’, it will probably declare that baby a national treasure.”

“Please, Elizabeth, don’t twist the knife in the wound.” Said sadly Nancy ‘B’. For all her intensive training as a field agent of the Time Patrol, she was still very much a teenage girl, with often strong emotions and feelings that were hard to control. On the other hand, D’Artagnan was in her eyes turning from simply being a famous historical figure to being a man worthy of the greatest respect and admiration and whose personality seemed to match her to a ‘T’. Something that Elizabeth had said then sank in her head. Wiping her tears, she then went into the bed she shared with her mission partner.

“Let’s sleep now. As you said, tomorrow will be a big day.”

Blowing the candle on her night stand, she then looked at the ceiling in the now dark room.

“Good night, Lisbeth. Good night to you guys above us.”

“Good night, Nancy. I envy you, truly.” She heard in her implanted miniature radio. That was the voice of Frida Winterer, on duty aboard the scout ship WALKUREN, floating above Paris and hidden under electro-magnetic cloak.

“Thank you, Frida. You are a real friend.”

### **11:02 (Paris Time)**

**Monday, April 17, 1651**

**Palais-Royal, Paris**

Anne Marie Louise D'Orléans, Duchess of Montpensier, was walking past the suite of the Duchess of Longueville when a series of screamed insults and swears coming from inside the apartments made her stop and put her ear to the door in order to listen. Somebody was obviously getting a first class dressing down inside. Mademoiselle de Montpensier was suddenly put out of balance when the door opened, making her fall forward at the feet of Gérard, the head bodyguard of Madame de Longueville. The flustered man didn't say a word then and left quickly, followed by three mortified bodyguards. That left the young blonde, still on her hands and knees, alone to face an irate Duchess of Longueville.

“What were you little twit doing there? Spying on me?”

“Me, a twit?” Replied heatedly Anne Marie Louise. “Watch your mouth: I'm of royal blood.”

“Yes, yes, everybody knows that around here.” Shot back Anne-Geneviève de Bourbon Condé in exasperation. “Everybody also knows that you are still a virgin at the age of 24 and can't dream of anything else but of one day marrying little King Louis. You should get a man in your bed one fine night, so that you could get finally some brains in that little head of yours!”

The Great Mademoiselle, as she was universally known, swallowed back the choice words she had in mind and got up on her feet in order to face her counterpart from a more dignified stance.

“My private life is my business! Now, why were you screaming loud enough to be heard from across the palace?”

Anne-Geneviève threw her hands in the air then.

“Alright, you might as well know, since my stupid bodyguards are at fault. Yesterday, I ordered one of my bodyguards to follow those two English girls who brought

a letter to the Queen, since I suspected some plot of Cardinal Mazarin. The idiot was assaulted and beaten unconscious by that savage girl from New France. Now, I just learned that those two English girls managed to lose the four bodyguards that were assigned to follow them this morning. That savage girl even had the nerve to flash her ass at my men before disappearing in a small alley.”

That made the Great Mademoiselle smile in amusement, which got in turn the Duchess of Longueville even madder.

“You find it funny that two girls who are possibly messengers of Mazarin could escape my men?”

“What would you do with them if you caught them anyway? Kill them? If they really represent the Queen and King of England, you could then start a first class diplomatic row. Don’t forget also that Queen Henriette is my aunt.”

“For what little you care about your aunt.” Shot back Anne-Geneviève. “Anyway, seeing what kind of letters they carry would easily show me who they really represent. If they work for the Cardinal, I would then make sure that they reveal the hiding places of their accomplices in Paris.”

Anne Marie Louise didn’t have to ask by what means the two English girls would be questioned: the methods had changed little since the earliest times in history.

“Well, good luck in your hunt, madame. I will inform you if I meet these girls again.”

She then left the Duchess’ suite, hoping that those two English girls would have another occasion to ridicule Madame De Longueville’s men.

## **15:38 (Paris Time)**

### **The Louvre Palace**

#### **Paris**

Lisbeth stuck her head timidly inside the doorway of the large but mostly bare room on the ground floor of the Louvre Palace. Up to now, her and Nancy had found the Louvre bare of occupants, except for a few French guards and maintenance workers. A young and pretty woman sitting by the side of a large bed and reading a book to a little girl lying in the bed looked up at Lisbeth with curiosity.

“Can I do something for you, miss?” She asked in English.

“Uh, I was hoping that it would be the other way around.” Replied Lisbeth, entering the room with Nancy behind her. Both stopped at a good distance to the bed, putting down on the floor their baskets before bowing politely at the woman by the bed.

“I am Lady Lisbeth of Strathmore and this is my friend and lady-in-waiting, Lady Nancy Sommers. We were hoping to have an audience with Her Majesty the Queen, but have found only empty rooms up to now.”

“An audience...” Said the young woman, sadness in her voice. She then swept her arms around, showing the bare room and empty fireplace. Her own dress was modest and she wore no jewelry.

“As you can see, Lady Lisbeth of Strathmore, there are no guards to stop you from seeing the Queen, no valets or ladies-in-waiting to lead you to her either. We are only a few around the Queen, hoping for better times in rooms we can’t even afford to heat. I will lead you to her but I’m afraid that you will be disappointed by the state of her court. By the way, I am Countess Ann Morton and this is Princess Henriette-Anne.”

“You are the Countess of Morton?” Exclaimed happily Lisbeth before kneeling in front of her and kissing her hand respectfully. “I always wanted to compliment the courageous lady who saved young Princess Henriette-Anne from the clutches of Cromwell.”

Ann Morton blushed and rose from her chair, making Lisbeth get to her feet at the same time.

“I wish that my appearance would be worthy of my title, Lady Lisbeth. As for saving the Princess, I only did my duty.”

“But you did it with such courage, Countess. May God bless you! Could I kiss the Princess?”

“By all means, Lady Lisbeth.”

Her eyes sparkling with tenderness, Lisbeth kissed the forehead of the little girl draped under multiple blankets to stay warm. The girl’s black eyes sparkled back.

“Thank you, milady. Are you coming to stay with us?”

“No, Your Highness. We are only here to visit and bring a few gifts.”

“Gifts?” Replied the skinny little girl, hope in her voice.

“Yes, Your Highness. I even have something special for you.”

Lisbeth then searched inside her basket and brought to the child a small square cake wrapped in waxed paper.

“We have brought with us a number of honey cakes. This one is for you.”

The little princess was about to hungrily bite in the cake when Ann Morton's hand suddenly stopped her. The Countess then looked gravely at Lisbeth.

"Excuse my suspicions but Cromwell's agents would love no better than to be able to poison us. Do you have proofs of who you are?"

Lisbeth didn't get offended by that. The sad truth was that Henriette-Anne was actually going to die from suspected poisoning in a few years time and that Anne Morton's caution was well justified. Instead, Lisbeth broke a small part of the cake and ate it.

"We didn't bring letters of patent with us, Countess, as we had to go through enemy lines to come to France and couldn't risk being discovered with such letters. You know as well as me what the parliamentary soldiers of Cromwell do to the supporters of the King that they find."

Ann Morton lowered her head as nightmarish visions came back to her.

"Yes, I know too well indeed. The cruelty of those fanatical Puritan knows no bounds. I am sorry for doubting you, Lady Lisbeth."

"Can I eat the cake now, Ann?" Asked in a pleading voice the little princess. That broke the heart of Elizabeth Windsor who, as a member of the British royal family of modern times, felt a strong affinity with this royal family. Ann Morton was finally convinced on seeing the tears in Lisbeth's eyes while she smiled tenderly to the little girl.

"You may eat it, my little princess."

As little Henriette-Anne avidly ate the cake, Lisbeth faced back Ann Morton.

"Me and Nancy brought food in those two baskets. Could I leave a piece of cheese for the Princess before seeing the Queen?"

From the famished look that the Countess gave to the covered baskets, along with her thin face, it was obvious that she was sorely tempted to have a bite herself right now.

"You would make the Princess very happy indeed, Lady Lisbeth: none of us have seen meat or cheese for weeks."

"I will take that as a yes." Said Lisbeth, smiling. "Nancy, can I borrow one of your knives?"

As Ann Morton watched with surprise and shock Nancy take a throwing knife out from the front of her court dress, Lisbeth explained in a soft voice.

"My friend Nancy also happens to be my bodyguard. She is very good at it."

Accepting the knife from Nancy, Lisbeth took a round cheese from one of the baskets and cut two medium-size pieces, handing the first to little Henriette-Anne, then the

second to Ann Morton. Both pieces were eaten very quickly, prompting Lisbeth in cutting two more pieces, a wide grin on her face.

“I thought that you would like this Dutch Gouda cheese. I like it a lot myself.”

“Lady Lisbeth, I won’t forget your kindness.” Said Ann Morton as she quickly ate her second slice of cheese.

“Countess Morton,” said Nancy softly while approaching her, “a person of your quality and devotion deserves better than wearing the dress of a simple servant. You would honor me a lot by accepting these as a token of my admiration for your courage and faithful services to the Queen.”

As she spoke, Nancy undid her pearl necklace and matching earrings before clipping them on Ann Morton, who was too moved to protest at first.

“But, I can’t accept those, not when the Queen herself is bare of jewels.”

“Don’t worry about that, Countess.” Replied a smiling Lisbeth. “We have a few more gifts to hand around. Let’s go see the Queen now, if you may: I have been dreaming of that moment for a long time.”

Following Ann Morton out of the chilly bedroom and into the hallway, Lisbeth and Nancy, food baskets in their hands, soon entered a large lounge. Like in the rest of the palace, the ambient temperature there was quite low and the fireplace had not seen a fire for months. The five persons wearing long coats and playing cards at a table near a window looked up at the newcomers, while a midget hurried towards them, a hand on the dagger at his belt. Ann Morton reassured the midget with a sign of the hand before going to the table and performing a curtsy in front of the only woman of the group.

“Your Majesty, Lady Lisbeth of Strathmore and her lady-in-waiting are soliciting the privilege of an audience with you.”

The small woman with curly black hair Morton was addressing examined for a moment the two newcomers, then smiled.

“Please come forward, Lady Lisbeth of Strathmore, along with your friend.”

The two young women complied quickly before doing a curtsy in front of Queen Henriette-Marie after putting down their baskets of food. At age 42, the Queen was still a pretty woman, although years of hardship had marked her face. Her dress, while elegant, was quite worn and she was devoid of jewelry. The four men now standing around the table were dressed as modestly as her, with one wearing the robe and

crucifix of a priest. Two of the men had swords on their belts and looked ready to use them if need be.

“What brings you to Paris with your friend, Lady Lisbeth?”

“The civil war in our poor country, Your Majesty. My parents, judging the situation dangerous at home, decided to send me to France for a few months in order to let pass what they thought then was the worst of it. It seems unfortunately that they had been too optimistic. With little to do and with ample funds in our hands, I thought that it would be a good time to pay a visit to my Queen. Also, knowing about your living conditions here, the good people around Angus, where our family estate is, collected enough to convey through me a few gifts for their beloved Queen. My friend Nancy came along as my bodyguard.”

“Your bodyguard?”

While the Queen showed surprise, the two armed noblemen behind her smiled as if hearing a good joke. Lisbeth looked with displeasure at the men, something the Queen noticed.

“Lord Jermyn, Lord Goring, Lady Lisbeth and her friend made a long and dangerous trip in order to pay homage to me. Please treat both of them with the courtesy due to my guests.”

“Yes Your Majesty.” Replied politely the youngest of the two, a tough-looking man in his late thirties. “Please excuse our reaction, Lady Lisbeth.”

“Apologies accepted, my lord. I realize that Nancy’s abilities are quite unusual. Would you like a demonstration?”

“Why not?” Said the Queen, grinning. “We are in such short supply of any entertainment here.”

Lisbeth then winked at Nancy.

“The main door, Nancy.”

At those words, the teenager plunged both hands inside the cleavage of her dress and, with both incredible speed and accuracy, threw a pair of knives which embedded themselves in the door panel, a few inches apart from each other and at chest level. Nancy immediately followed that by performing a series of back flips towards the door, finally retrieving her knives after landing with the grace of a cat. That demonstration left the Queen and noblemen speechless for a moment, which gave a chance to Lisbeth to get back to the main topic of her visit.



“Your Majesty, seeing you in such a poor attire pains me, as it would also pain your loyal subjects. Please accept this small gift from your people.”

After a last incredulous glance at Nancy, the Queen accepted the flat wooden box that Lisbeth had taken out of one of her baskets and slowly opened it. Her eyes opened in admiration at the set of pink pearl necklace, earrings and bracelet inside the box.

“May I, Your Majesty?” Said Lisbeth softly before helping to clip the necklace around the Queen’s neck. Both women were close to tears when they exchanged a hug. The next gift from Lisbeth was a small casket full of gold coins.

“We heard that you had to contract debts in order to feed your retinue. This should cover them as well as the wages of your followers, Your Majesty.”

That got the noblemen and Ann Morton to smile in contentment: all of them were penniless after selling off all of their valuables.

“Sir Cowley,” said Henriette-Marie as she handed over the casket to a modestly dressed man, “could I ask you to do an accounting of what I owe and see that the back wages and most urgent debts be paid. Leave some money as well for food and heating wood.”

“Your Majesty,” cut in Lisbeth, “I already took care of the wood: a cart should deliver a load of dry wood anytime now. As for the food, me and Nancy brought some provisions with us. If we may use this table, Your Majesty.”

Of a common accord, the playing cards on the table were quickly removed and the four baskets put on top of it after a clean cloth was thrown over the table. Delighted squeals rang out as Lisbeth and Nancy lined up an assortment of sausages, cheese, hard boiled eggs, bread, salted fish and ham. One basket also contained a jug of red wine.

“Bless you both for your generosity.” Professed the priest before leading a short grace.

“Oh dear, I was forgetting my poor Minette with all this.” Said the Queen as her followers went at the food with gusto. “Lady Morton, please bring Minette here so that she can eat too.”

After letting the Queen and her followers eat in peace for a few minutes, Lisbeth, sitting besides Henriette-Marie, spoke up.

“Your Majesty, may I ask only one favor of you and your followers: that you do not mention my name or that of Nancy to anybody back in England.”

“Your modesty is too great, Lady Lisbeth: I am too much in your debt to just forget you and your family.”

“Your Majesty, it is not a question of being modest. If Cromwell or his followers learn that I gave you comfort here, they will take revenge on my family and their people. After the atrocities committed in Ireland by Cromwell and his soldiers, I believe that nothing is sacred or safe from this traitor and regicide.”

Father Cyprien De Gamaches lowered his head at the mention of the massacres in Ireland.

“God will make the final judgment on that evil man. To kill thousands of peasants just because they were Catholics...”

“Sad experience showed me that mixing religion and politics always result in bloodshed and suffering, Father.” Said thoughtfully Nancy, attracting on herself the attention of both the Queen and of Father Cyprien.

“Can I assume that you are a good Catholic, my child?” Asked the priest, to which Nancy shook her head.

“You would assume wrongly, Father. I am an agnostic.” That shocked Father Cyprien to no small end. He however bit his lips and faced Lisbeth, keeping a friendly expression.

“And you, Lady Lisbeth, what religion do you practice?” The young English aristocrat locked eyes with him as she answered calmly.

“Father, I am a practicing member of the Anglican Church. I do agree with Nancy on one thing here: different religions should not preclude peace and friendship. Nancy is my best friend and will stay so irrespective of the religion she practices, if any.”

The embarrassed silence that followed was cut by Nancy, who suddenly rose to her feet as she looked out through one of the windows.

“The cart of wood has arrived! I’ll go direct the workers.” She was about to leave at a run when she remembered something and performed a curtsy in front of the Queen.

“With Your Majesty’s permission...”  
 “By all means, young Nancy.”

Father Cyprien shook his head as he watched Nancy leave the room.

“That young girl’s mother should pay more attention to her religious education.”  
 “Father,” replied Lisbeth with annoyance in her voice, “Nancy is as kind and compassionate a person as any Christian could be. On the other hand, I have seen too

many so-called good Christians commit unspeakable horrors and show utter intolerance towards others, contrary to Jesus' teachings of tolerance and kindness. I don't judge others based on their religion and I'm not about to start with my friend Nancy."

**16:07 (Paris Time)**

**Friday, April 21, 1651**

**Palais-Royal, Paris**

The officer in charge of the soldiers of the Duke of Orléans who were guarding the Palais-Royal frowned on hearing the request from the tall and pretty young teenager who had showed up at the main entrance of the palace, wearing a modest dress and carrying a guitar and an haversack.

"You want to play music and dance to entertain the young King? And you are...?"

"Lady Nancy Sommers. I already came twice to the palace with my mistress, Lady Lisbeth of Strathmore, to speak with the Queen."

"Do you have any weapon with you?"

In response, Nancy pulled down on the cleavage of her dress, making her firm young breasts pop out while she smiled to the officer.

"Only if you call these weapons, monsieur."

The officer laughed while admiring her denuded chest.

"These could indeed qualify as very effective weapons, mademoiselle. I will however have to search your haversack. Henri, have a look in it."

One of the four soldiers on duty at the main gate quickly searched Nancy's haversack as the latter put her breasts back in her dress.

"There are no weapons, Lieutenant, just some clothes and a couple of musical instruments."

"Very well! Wait here, miss. I will go see if the Queen can receive you."

Leaving Nancy with his four soldiers, the officer entered the palace at a quick pace, returning some twelve minutes later.

"The Queen will see you, mademoiselle. Please follow me."

Nancy was led down a long corridor before going up to the second floor, finally arriving at the door of a lounge guarded by two soldiers. Nancy didn't miss the fact that

the soldiers belonged to the Duke of Orléans, and not to the royal army. The Queen and the young King, despite the appearances, were effectively prisoners of the Fronde. Once introduced in the lounge, Nancy found the Queen there, along with young King Louis and his younger brother Philippe, the Duchess of Montpensier and a few ladies-in-waiting. All of them sat in sofas placed near a large fireplace in which a good fire was burning. Like all the stone buildings of the time, which didn't have a central heating system, the palace was fresh in this end of April, forcing its occupants to live close to their fireplaces in order to find some warmth. Nancy walked to the Queen and stopped a few steps in front of her, then curtsied to her and the King.

"Thank you for receiving me, Your Majesty."

"It is I who must thank you for your visit, Lady Sommers." Replied Queen Anne in a friendly tone. "Distractions are so rare in these times. So, what can you do to entertain us?"

"I propose to sing a few songs while playing my guitar, as well as telling a few stories about New France. I can also perform a few acrobatics and dance, Your Majesty."

"That program sounds nice, Lady Sommers." Said the Queen before looking at her eldest son. "What would you like her to do first, Louis?"

"I want to hear her play the guitar and then tell us stories about New France, Mother."

"Very well, Louis. Lady Sommers, would you have objections to stay in this palace overnight? Darkness will fall in a few hours and the streets of Paris are unsafe in these troubled times."

"I accept gladly your offer of hospitality, Your Majesty."

"In that case, come with me and I will assign you a room, where you will be able to drop your things and change for your various gigs."

The Duchess of Montpensier, who was now enthusiastic at the idea of hearing stories about New France, thankfully didn't think about following the Queen and Nancy in order to keep watch on them. Using a door of the lounge that communicated with the royal apartments, Queen Anne of Austria led Nancy to a small servant's room that communicated with a much bigger and far more luxurious bedroom. The servant's room, while tiny, was at least well lit by a window.

"You will be able to use this servant's room. The bedroom next door is that of Louis. This way, nobody will be able to get at you without being noticed."

She then lowered her voice to a near whisper.

“Do you have a letter for me, Lady Sommers?”

“Yes, Your Majesty! A rider from the Cardinal arrived yesterday from Germany and brought this letter. Monsieur d’Artagnan should also arrive in the next few days with more letters. Here is the letter that arrived yesterday.”

The Queen quickly took the letter Nancy took out of her dress, then hid it in her corsage while smiling to her.

“Your services to the crown will not be forgotten, Lady Sommers. I will have a letter for Monsieur d’Artagnan to carry before you depart the palace tomorrow morning. Now put your things down and let’s return to the lounge before the Great Mademoiselle wakes up and wonders about what we are doing.”

Less than two minutes had passed by the time Nancy returned with the Queen to the lounge, her guitar in hand. Going to stand between the sofas and the fireplace, Nancy smiled to the young king and to his brother, who was ten years old.

“Your Majesty, I will start with a song called ‘Destin’.”

She then started playing her guitar to sing an adaptation of a hit song by Céline Dion, composed at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Apart from counting five of her past incarnations as a dancer, musician and singer, Nancy was also part of the ‘Time Minstrels’, a musical band formed by young members or relatives of members of the Time Patrol. The Time Minstrels specialized in adapting and playing songs and musical pieces from various periods of history. Many had told Nancy that she could have easily become a professional artist with her voice, physique and talents for dance and music. Her first performance this afternoon attracted a concert of enthusiastic applause, with young King Louis XIV smiling from one ear to the other while eyeing her with sparkling eyes.

“Bravo, Lady Sommers! Another song, please!”

“With pleasure, Your Majesty.” Replied Nancy before starting another song in French that had never been heard before in this century, playing her guitar with gusto. That song was as well received as the first, prompting her to bow to thank her audience. Seeing a harpsichord, an ancestor of the piano, that sat in a nearby corner of the lounge, Nancy looked at the Queen.

“If you don’t mind, Your Majesty, I would like now to play a piece or two on your harpsichord.”

“You are most welcomed to it, my child.”

Going to the harpsichord, a large Flemish model with a twin keyboard, and standing behind it, as it was meant to be played, Nancy tried a few keys to judge the tonality range of the instrument. Thinking for a few seconds, she then started to play a solo harpsichord piece that was due to be written in about sixty years by the great German composer Johan Sebastian Bach. Queen Anne, like the young Duchess of Montpensier, opened their mouths in astonishment as Nancy played the harpsichord with evident mastery, while they obviously loved Bach’s composition. Nancy followed Bach’s piece by an adaptation as a solo harpsichord piece of a modern pop song, singing along in English as she played the instrument. After another round of applause, she returned to her guitar and sang a hit song from the musical score of the movie *GLADIATOR*, a performance that nearly brought tears to Queen Anne with its melancholic, tragic tunes. At the end, after applauding her with enthusiasm, Anne Marie Louise d’Orléans said something that made Nancy smile to her.

“When I think that the Duchess of Longueville is calling you a savage, Lady Sommers.”

“Those that Europeans are calling savages could actually show you a few tricks, Duchess. The Amerindians of New France know nature intimately and practice a natural medicine that I believe to be far superior to the medicine known in France. If you don’t mind, I will go change quickly for the second part of my show.”

Disappearing through the door that led to the royal apartments, Nancy left the spectators alone to comment her performance to date. The young king in particular, who loved playing the guitar, was most enthusiastic and said that he was anxious to see more. He was not disappointed when Nancy returned a few minutes later, executing a number of tumbles and flips before landing in front of the fireplace and of the row of sofas. The French present drew air in on seeing her new outfit: she was now dressed in a red loincloth, buckskin leggings, moccasins and a sleeveless leather tank top vest that left her navel and belly bare, plus wore a leather headband decorated with colored stitchings. She also had painted her face the way Iroquois warriors did for war and made a ferocious grimace, her eyes wild, making more than one spectator shiver with fear.

"I am Kakwitte, an Iroquois warrior, and I will tell you how I kill and scalp my enemies."

Nancy then executed a frantic war dance while singing in Iroquois language. She followed that with a hunting story told in French, with her hunting expedition turning into a battle at the encounter with a group of Algonquin hunters. She moved constantly during her story, jumping around and performing flips while making scary faces. While the Duchess of Montpensier shivered while still enjoying the show, young Louis and his brother Philippe giggled in pleasure at her grimaces and applauded hard at the end of her performance.

"Bravo, Lady Sommers! You are fantastic! Please tell us more stories."

"That will have to wait after supper, Louis." Said Queen Anne, who was fanning herself to chase the emotion that the ferocious show given by Nancy had brought her. "You are of course invited to have supper with us, my child."

"It will be an honor for me, Your Majesty." Replied Nancy while curtsying to her. "If you don't mind, I will go change and wash a bit first."

"Go, my dear!"

As the Queen commented with the other women present Nancy's performance, young Louis disappeared inside the royal apartments, pretending that he needed to go use a chamber pot. Going to his bedroom, his eyes sparkled with pleasure when he found Nancy topless in the adjacent servant's room while she was taking off her Amerindian outfit. The teenage girl didn't mind that, smiling to him and inviting him to come closer before closing the door of the tiny room behind the King.

"I hope that you liked my show, Your Majesty."

"A lot, Lady Sommers. You also have a fascinating body, so supple and strong for a girl."

Unable to resist his urge, the boy of twelve then raised his right hand hesitantly, finally covering Nancy's left breast and fondling it gently. Seeing that she was smiling at that, he then fondled both of her breasts, his breathing accelerating. Nancy let him fondle her for a few seconds before gently stopping him.

"I promise to let you enjoy my body fully tonight, Your Majesty. However, I must now change and wash quickly, before your mother could suspect that you are with me."

"Can I continue to watch you then?"

Nancy didn't reply to that, simply continuing to undress until she ended fully naked in front of the boy. Louis licked his lips on seeing that her groin was carefully shaved.

"You are truly making me mad with desire, Lady Sommers."

"I do make the same effect on most boys, Your Majesty, but thank you for the compliment."

Nancy then slipped back in her undershirt and dress before washing her face to remove the Iroquois war paint. On her urging, Louis then returned to the lounge, in order not to attract the suspicions of his mother. Once dressed and washed, Nancy took the time to comb her hair and to apply some light makeup, then returned to the lounge. There, on top of the Queen and of the other spectators, she found the Duchess of Longueville, to which the Duchess of Montpensier was enthusiastically telling her about Nancy's show. Anne-Geneviève de Bourbon Condé stiffened on seeing Nancy appear in the lounge but did as if she had not seen her, ignoring her and leaving the lounge in quick paces, probably to go alert her bodyguards. Nancy resolved to be on her guards for the rest of the evening and night as she followed the Queen towards the dining room.

## **22:19 (Paris Time)**

### **Royal apartments, Palais-Royal**

#### **Paris**

A lit candle in one hand, Nancy slipped silently inside the room of the young king in order to get to her own room. She now had with her, hidden in her corsage, a letter from the Queen addressed to Cardinal Mazarin. As she was passing by the bed of Louis XIV, the young boy suddenly sat up, having probably been waiting for her in the dark room.

"Lady Sommers, could I see you tonight?" Whispered the boy.

"Just give me time to undress, Your Majesty."

Going into the servant's room, Nancy put down her candle holder on the dresser, then quickly took off her clothes before returning naked in the dark to Louis' bed. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she smiled to the young king, who was hungrily eyeing her in the semi-darkness of the room, which was poorly lit by two candles. Nancy knew that Louis was going to catch a venereal disease in a few years, thanks to his fooling around with a multitude of lovers, but that he was still healthy right now. She had anyway received as an agent of the Time Patrol a series of vaccines developed by the doctors of the Global



Council and covering the most common diseases of the past, including sexually transmitted diseases. The young king was a solidly built and handsome boy who was only one year younger than her. To talk of abuse in this case would thus be laughable, especially in view of the countless lovers and mistresses, both commoners and aristocrats, that Louis XIV was going to collect during his life. Nancy certainly found Louis to her taste, but she also had received discreetly a radio message from Mike Crawford, asking her if she was ready to do what was needed for her to get in the good graces of Louis XIV and thus gain a long term access to the royal court. She was already preparing herself for a long term mission in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century that would see her marry briefly a French Aristocrat living in the Caribbean, in order to create a person important for the Time Patrol. To become the occasional lover of Louis XIV did not bother her, at least for the first years of his reign, before the negative influence of his court and the constant fawning or his courtesans would develop in him his least attractive traits, like selfishness and arrogance. Pushing aside the bed sheet covering the boy, Nancy then made him remove his night shirt before lying beside him and smiling to him again.

“You do realize that this cannot have any long term consequences, Your Majesty. I must stay as anonymous as I can in this court, for many reasons, while I am of a much too low class to dare asking favors from you.”

“I know, Lady Sommers. However, know that the hardships of this Fronde have taught me that I can't expect any true loyalty from the great nobles of my realm, nobles who betrayed the crown and are holding me prisoner with my mother and brother in Paris. To date, only people of the lower classes and nobles of small lineage, like Monsieur d'Artagnan, have proved to be truly loyal to the crown. Once this damn Fronde is suppressed, I will need such loyal and competent persons to help me administer and defend France. You appear to be such a person to me, Lady Sommers.”

“You are flattering me, Your Majesty.”

“No, I am only saying the truth.” Replied Louis, serious. “You are not only beautiful: you are also full of talents, brave, intelligent and resourceful. To have you in my service would greatly please me. As for your anonymity, that can be arranged easily enough. By the way, call me simply Louis when we are intimate.”

“With pleasure, Louis.” Said softly Nancy before hugging the boy and kissing him, letting the hands of the young king caress and explore her body at will.

Nancy left the palace discreetly early next morning, after a last word with the Queen and a discreet kiss with Louis. Foiling again the surveillance of the men of the Duchess of Longueville, who were watching the royal apartments, she left via the window of her room before the Sun rose up and climbed down the stone façade with the agility of a spider, then disappearing at a run in a nearby street. Less than thirty minutes later, she was back at the Inn of Le Lion Noir, where she gave her precious letter to Monsieur Bartett. In a few days, d'Artagnan would be coming back from Germany and would be able to take charge of the letter. Nancy was already longing dreamily for that day.

**14:40 (Paris Time)**

**Tuesday, April 25, 1651**

**Inn of 'Le Lion Noir'**

**Paris**

D'Artagnan, still covered with dust from his ride back from Germany, nearly ran inside the inn, eager to see Nancy again. His heart jumped with joy when he saw her at a table near a window, reading a book. The look of happiness on her face when she saw him was well worth his long trip. Shedding his dirty cape first, he walked quickly to her while she rose to her feet and met him halfway. They kissed each other passionately for a long moment, attracting a few amused but gentle comments from other customers present in the main hall of the inn. Nancy's bright green eyes positively sparkled when she looked at Charles after ungluing herself from him.

"It was a long week for me, Charles. I missed you a lot."

"I missed you too, my beautiful Nancy." He kissed her again before looking around the main hall. "I don't see your friend Lisbeth or my own friend Isaac around. Don't tell me that they are upstairs, doing something together."

That made Nancy giggle and shake a finger at him.

"Now, you better not say that in front of Lisbeth: she does not appreciate jokes about her private life. But since you mentioned it, let's go upstairs ourselves."

Nancy took the time to retrieve her book while D'Artagnan grabbed his cape. He looked at the leather-bound book with curiosity.

"What are you reading, Nancy?"

"A Greek comedy. It's actually quite funny."

“You can read Greek?” Exclaimed Charles, not a little impressed. That attracted a proud smile on Nancy’s face.

“Yes, along with Latin, Hebrew and a few other languages.”

Charles was left flabbergasted by that: the more he thought that he knew her, the more she surprised him. He didn’t have a chance to reply to that, Nancy pulling him eagerly up the stairs towards his room.

### **15:46 (Paris Time)**

#### **D’Artagnan’s room**

Nancy sighed with contentment and laid down on top of Charles, still impaled on him. Charles’ heart was still beating furiously from the energetic treatment from the teenager, who smiled tenderly to him.

“You know, Charles, I haven’t felt the way I do now for a man in a long time. I have known and bedded many men before but none like you.”

Charles stared silently into her eyes, his mind in turmoil. He was a man close to his forties, with no personal fortune and little possessions. His life as a soldier had made him meet many women, but only as short adventures. The sensible and commonly sought way would be for him to find a reasonably wealthy and pretty woman, marry her and thus enjoy a quiet and comfortable retirement, apart from having a few sons to ensure the continuation of his name. Marriages of love for men like him were considered of the utmost ridicule by most. Yet, the thought of losing Nancy hurt him deeply: she was too special a girl to let go. The fact that she was probably of only moderate means herself was now far in the back of his mind. What was on his mind now was to keep riding and fighting with her at his side. If his friends ridiculed him for that, then the hell with them! His hands started caressing gently her face as he spoke softly.

“Nancy, I love you more than anything else in the World. Would you marry me?” Infinite tenderness filled her eyes then. Tears came next as she shook her head slowly.

“Charles, you can’t imagine how your request touches me, but I have to say no. Not because I don’t love you but because too many people depend on me. Also, you are an important man at the King’s court and you will be expected one day to enter a marriage of convenience with some aristocrat woman. I have my destiny and you have yours.”

“Nancy, my destiny is with you. I don’t want it any other way.”

She had trouble replying to him, tears and sobs choking her.

“Charles, I do love you, but I simply can’t marry you. Will you be contented with me being your occasional mistress?”

“How often could we see each other?” Asked D’Artagnan, his eyes full of tears. Nancy kissed him tearfully before replying.

“Every week, if you wish so. We will just need to give ourselves a rallying point every time.”

D’Artagnan thought that over for a moment, then pressed Nancy’s naked body against his.

“Then, I could live with that, Nancy.”

They kissed each other again before Nancy looked into D’Artagnan’s eyes.

“Charles, there is something else that I can do for you.” She said very softly.

“And what’s that, my love?”

“I want a baby from you.”

“You...you would do that for me?” Said D’Artagnan, touched. Nancy nodded, then kissed him again.

**12:49 (Paris Time)**

**Thursday, April 27, 1651**

**Rue Saint-Antoine, Paris**

D’Artagnan eyed nervously the sinister towers of the Bastille fortress to their right, then the group of soldiers visible ahead at the Gate of Saint-Antoine. Lisbeth rode besides him Amazon style on her mare, while Nancy rode closely behind them. The Queen’s precious letters to the Cardinal were hidden under his shirt, while a bulging bag full of food was solidly attached to his saddle. Charles then noticed a rich carriage pulling to the side of the barricade watched by the soldiers, having come from outside the gate. A young woman aristocrat was now conversing with the officer in charge of the barricade. D’Artagnan felt acid in his stomach when he recognized both the woman and the soldiers and he got closer to Lisbeth to speak to her in a low voice.

“Trouble ahead, milady! I see Mademoiselle De Montpensier at the gate, speaking with soldiers of the Duke of Orléans, her father. She knows me.”

Lisbeth's face closed up at those news. Discreetly changing her riding posture to that of a man instead of the awkward Amazon style deemed proper for women, she signaled Nancy to do the same without breaking their stride.

"Monsieur d'Artagnan, your letters must go through. No matter what happens next, ride away!"

"What about you and Nancy?"

"We will take care of ourselves, Charles. You, on the other hand, are the only one that can take care of those letters."

Charles swallowed hard as he looked behind him at Nancy, who nodded her head in agreement.

"She is right, Charles. Ride through with Lisbeth. I will cover your escape if need be."

"But..."

"Go! We still can bluff our way through."

Anne Marie Louise D'Orléans was still speaking with her father's officer when a trio of riders approaching from the Rue Saint-Antoine caught her eye. She then recognized with excitement the two English girls who, only this morning, had again ridiculed Madame De Longueville's men by losing them despite being trailed by eight experienced men. Their discomfited faces after having been admonished by their hysterical mistress had made her laugh hard then. Her amusement at seeing the two young women suddenly vanished when she looked closely at the man riding alongside them. Grabbing the officer by the shoulder, she then pointed at d'Artagnan.

"THAT MAN IS AN AGENT OF CARDINAL MAZARIN! ARREST HIM!"

Her scream and that of the officer ordering his men to seize him prompted d'Artagnan in doing something the Great Mademoiselle, herself a good rider, did not think possible: ignoring the guarded chicane entrance of the barricade, he made his horse jump over the barricade itself. Adding to the Duchess' amazement, the English aristocrat girl vaulted the barricade as well with her horse and galloped away behind d'Artagnan, prompting the officer to shout an order to his men.

"SHOOT THEM!"

The Duchess then saw Nancy, who had stayed well behind her two companions, spur her horse and charge the dozen or so soldiers leveling their muskets at the fleeing d'Artagnan and the English aristocrat. Nancy's horse crashed into them before they

could fire, throwing their ranks into utter confusion. Anne Marie Louise D'Orléans understood with a pinch of admiration that Nancy was deliberately staying behind in order to protect the escape of her companions. Seeing a soldier about to point his pistol at the girl, she shouted at once as loud as she could.

“DON'T SHOOT HER! TAKE HER ALIVE!”

Soon trapped between the defensive moat of the Bastille and a half-circle of soldiers armed with halberds, swords and muskets, the teenager jumped off her horse and, taking from her saddle bags some sort of twin baton flail, swung it over her head while shouting at the soldiers as her horse galloped away on her order, breaking through the cordon of soldiers.

“COME ON! SHOW ME WHAT YOU MEN HAVE!”

Mesmerized by that scene, Anne Marie Louise watched on as the four first soldiers to approach the girl were greeted by a flurry of flail swings and high kicks and sent sprawling to the ground in seconds, to the astonishment of all around her.

“IS THAT ALL YOU GOT?” Taunted the teenager, adopting a strange combat stance. Seven men then charged her at once from three different sides. The first two got slapped on the temple by her baton flail and collapsed to the ground, followed quickly by two more men. The fifth one was greeted by a piercing war scream and a punch to his plexus, while the sixth one, charging at a run with his musket wielded like a club, was grabbed by an arm, swung around her twice and sent flying in the water-filled moat. The girl then ducked under the musket swung at her by the seventh man and punched him viciously in the testicles. She then grabbed a discarded halberd with both hands and, with a blood-curling war shriek, charged the line of stunned soldiers, who seemed nearly ready to run away by then and had backed off by a few paces. At the last instant she planted the butt of the halberd in the ground and pole-vaulted over the heads of the incredulous soldiers. Hitting the ground in a smooth roll, she then started running towards the now panicking Duchess of Montpensier. Luckily for the Great Mademoiselle, a soldier tripped the teenager with his long pike, making her fall hard on the ground. A dozen now furious soldiers used that chance to jump on the girl, brutally grabbing her and punching her repeatedly.

“STOP THAT!” Ordered at once Anne Marie Louise, worried that they would kill her. “BRING HER TO THE BASTILLE AND PUT HER IN CHAINS!”

The Duchess then faced the officer besides her.

“Quick, take your horse and inform immediately the Duchess De Longueville at the Palais-Royal that we captured one of the two English girls. She will understand.”

“It will be done, mademoiselle.” Replied the officer before running to his horse. Anne Marie Louise then followed the soldiers dragging the unconscious English girl, still having trouble believing what she had just seen.

### **13:41 (Paris Time)**

#### **The Bastille, Paris**

Nancy ‘B’ woke up slowly, waves of pain coming from her battered body, head and face. She then realized that she was suspended by both wrists to chains passing through steel pulleys attached to the ceiling of a large, high-vault room made of stone masonry. She also saw that her feet were chained to the floor, making it next to impossible for her to move in any way. A soldier who had been standing by the door of the room briefly turned his head towards the hallway beyond the door and shouted.

“TELL THE DUCHESS THAT THE PRISONER IS CONSCIOUS!”

The noise of footsteps then told Nancy that another soldier was going away to pass that message. Looking around the poorly-lit room, which had no windows and was probably underground, she swallowed hard on seeing a number of torture instruments, including a brazier with iron bars plunged into it. Furthermore, the chains from which she was suspended ended up around a wooden drum which could be turned with a lever, thus tightening the chains and making the whole contraption a stretching rack. Nancy ‘B’ breathed deeply a couple of time to control the fear that then rose in her. Her timeline twin had to go through similar severe tortures on two occasions and she had no wish to gain a similar experience. She however had little say on how things would go now. Worse, as long as witnesses were present, she would not be allowed to use her implanted time distorter to jump space-time and escape this awful place by disappearing into thin air. The footsteps of a number of persons approaching along the hallway then focused back her attention towards the door. Those persons turned out to be that pesky Duchess of Orléans and another, older aristocrat woman accompanied by four men. The older aristocrat had been at the Palais-Royal but Nancy could not remember her name. Once inside the torture chamber, the unknown noblewoman approached Nancy and looked up at her with a mean smile.

“So, you thought that you could play around with my men? Now you will pay for it. First, you will tell me for who you really work.”

“And who is asking, if I may?”

The noblewoman was seemingly displeased by her question and motioned to one of the men, who then went to the drum and pulled the levers a number of time, tightening the chains holding Nancy and painfully stretching her body.

“I will ask the questions here, not you! Who do you work for?”

“I am the lady-in-waiting of Lady Lisbeth of Strathmore, who was sent to Paris by King Charles the Second of England to find support from the Queen of France in his fight against the armies of Oliver Cromwell.”

The eyes of the noblewoman narrowed as she stared coldly at Nancy.

“That was the story your mistress dished out at the court. However, you were caught while riding in the company of an agent of Cardinal Mazarin. If you answer my questions truthfully, you will avoid a lot of pain.”

“And what then if I do?” Asked Nancy, only trying to delay the inevitable.

“Then, I may show some leniency with you. After all, you are nothing more than a servant.”

That disdainful remark by the noblewoman infuriated Nancy, who had no respect for all those high-born people who had done nothing by themselves to deserve their privileges. She however knew that the noblewoman could be trying to entice her in speaking too fast and reveal something through anger.

“What I am, I became through my own merits and efforts, not through birth. If you think yourself to be superior to me, then unchain me and I will show you who is really the superior person here.”

That clearly irritated the noblewoman, who made another sign to the man at the drum. Nancy had to clench her teeth together in order not to scream with pain as her joints were painfully stretched hard.

“No simple servant will mock the Duchess of Longueville! You obviously need a good lesson in humility.”

Walking to Nancy, the Duchess then roughly ripped her dress away, soon leaving her totally naked. The noblewoman then massaged Nancy’s large, firm breasts.

“You have a really nice chest. Maybe we should start with it.”

Going to a table supporting a number of instruments, the noblewoman chose a pair of pliers with long handles and returned to near Nancy, the pliers held high. That was



when Anne Marie Louise D'Orléans could not stand this anymore and went quickly to Anne-Geneviève De Bourbon Condé, pleading with her.

"Do we really have to do this? She's a brave girl and deserves better than this. What could she tell us of real importance anyway since she is a simple servant?"

The Duchess De Longueville looked down at her with contempt.

"You fancy yourself as some kind of Amazon and you can't stomach this? That simple servant, as you called her, knocked out a dozen soldiers by herself. I will tell you what she is: a spy and a potential assassin. She must know where to find Mazarin's agents in Paris and she will tell us, I promise you that."

She then grabbed with her pliers the lower part of Nancy's left breast and pinched it as hard as she could while twisting the pliers. Searing pain shot through Nancy's brain but she barely managed not to scream through sheer willpower. As the Duchess De Longueville took one step back to leave space for her men to continue the tortures, she was hit squarely in the left eye by a ball of saliva spit out by Nancy. Pushing a scream, she jumped back and dropped her pliers, then used part of her dress to wipe her eye dry. She was positively livid when she looked back at Nancy but was cut off by her prisoner, who stared at her with utter contempt.

"You torture a chained prisoner and think of yourself as a tough woman? You are no more than a spoiled woman who was spoon-fed by others all your life. At least the Duchess De Montpensier proved that she was no sadist, contrary to you."

"YOU WILL REGRET THIS! MEN, QUESTION HER HARD! I WANT ANSWERS BUT, MOST OF ALL, I WANT TO HEAR HER SCREAM!"

The noblewoman then went to a corner of the room and grabbed a chair, bringing it to a position three meters in front of Nancy. The Duchess sat in the chair and looked on as the first crack from a whip echoed in the room. Disgusted and sickened by this, the Duchess De Montpensier ran out of the torture chamber and threw up once in the hallway. She then heard the voice of the Duchess De Longueville, mocking her.

"YOU'RE NOTHING MORE THAN A LITTLE WHIMP, ANNE MARIE!"

Filled with both rage and horror, the young blonde didn't dare however go back in the torture chamber, for fear of seeing more unspeakable things. She thus ran away, in a hurry to leave this sinister prison.

Jumping in her carriage parked in front of the main entrance to the Bastille, Anne Marie Louise d'Orléans ordered her driver to bring her back quickly to the Palais-Royal.

Suddenly feeling sick as the carriage started to roll, she barely had the time to stick out her head by the door's window before she threw up. She was still disturbed when she arrived at the Palais-Royal and went to lock herself in her apartments to try to chase from her mind the horrible images she had seen in the Bastille. After half an hour of trying to find peace of mind and also feeling remorseful about her role in the capture of Nancy, Anne Marie Louise then decided to go see the young King Louis. She found him after fifteen minutes of walking through the palace, practicing his sword fencing with his personal weapons trainer, Monsieur Vincent de Saint Ange. Running to the King, Anne Marie Louise threw herself at his feet, interrupting his practice session.

"Your Majesty, pardon me for interrupting your practice like this, but something horrible is happening in the Bastille. Lady Sommers, the lady-in-waiting of the English aristocrat who visited us a few times here, is being tortured in the Bastille, on orders from the Duchess of Longueville."

The teenage king looked at her for a moment with incomprehension before his expression hardened.

"She is being tortured? But why?"

"She was seen in the company of Monsieur d'Artagnan, an agent of Cardinal Mazarin, and helped him and Lady Lisbeth of Strathmore escape the soldiers guarding the Saint-Antoine Gate, but was herself captured after a hard, unequal fight."

"And where precisely is Lady Sommers right now, mademoiselle?" Asked Louis, now anxious and worried. He could not of course confess to her that he had quickly developed a crush for the tall girl from New France.

"In the torture chamber in the basement of the Bastille's central tower, Your Majesty. The men of Madame de Longueville are now torturing her with whips and red hot irons."

Louis stared for a moment at Anne Marie Louise before turning to face his fencing teacher.

"Monsieur de Saint Ange, give me my war sword and bring me my pistols, loaded!"

"But, Your Majesty, the guards of the Duke of Orléans will not let you leave the Palais-Royal like this." Objected with good reason the master fencer. Anne Marie Louise, now seeing a way to redeem her conscience, then spoke up.

"I can order my father's soldiers to let you out and escort you to the Bastille, Your Majesty."

"Please do that, my cousin!" Exclaimed the young king. "It will not be said that I let a young girl be tortured without doing nothing. My weapons, Monsieur de Saint Ange!"

As Anne Marie Louise left at a run to go talk to the guards, Louis armed himself quickly and ordered that his horse be brought to him. The young duchess came back to him as he was mounting his horse.

"The gates are opened, Your Majesty. May God protect you!" Louis saluted her with his large felt hat, then galloped towards the main entrance of the palace.

The commander of the palace guards was suddenly confronted with an impossible dilemma when the young King Louis XIV arrived on his horse at the main entrance barely a minute after he had gotten the order from the Duchess of Montpensier to let the King leave. His orders from the Duke of Orléans were clear: to prevent the royal family from fleeing Paris, while also insuring its security against possible rioters. This time, however, only the King wanted to go out, and this to go to the Bastille, a fortress solidly held by the forces of the Fronde. On the other hand, while he detested Cardinal Mazarin, like all the other members of the Fronde, the captain of the guards had only the greatest respect towards the young king and would never think of hurting him, or to let others hurt him. Stepping besides the King's horse, the captain saluted his monarch with his hat.

"Your Majesty, what is pushing you into wanting to go out like this, armed to the teeth?"

"I intend to stop an injustice, Captain des Ouches. Some people are cruelly torturing a young girl in the Bastille and I have the firm intention to go save her and put her under my protection."

Des Ouches did not remark on the irony of those words, as the King was himself under the guard of his men and was in reality ill placed to put anyone under his personal protection. However, the young Louis would reach the age of royal majority in barely four months and would then be legally able to govern by himself. Many things could happen in those four months and avoiding gaining the enmity of the young king seemed a good idea to the captain, who also knew too well the eminently versatile character of his master, Gaston d'Orléans. The resolute expression of his young king finally decided the old soldier, who looked at his lieutenant.

"Monsieur d'Arbouilles, get me my horse and have ten fully armed men mount up as well: I am escorting the King to the Bastille."

"Right away, monsieur!"

As the lieutenant ran away while shouting orders, Des Ouches looked back at Louis.

"May I ask on whose orders that girl is being tortured, Your Majesty?"

"She is being tormented on orders from the Duchess of Longueville, Captain Des Ouches. The girl in question is the tall English teenager who visited my mother a few times here."

"Ah, yes, I remember her, Your Majesty. She is in truth way too young to deserve such tortures, which are anyway officially illegal against children."

"My point exactly, Captain."

Less than five minutes later, Louis XIV left the palace at a gallop, closely screened by Captain Des Ouches and ten riders. Luck then smiled to the young king. Disgusted by Nancy's resistance and stubbornness, the Duchess of Longueville left at the same time the Bastille in her carriage but, wanting to visit someone in town, took a different road than that leading directly to the Palais-Royal. She thus never crossed path with the King's party, which arrived without incident at the main entrance of the fortress. Captain Des Ouches, riding level with Louis, shouted to the sentries posted at the lowered drawbridge of the main entrance to the Bastille.

"MAKE WAY FOR THE KING!"

The soldiers standing guard at the gate hesitated for a moment but let the King and his escort enter, coming to attention as he galloped inside the fortress. The commander of the Bastille hurried to come down in the inner courtyard and bowed low to Louis as the latter was dismounting from his horse.

"Your Majesty, your visit is rather unexpected."

"I know, monsieur. I am however in a hurry. Lead me at once to the basement of your dungeon."

Understanding now why the King had come, the noble, who took his orders from the Paris Parliament and not from the Duke of Longueville, didn't object and led Louis and the guards of the Duke of Orléans inside the central dungeon. The members of the Fronde justified their revolt by saying that they were opposed to the abuses committed by Cardinal Mazarin and Queen Anne. However, nobody had up to now attacked the young king himself, or had denied his authority, another factor that played in favor of

Louis that afternoon. As the small group were going down a steep spiral staircase and was about to get to the first basement level, a long scream of pain echoed along the stone walls, making Louis cringe. Grabbing and drawing out one of his two pistols, he patted the shoulder of the commander of the fortress.

“Hurry up, monsieur!”

“Uh, yes Your Majesty!”

The group soon could hear distinctly the repeated crack of a whip as they approached a massive wooden door. The commander of the Bastille pointed the door to Louis.

“This is the only door to the torture chamber, Your Majesty.”

Captain Des Ouches reacted at once, turning around and designating the door to his men.

“I want four men to guard this door. Accept orders only from me or the King. The rest, follow me!”

The old soldier then opened the door and rushed inside, sword and pistol in hand, followed closely by Louis. The captain and the young king were confronted at once inside by a sinister scene: four men surrounded a naked girl being stretched by chains suspending her above the ground, with two men whipping mercilessly the girl’s back and chest with bullwhips while a third man was turning progressively the mechanism that put tension on the chains. The fourth man was actually approaching the naked girl while holding a red hot iron in one hand, evidently ready to brand her. Blinded with instant fury on seeing this, Louis raised his pistol and shot from five paces away the man with the branding iron, killing him outright. The three other men snapped their heads around at the detonation of the shot and looked with wide eyes at the King and his escort.

“DON’T SHOOT! WE ARE IN THE SERVICE OF THE DUCHESS OF LONGUEVILLE.” Shouted the man turning the wheel of the stretching mechanism.

“Jackals like you have no place in my kingdom!” Replied Louis. “Release this girl at once!”

The order was given more weight by six soldiers pointing their muskets on the three surviving men of the Duchess of Longueville. The men then raised their arms without another word. Going to the stretching mechanism and brutally pushing aside Gérard, Captain Des Ouches released himself the tension drum. The cry of pain from Nancy when she crumpled to the ground finished convincing the old soldier that he had done the right thing today by escorting and backing his young king. On his part, Louis hurried to Nancy, kneeling besides her and caressing her face before kissing her gently.

"You are now safe, my friend. I will bring you back to the Palais-Royal, where you will be treated under my protection."

"Louis? What...what are you doing here? You can't risk your life like this for me. You are too precious to France." Said Nancy with difficulty while repressing her cries of pain. Des Ouches paled on hearing that exchange: the girl must be a lover of his young king. This story was decidedly becoming more intricate by the minute. Going to Nancy, he helped Louis undo the manacles that had held her and that had dug deep, bloody furrows around her wrists and ankles. Her back, chest and buttocks were covered with bloody whip marks and with at least a dozen deep burns from branding irons. The stretching she had endured had also probably damaged or even disjointed her articulations. Des Ouches evaluated that the girl would need weeks of care to recuperate, if she in fact didn't suffer lifelong sequels from this. As he expected, she proved incapable of standing by herself, sitting down on the floor with a cry of pain on her first try to get up. Des Ouches then pointed two of his soldiers.

"Grab her under her legs and armpits and carry her up to the inner courtyard. Be gentle about it."

Seeing the cape of one of the tormentors hooked to a nearby wall, Des Ouches went to grab it and used it to cover Nancy's nudity as his two men carefully picked her up. As Nancy was being carried out, the graying captain pointed the three surviving men of Madame de Longueville to the King.

"What do we do with these three pieces of shit, Your Majesty?"

"Shoot them!" Was the immediate order from Louis. On a sign from their captain, four soldiers raised their muskets and shot the three men from barely six paces away as the latter had their backs to a stone wall. Des Ouches then used his sword to give them the coup de grace before leaving with the King.

Nancy was gently hoisted on the back of Louis' horse, with the young king feeling pride and satisfaction fill him as Nancy put her arms around his waist in order to hold on to him: justice had been done, and this by his own hand. Still escorted by the soldiers of Des Ouches, he pushed his horse into a slow trot, in order not to make Nancy suffer more. The royal party arrived back at the Palais-Royal after a fifty minute trip. There, servants and maids helped take Nancy down from Louis' horse there and put her on a stretcher before carrying her towards the royal apartments. Before entering the palace himself, Louis face the captain of the guards and saluted him with his hat.

"Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your help, Monsieur Des Ouches. You rendered me a great service and I will remember that."

"It was a pleasure, Your Majesty."

Louis then walked inside, hurrying to catch up with the servants carrying Nancy. Now that the level of adrenaline in his blood was coming down, he started to worry about the possible reactions of his mother to his actions. In that he was soon proved right. Pacing nervously in front of the door to the royal apartments, Queen Anne watched the servants carrying Nancy pass by her, then stared hard at her son.

"Louis, what were you thinking? Why did you risk your life like this for a simple commoner?"

Louis, who normally bent to the authority of his mother, got irritated by her choice of words.

"A simple commoner, Mother? This girl just endured atrocious tortures in order to protect your secrets. It is people like her that I wish to have in my service once in power, people that are loyal, competent and honest, not nobles ready to betray the crown and rob it. I rendered justice as the King today and I am proud of it, Mother. The least you could do for this poor girl is to thank her for not betraying you under the tortures."

Anne of Austria, taken aback by his forceful reply, calmed down a bit and looked at him gravely.

"Are you sure that she didn't speak, Louis?"

"Mother, they would not have continued to torment her so cruelly if she had already talked. Now, with your permission, I will go make sure that Lady Sommers is properly cared for."

"Then go, my son, and pray that your little adventure will not bring unfortunate consequences to us."

Deeply disappointed by the reaction of his mother, Louis entered the royal apartments in hurried steps. A servant then led him to a small servant's room, where Nancy had been laid on top of a bed. Three women were already busy washing Nancy's wounds while she lay naked on her left side when Louis entered the room. The oldest of the women gave him a sad look.

"This poor girl was made to suffer most cruelly indeed, Your Majesty. She will probably need weeks of bed rest and care to recuperate. Hopefully, infection will not set in."

"I...I know Amerindian ointments that prevent infections." Cut in Nancy with a weak voice. "I don't want the so-called doctors around here to care for me: they would probably kill me with their treatments."

Louis hurried to the bed and sat by her side on it, speaking to her softly.

"My servants will do what you will tell them to do, my friend. Now, rest: you need it."

As Louis was about to get up from the bed, Nancy grabbed his right hand and pressed it while looking at him with moist eyes.

"Thank you, Your Majesty: you are a king as brave and kind as you are handsome."

That compliment, and the tone on which it was said, warmed Louis' heart and filled him with pride. He quickly kissed Nancy on the lips before getting on his feet and looking at the senior servant.

"Do what she will tell you and don't let in any court doctor without my prior consent. Also, if the Duchess of Longueville tries to see her, warn me at once."

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

His mind now less preoccupied, Louis left the room after a last longing look at Nancy, then went to the palace chapel with the intention to pray for her prompt recovery.

### **10:46 (Paris Time)**

**Friday, April 28, 1651**

**Palais-Royal, Paris**

Anne-Geneviève de Bourbon Condé charged down the corridors of the palace at a furious pace, accompanied by two of her surviving bodyguards. She had gone to the Bastille this morning, only to learn there that her four men had been executed on the King's order and that the savage girl, from which she had hoped to extract the names of the agents of Cardinal Mazarin in Paris, had been freed and then brought to the Palais-Royal. Going to the palace, she had been received coldly by Captain Des Ouches, who had not been impressed by the threats and invectives from the duchess. Anne-Geneviève had to contain her rage, not having enough of her soldiers in Paris to be able



to intimidate or relieve of duty Des Ouches. Her husband was presently in Normandy and was trying to gain more nobles to the cause of the Fronde, while her brother, the famous Great Condé, was leading his army in the field against the royal army, far from Paris. As for Gaston d'Orléans, whose soldiers seemed to have supported the King in this affair, he was in Orléans, taking care of his lands. To find herself so helpless was not something that Anne-Geneviève liked.

Seeing the young Duchess of Montpensier walking in the opposite direction from her in the hallway, Anne-Geneviève blocked her path, forcing her to stop. She didn't like the way the Great Mademoiselle averted her eyes while showing hostility towards her.

"Where is that damn savage girl that the King took out of the Bastille yesterday?"

"She is under guard in the royal apartments. I visited her this morning and what your men did to her was horrible. I am actually happy that Louis freed her."

"You young moron!" Spat Anne-Geneviève. "That girl holds information vital to the Fronde. She must talk!"

"Your men tried the worst tortures on her, without results. You will never make her talk. Even better, you will not be able to lay your hands on her now. You should go pray for the salvation of your soul, which is in great need of it. Goodbye, madame!"

The Duchess of Montpensier then walked away without another look at her, leaving Anne-Geneviève livid. Going up to the royal apartments with her two men, she was stopped at the door of the apartments by two soldiers of the Duke of Orléans, who crossed their muskets to block her passage.

"Nobody enters: order from the King!" Said firmly the senior soldier. Anne-Geneviève threw him a furious look.

"Do you know who I am, you idiot? I am the Duchess of Longueville and you will let me pass!"

"My orders come from the King and apply specifically to you and your men, Your Highness."

As Anne-Geneviève was about to explode, six more soldiers led by a young lieutenant came out of a nearby lounge facing the royal apartments, their muskets at the ready. The young officer, his left hand on the pommel of his sword, spoke to her in a barely polite tone.

"You will have to stay away from the royal apartments, Duchess: order from the King!"

"But, have you all become stupid? The King is supposed to be our prisoner here, not the other way around. The girl he freed yesterday is an agent of Cardinal Mazarin."

"My orders from the Duke of Orléans are to stop the royal family from leaving Paris, but also to protect the King and to treat him with all the respect due to him. Either you leave now or I will have to use force, madame."

"Enough! I understood: I will leave!" Said the Duchess of Longueville before turning around and walking away with her bodyguards while muttering between her teeth.

"Bunch of dummies!"

Returning to her carriage parked in the palace's courtyard, she climbed inside it with her two bodyguards and ordered the driver to roll towards her private residence, situated in another part of Paris. The carriage had been rolling for less than ten minutes when it abruptly stopped, nearly projecting the duchess out of her bench seat. Sticking out her head by the door with the intent of telling the driver what she thought about his driving, Anne-Geneviève then swallowed her hot words on seeing that a chariot was blocking the narrow street and that six big men holding either pistols or blunderbuss guns were now surrounding the carriage. A strong hand then grabbed the duchess by her collar, while the door of the carriage was opened from the outside. Anne-Geneviève was brutally pulled out and thrown on the pavement, while her two bodyguards were forced to raise their hands up, four pistols pointed at them. Shaking with fear, Anne-Geneviève de Bourbon Condé was pulled back on her feet by one of the attackers and then violently pushed against a wall. A young blond woman came forward at once and grabbed her by the front of her dress, coming nose to nose with her while speaking with a strong English accent.

"You will now pay for what you did to my friend, Frenchie!"

The blonde then hit her in the belly with her right fist, making the duchess bend over, her breath taken away. An uppercut returned her back up against the wall. Alternating insults in English and threats, the blonde administered to the terrified noble a solid beating that went on for a good minute. She finished the beating with a kick to the ribs that made Anne-Geneviève scream with pain.

"You get anywhere close to Nancy again and you will get even worse, you bitch!"

The six men and the blonde then disappeared in an instant into the side streets, leaving the duchess bleeding but still conscious on the pavement. Her two bodyguards, who had been disarmed by the assailants, then came a bit late to her rescue.

“Are you alright, madame?”

“No, I’m not alright, you idiot!” spat Anne-Geneviève with difficulty, her ribs and face making her suffer. “To be attacked by Englishmen here in Paris, in daylight: what a scandal!”

“They are gone now, madame. We will help you get back in your carriage.”

The duchess let out a cry of pain when the two men helped her up on her feet and she held her left side.

“AAAH! That damned Englishwoman must have broken one of my ribs.”

What her bodyguards didn’t dare tell her was that her face was also a mess, with blood from her lips and nose and one eye that was already starting to close. Without another word, they helped their mistress get back in the carriage, then ordered the driver to leave at once. That same night, the Duchess of Longueville left Paris without further ado, to go spend a few days on her lands in Normandy. She certainly was not ready to show up at the royal court and have to explain what had happened to her, thus becoming the laughing stock of the palace.

### **23:49 (Paris Time)**

**Wednesday, April 26, 1651**

**Royal apartments, Palais-Royal**

**Paris**

Louis woke up with a startle when a hand gently covered his mouth. Opening his eyes and with his heart racing, he took a few seconds to focus his vision and see in the darkness of his bedroom a naked female silhouette bent over him. A soft voice then whispered to him.

“It’s me, Nancy, Louis.”

“Nancy? Why are you up at this hour?”

“I wanted to say goodbye to you. I am now strong enough to walk and even to run and I don’t want to continue to make you and your mother run risks because of me.” On an impulse, the young Louis started caressing Nancy’s hair while staring into her eyes.

"I will miss you a lot, my friend. Where will you go?"

"I will go hide with friends, time to fully heal my wounds. I promise you that I will return to Paris for your next birthday, when you will be declared old enough to reign by yourself. I however wanted to leave you with a last proof of my friendship, Louis."

Nancy then slipped under the bed sheets and straddled the boy, offering him her breasts.

"I am all yours tonight, Your Majesty. Enjoy me as much as you want."

Louis didn't have to be told twice and made love with her passionately for more than an hour, with Nancy helping the uncommon libido of the young king by caressing and stimulating him while he recuperated between orgasms. She finally gave him a last kiss.

"Thank you again for saving me in the Bastille, Louis. I will have an eternal debt of gratitude towards you."

"It is I who owes you a debt of gratitude, Nancy, for your loyalty, courage and friendship. You will always be welcomed at my court."

Louis then observed her as she put on a night shirt and a cape, noting in the light from a nearby candle how her cruel wounds were quickly healing. He became alarmed when she opened a window and stepped on the outside ledge, but Nancy reassured him with a gesture of the hand.

"Don't worry, Louis. I am able to climb down the wall. Tell your mother that Lady Lisbeth will continue to serve as an intermediary between her and d'Artagnan while I recover. I will see you back in September, Louis."

"I will be awaiting you, my friend." Replied the young king, who rose from his bed and went to the window to watch her go down. To his relief, she got to the ground without problems and, nearly invisible in the night with her dark brown cape, disappeared at a run inside a nearby street.

"Be careful, Nancy." Whispered Louis before returning to his bed. He went to sleep with a smile on his face as he dreamed about his last moments with her.

**18:23 (Paris time)**

**Saturday, May 6, 1651**

**Inn of Le Lion Noir**

**Paris**

Having just arrived back from Germany, d'Artagnan nearly ran inside the inn once a stable boy had taken custody of his horse. Seeing Lady Lisbeth of Strathmore inside the main hall, he went to her table, where she was having supper, and sat facing her, speaking in a low but urgent voice.

"Where is Nancy, Lady Lisbeth?"

The English aristocrat gave him a reassuring smile and showed him the plates of food on the table.

"Don't worry about her, Monsieur de Castelmore: she went through some difficult and painful moments but she is now safe. Please serve yourself: you must be famished from your long trip."

Recognizing that his stomach was indeed empty, Charles grabbed a chicken leg and started to devour it while still looking at Lisbeth.

"Tell me what happened after when we went out by the Saint-Antoine Gate, after you peeled off towards another gate, milady."

"To make a long story short, Nancy was captured after covering our escape and was then brought to the Bastille. There, the Duchess of Longueville had her tortured for hours, but without being able to break her."

Charles felt a mix of horror and rage on hearing that. Lisbeth continued before he could say something.

"Young King Louis, God bless him, then came to Nancy's rescue once informed by the Duchess of Montpensier of what was happening in the Bastille. The King took Nancy out of the Bastille with the support of Captain Des Ouches and his men and then brought her to the Palais-Royal to have her cared for. Nancy left discreetly the palace five days later and is now recuperating in a secret safe house."

"The King himself saved Nancy?" Said Charles, incredulous. "But, Queen Anne would never let him take such risks."

"Let's say that the Queen learned of the rescue only after Nancy arrived with Louis at the palace. The important thing here is that Nancy is now safe and will be able to recover, even though she will be left with some scars."

"Could I see her?"

Lisbeth shook her head slowly, her expression grave.

"I cannot risk compromising her hiding place, Monsieur de Castelmore. She however left me a letter for you."

Eagerly taking the letter produced by Lisbeth and opening it, Charles read it with growing emotion. Nancy, on top of reassuring him about herself, was declaring again her love for him and was promising to see him again in Paris at the end of August, when she was going to take again a room at the Inn of Le Lion Noir. Charles was feeling a bit better as he slipped the precious letter inside his vest.

“August! The months till then will be long months indeed for me. May God help her.”

## **10:02 (Paris Time)**

**Friday, June 30, 1651**

### **Mathieu Le Nain’s painting shop, Paris**

Mathieu Le Nain weighed with satisfaction the heavy purse just given to him by Lady Lisbeth of Strathmore as four big men hired by her and supervised by young Nancy were nailing shut the crates containing the two finished portraits.

“It was a true pleasure dealing with you and your young friend, milady. Don’t hesitate to come back whenever you feel like it.”

“The pleasure was mine, Monsieur Le Nain. You truly deserve the title of master painter. Be assured that I will recommend you to my friends.”

Le Nain acknowledged the compliment with a smile and a bow.

“You are too kind, milady. I wish you a safe trip home.”

Nancy got close to Mike Crawford, who was finishing with James Parker to close the crate containing her nude portrait, which Le Nain had finally agreed to sign. Sean Brady and Otto Skorzeni had already started bringing out Elizabeth’s portrait to the cart waiting outside, where Heinrik Braun was at the reins.

“I will let you decide where to hang it, Mike.” She whispered in his ear. “Just make sure that it is on public display.”

Mike smiled tenderly at her as he lifted his end of the crate.

“With the way you fulfilled your mission here, you can ask about anything from me. We will hang it at the Time Club, where everybody will be able to admire it. After that, we will have those scars of yours removed as much as possible. Unfortunately, now that your wounds had time to heal naturally, some traces of them will be left permanently.”

“That’s alright: I can live with them. I could not risk having these scars disappear as if by magic. That would have raised too many questions at the court. Thank you for convincing Farah to let me visit from time to time d’Artagnan in this time period.”

Mike then stared at her gravely.

“Nancy, Farah didn’t need much convincing to agree with your request: she cried like a fountain when she saw the film of your love declaration to d’Artagnan. Hell, many of the girls in the Time Patrol are jealous of you and think d’Artagnan to be gorgeous. As long as you never tell Charles who you really are, we all can live with a romance through time. Where will you spend your maternity leave?”

“In Paris ‘B’. I want my child to have French citizenship. D’Artagnan would have it no other way.”

Mike nodded to that.

“I certainly can understand his point of view. The child of d’Artagnan and of Joan of Arc: that should get the French medias excited.”

He and Parker then left with the crate. Nancy went to join Elizabeth near Le Nain, smiling at the latter.

“Thank you again for accepting to sign my portrait, Monsieur Le Nain: it will be a true honor to possess such a work of art.”

“Your pleasure is mine, mademoiselle.” Replied the painter, bowing again. He watched both young women leave, then firmly tied the purse full of gold coins to his belt with a content smile. If only he could get two customers like these every six months. Having to paint a nude of that magnificent tall teenager had also been a nice bonus.

## **09:50 (Paris Time)**

**Thursday, March 5, 1953 ‘B’**

**Hospice de la Maternité**

**Boulevard de Port-Royal, Paris**

Nancy ‘B’, dressed in a wool skirt and sweeter, only needed to walk in the reception lobby of the Hospice de la Maternité, situated on the site of the old Abbey of Port-Royal, to understand that her pregnancy was going to be public news. All the waiting patients and the staff present gawked at her at once, with some whispering excitedly between them while glancing at her. Sometimes the celebrity of her timeline twin, whose death was still not known in this timeline, could be a real pain. Ignoring the

stares, Nancy made her way to the reception desk, where a young receptionist sat. The woman gave her a big smile as she leaned on the counter.

“It is truly an honor to receive your visit, Overseer. What may we do for you?”

“I am sorry to disappoint you, miss, but I am not the Overseer of Palestine. I am just her timeline twin. As you can see, I am over five months pregnant and would like to be consulted by one of your doctors.”

“A timeline twin?” Said the nurse, confused. Nancy explained herself patiently.

“Yes! Nancy Laplante ‘A’, the Overseer of Palestine, was born in the future of timeline ‘A’. I was born in the future of this timeline. My name is Nancy Laplante ‘B’. Do you have a doctor that still takes new patients?”

“Uh, yes, miss, we do. One moment, please.”

The nurse, a bit embarrassed, grabbed her telephone and talked briefly with someone before putting it down and looking back at Nancy.

“If you could take a seat, Miss Laplante, Doctor Marsant will come for you in a few minutes.”

“Thank you, miss.”

Nancy went to one of the chairs of the reception lounge that were empty and grabbed a used fashion magazine on a low table before sitting. She had to wait less than ten minutes before a man in his early forties wearing a white overcoat and a well used suit came to her and shook her hand.

“Miss Laplante? I am Doctor Jacques Marsant. You want to register with our clinic?”

“That’s correct, doctor. The Time Patrol does have its own medical facilities but I prefer for sentimental reasons to have my baby here in Paris. I can tell you more once in your office.”

Taking the hint at once, Marsant escorted her without further ado to his small office, which connected with an examination/treatment room. Once both of them had sat in Marsant’s office, Nancy took a large envelope from her leather carrying bag and gave it to Marsant.

“My doctor with the Time Patrol is Doctor Farah Tolkonen. Here are copies of her preliminary examinations and medical scans on me. You can keep them for your files.”

Marsant opened the envelope and extracted a file from it, examining it for a minute or so before looking back at her.



“May I ask what was the reason for not having your baby at a Time Patrol facility, Miss Laplante?”

“Basically, I want my baby to have French citizenship, doctor. It would mean a lot to me and the father, who was a French citizen.”

“Was? Is he dead, miss?”

“Yes...and no. He is from the year 1651, the year I conceived my baby with him in Paris.”

Interest showed at once on Marsant’s face, who grabbed a pen and a medical form at once.

“This certainly sounds like a fascinating maternity case, miss. First, may I have your date and place of birth?”

“Certainly! I was born on June 13, 1982 ‘B’, in Montréal, Canada, and am now fourteen. My name is Nancy Laplante ‘B’. Before you ask, I could not marry the father of my child because of the possible historical implications. He is however more than ready to recognize the child as his. Before we go further, I must ask you to keep all this information confidential, at least until the birth of my child.”

“Do not worry, miss: we take our patients’ confidentiality very seriously. Could I have the approximate date of conception of your child?”

“Late April of 1651. Five months and a half have elapsed since then.”

“So, you should give birth around the end of June or early July of this year...if you don’t travel in time until then.”

“I actually am working at the Time Patrol liaison office at Le Bourget and do not plan to travel in time from now until after I give birth, doctor.”

“Excellent! I have to say that juggling past, present and future dates like this is a bit confusing to me. Uh, could I have the name of the father, just for the sake of legality?”

Nancy smiled as she felt the contained excitement of the French doctor: he probably expected some famous historical name in view of her status as agent of the Time Patrol. In this he was not going to be disappointed.

“Certainly, doctor. His name is Charles Ogier de Batz de Castelmore, born in 1613.”

“D’Artagnan, the musketeer?” Asked Marsant, his voice nearly strangled by surprise. Nancy grinned at his reaction.

“That is correct, doctor. This of course has to stay confidential: I have no wish to see an army of reporters descend on this clinic for my child’s birth.”

“Neither do I, miss.” Replied Marsant, shaking his head. Preventing all of his staff from leaking this explosive news to the medias was going to be a near impossible task. If it ever came out in the open, he could then expect his clinic to be submerged by a wave of journalists and press photographers.

### **21:13 (Paris Time)**

**Friday, June 26, 1953 ‘B’**

**Hospice de la Maternité**

**Boulevard de Port-Royal, Paris**

“COULD YOU PLEASE MAKE SILENCE? SILENCE, I SAID!”

The shouted words from Doctor Marsant finally quieted down enough the mass of reporters, television crews and photographers camped in the lobby of the clinic to let Marsant speak in a normal voice.

“I shall remind you all that this is a medical clinic and that silence is required here. Do not force me to have the police clear you out. Now, I have an announcement to make. Miss Nancy Laplante ‘B’ has given birth to a healthy baby boy at eighteen twenty, without the need for a cesarean section. The baby weighs three kilos and four hundred grams, or about seven and a half pounds for the British and Americans here.”

“WHY WAIT THREE HOURS BEFORE TELLING US ABOUT THE BIRTH?” Shouted at once a reporter from the back of the crowd, eliciting a concert of approving grunts.

“That was the wish of Miss Laplante, so that she could have some time to recuperate and prepare for this.”

Marsant then signaled a nurse to open the double doors leading inside the clinic. Preceded by a good dozen male orderlies who formed a protective line between her and the reporters, Nancy was then wheeled out on a wheelchair, a baby in her arms. Dozens of flashbulbs exploded at once, forcing Nancy to protect the eyes of her son with one hand. The nurse pushing her wheelchair stopped it four paces from the line of reporters and photographers. Nancy, looking tired but happy, then raised one hand to request silence.

“Gentlemen, I will now make a short statement, if you will stop shouting questions like this...Thank you! First, I wish to thank the staff of the Hospice de la Maternité, for their kind, professional care of me and my baby. Next, I wish to present my son, Charles d’Artagnan.”

More flashbulbs erupted, while cameramen jostled for better positions as Nancy presented to the crowd the newborn in her arms. After a few seconds of pausing for the cameras she cradled back her son and spoke up.

“I am now on maternity leave from the Time Patrol and will stay until tomorrow in this clinic, then will have my son registered as a dual citizen of France and of the Time Patrol. The ones here who did their history homework may know that d’Artagnan officially married the Baroness of Sainte-Croix, Charlotte-Anne de Chanlecy, on April 3<sup>rd</sup> of 1659, to officially separate from her in 1665 after having two sons from that marriage. He never remarried afterwards and eventually died in combat on June 25<sup>th</sup> of 1673 in front of the walls of Maestricht, at the age of sixty. I did not marry him and couldn’t, for obvious historical reasons, but we love each other in secret. I intend soon to go back in time and present to him his son, which we conceived together in Paris in 1651. We will then see each other at intervals, as history permits. Before you ask, no, d’Artagnan doesn’t know about the future, as I used a cover story to see him.”

“MISS LAPLANTE,” shouted a reporter, “WHAT KIND OF COVER STORY DID YOU USE IN 1651?”

“For him and other people of that time I am an English girl of low nobility visiting occasionally the widowed queen of England, who lived in exile in Paris during the stay in power in England of Oliver Cromwell, who had King Charles The First decapitated in 1649.”

“DID YOU MEET MANY OF THE IMPORTANT CHARACTERS OF THAT TIME, MISS LAPLANTE?”

“I effectively met most of them, including King Louis The Fourteenth, Queen Anne of Austria and the Great Mademoiselle. The Time Patrol is now in the process of preparing both a printed and a video documentary on the history of the Fronde insurrection, which went on from 1648 to 1653 in France.”

“WILL WE BE ABLE TO SEE D’ARTAGNAN IN THAT DOCUMENTARY, MISS?”

“Many times!” Replied proudly Nancy. “He was after all a key messenger between Cardinal Mazarin and Queen Anne. And yes, you may see me by his side a few times in that documentary.”

“MISS, WHY DID YOU HAVE A CHILD FROM D’ARTAGNAN? WASN’T THAT RISKY FOR THE INTEGRITY OF HISTORY?”

Nancy gave the reporter who had shouted that question a dark look.

“I had a child from him because we fell in love with each other. The Time Patrol may have strict rules about the preservation of history but it also understands that its agents have human feelings. The way we had our child didn’t put history at risk and I certainly didn’t have a son from d’Artagnan just to brag about it. Now, if you will excuse me, I need to give some peace to my son.”

The nurse pushing her wheelchair then turned her around and returned her inside the clinic as the crowd of reporters broke away to run to the nearest telephones.

## **CHAPTER 5 – TASK FORCE ISRAEL**

**00:44 (Jerusalem Time)**

**Sunday, March 15, 1953 'C'**

**Command bridge of the USS TULAGI (LPDH 166)**

**Port of Haifa, Palestine**

Captain (Navy) Thomas Barry nodded his head with satisfaction when he saw that all the ones he wanted to be present for his briefing were now assembled around the tactical map display of his landing ship. He smiled in particular to a small, fat man wearing informal civilian clothes.

"We just got the word from our fleet headquarters in Naples, Mister Shomron: the planes of our force's air component will leave Bandar Abbas, in Iran, at dawn. Our planes arrived in Iran yesterday, after a long trip from Vietnam and around the southern tip of India. It is now time for us to do our part."

Barry then pointed a U.S. Air Force officer to the Jewish Agency representative.

"Major Barney Winslow will be counting on your familiarity with the air base at Ramat David to quickly put it back in operation."

Eli Shomron smiled and nodded his head, excited by this historic moment, only two days after the departure of the last British units from Palestine and the official proclamation of the new state of Israel.

"You will find that Ramat David is still in a very good state, Major Winslow. The British actually kept their word and left all of its installations and buildings intact. The base is presently being defended by our Haganah<sup>8</sup> combatants, who prevented any acts of sabotage by local Arabs."

"Just make sure that your people won't take the Marines of Lieutenant Colonel Tucker for Arabs and won't shoot at them." Remarked Captain Barry.

"They won't, Captain. Our combatants have received very strict orders to that effect."

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<sup>8</sup> Haganah : the initial name for the regular army of Israel.

“Excellent! What is happening with those three Soviet cargo ships filled with refugees and docked in this port? I would not want to see the unloading of these people get in the way of our own unloading.”

Shomron lowered his head in sadness as he thought about all those Soviet Jews packed aboard the three ships that had arrived from Sevastopol two days ago. The arrival of these 4,300 unfortunate souls had been a very bad surprise for David Ben-Gurion and his Jewish Agency. Already facing the prospect of a merciless war with the neighboring Arab states, the Jews of Palestine only had very limited material resources at their disposal and the arrival of so many new refugees was straining badly the capacities of the Jewish Agency. Worst, more Soviet ships packed with so-called immigrants were due to arrive in Haifa in the coming days. It was however politically impossible to Ben-Gurion to refuse those Soviet ‘immigrants’.

“Our combatants will prevent those refugees from coming ashore until your flotilla is fully unloaded, Captain Barry. This situation cannot go on for too long, however: the conditions aboard those Soviet ships are poor and they will soon be out of food and water. My government is truly anxious to be able to relocate these people as soon as possible on firm ground.”

“Our unloading should take two days at the most, Mister Shomron. Colonel Tucker, Major Winslow, start the unloading and get to Ramat David as quickly as you can.”

That order triggered a hurricane of activity on and around the five ships of the American amphibious flotilla docked in the port of Haifa. Further off at sea, the carrier USS LAKE CHAMPLAIN soon launched the first helicopters of the Marine Air Group 26, or MAG-26, while army helicopters that had been transported on the amphibious ship USS EMPRESS AUGUSTA also started to take off from its deck, loaded with paratroopers from the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. The side loading ramps of the USS TULAGI and USS EMPRESS AUGUSTA lowered to the quays and started letting out the tanks and armored amphibians of a reinforced battalion of Marines, along with army light tanks and artillery guns and an heteroclite fleet of air force ground support vehicles and equipment. Behind the USS TULAGI, the ammunition ship USS VESUVIUS and the tanker ship USS ASHTABULA, along with the general cargo transport USS LINCOLN, also started unloading their cargo on heavy trucks and rail flat cars waiting on the quays. One of the main reasons why the Ramat David airbase had been chosen for this

deployment was its proximity to the port of Haifa and the fact that it was linked to it by one of the few rail lines that existed in Palestine, factors that would greatly facilitate its regular resupply in fuel and ammunition. Less than one hour after the start of the unloading, the first American ground convoy was leaving the quays for Ramat David.

### **03:22 (Jerusalem Time)**

#### **Main gate of Ramat David airbase**

#### **Galilee, Northern Palestine**

Even while knowing that a column of American heavy vehicles was due to show up to reoccupy and reopen the ex-British airbase, Dan Mashad and his six fighters guarding the main gate nearly panicked when they heard the track noise and deep engine rumble of tanks approaching. Jumping on his field telephone, Dan turned frantically the handle of the telephone and nearly shouted in the receiver when someone picked up the call at the other end.

“We have tanks coming at us at the main gate! What do we do?”

“Calm down, Dan!” Replied the voice of his commander, Moshe Eshkol. “Mister Shomron is due in with a column of American troops and vehicles. Don’t shoot and just make sure that you identify Eli Shomron in the column before opening the gate.”

“But, what if these are Arab tanks approaching?”

“Then you die.” Answered curtly the battalion commander before cutting the call. Dan, not reassured much by his commander’s words, put down the telephone receiver and looked at his nervous fighters.

“Moshe says that these tanks must be American and that we are to hold our fire. Take position in your posts just in case, though.”

“The good that this will do to us.” Mumbled Masha Lewinski, a pretty brunette who also was one hard-headed young woman and an experienced fighter from the early days of the Haganah. Holding on to her STEN submachine gun, she returned to her sandbagged position with her partner, a young man barely out of his teens. Ze’v Abramovich gave her a quick nervous glance while taking the safety off his Lee Enfield .303 bolt-action rifle.

“If these are Arab tanks, how do we deal with them, Masha? We have no antitank weapons.”

“We try to plug any Arab sticking his head out of a hatch and hope for the best, Ze’v. You better put your safety back on: you make me nervous the way you keep your index on the trigger.”

“Uh, right!” Said the young man in a subdued voice before obeying Masha, who was a much more experienced fighter than he was. They wore a mix of tan or khaki short-sleeved shirts and shorts with no formal rank insignias, the just formed Israeli Defense Force being still in its infancy and being short of everything but courage and determination.

The first approaching vehicle soon emerged from the night’s darkness and turned out to be some kind of huge tracked armored vehicle with a boat-like bow and a small machine gun turret on top of it. An intimidating tank with a big gun was following it from up close, with more big shapes behind it. Dan Mashad shouted at his fighters as the first vehicle slowed down.

“HOLD YOUR FIRE UNLESS I SAY OTHERWISE! KEEP THE SAFETIES ON YOUR WEAPONS!”

None too reassured, Dan then got out of his sandbagged position and stood in the middle of the road, in front of the airbase’s lowered gate barrier. The tracked vehicle stopped five meters short of him, with the following vehicles also stopping. A man in civilian clothes then climbed out of the vehicle from a rear door and came to Dan at a calm pace, papers in one hand.

“Shalom! I’m Eli Shomron. These are the American troops and equipment that will take over this airbase from us. Here are my orders, signed by Ben-Gurion himself.” Using his flashlight, Dan studied carefully the man’s papers and found them to be in order. He then gave back the papers to Shomron.

“Are American planes going to use this airbase, Mister Shomron?”

“There certainly will be: they should arrive sometimes today. In the meantime, you are to obey these American soldiers. That comes directly from Ben-Gurion.”

Dan nodded, then looked back and made a sign to the fighter manning the gate barrier as Shomron returned inside his vehicle.

“Raise the gate, Shimon!”

Dan stood by the side of the road and watched on, both awed and fascinated, as the American column rolled inside the base. He counted a total of sixteen of the boat-like armored vehicles, plus eighteen tanks, six huge towed field artillery guns and eight



tracked self-propelled anti-aircraft guns, followed by nearly 200 various types of vehicles from big tanker trucks to airport aircraft tractors towing auxiliary power units and jet engine startup units. There were even two airport mobile staircase units and four truck-mounted radar units of varying size and design. Four of the tanks and four tracked carriers detached themselves from the column once inside the perimeter fence and fanned out, taking defensive positions on both sides of the gate. Over a hundred heavily armed soldiers then ran out of the tracked carriers and started at once to dig defensive trenches. One American, with a radio operator at his back, walked quickly to Dan, who eyed him carefully as he approached. The big American wore a steel helmet and what looked like a sort of bulky armored vest covered with cargo pockets. He was also armed with a compact type of assault rifle and a pistol.

“Do you speak English, mister?” Asked the American to Dan while still three paces away.

“Yes, I do.”

“Good!” Said the American, stopping one pace from Dan and offering his hand, which Dan shook. “I’m Captain John Cavanaugh, Baker Company of the Fourth Marine Amphibious Unit. My company will help you guard this side of the airbase.”

“And I’m Dan Mashad, squad leader from the Hanita Battalion. Welcome to Ramat David Airbase.”

“Thanks!” Said Cavanaugh, who then looked around at the lit buildings on the airbase. “This airbase seems to be still in good shape, isn’t it?”

“It is! The British built it in 1942 and handed it to us intact but empty two weeks ago as part of the turnover accord dictated by the United Nations partition plan. There are three long runways, along with half a dozen large hangars and a number of other buildings. We unfortunately don’t have at present any aircraft here. Most of the few aircraft we have are in Ekron Airbase, near Ashdod.”

“I see! This place will soon be alive with jet aircraft from Da Nang, though. Then, the Arab air forces around will have to stay away or suffer the consequences.”

“That will be most welcome indeed.” Replied Dan, meaning it, as a few of his fighters got out of their positions and approached him and Cavanaugh. “The Arabs have been bombing with impunity Haifa, Tel Aviv and other Jewish towns for the last two days, causing many casualties. The few prop-driven fighter aircraft we have can’t catch up with the jet aircraft the British sold to the Egyptians and Jordanians.”

Cavanaugh nodded at that while eyeing with interest Masha Lewinski, who stood firmly a few meters away with her submachine gun. He then spoke in a low voice to Dan.

“Do you have many female soldiers in your army, Mister Mashad?”

“Quite a few, out of necessity. We are fighting for our survival, Captain. Don’t worry about Masha’s abilities as a fighter: she has been fighting for over fifteen years now, since she was a teenager.”

“We ourselves have quite a few fighting women in our Air Force, but none yet in the Marine Corps, except as support personnel.”

“And how many jet fighter aircraft are coming?” Asked Dan, feeling elated.

“A whole squadron of the best fighters in the world, plus a few other jet aircraft squadrons.” Replied proudly Cavanaugh. “You will probably be interested to know that all of the fighter pilots that are coming are women.”

That attracted a big grin on the face of Masha Lewinski, a convinced feminist and a closet bisexual woman.

“Yes! I can’t wait to meet them, Captain.”

### **08:11 (Jerusalem Time)**

#### **British nuclear cruiser HMS TIGER**

#### **On patrol fifty kilometers off Tel Aviv**

#### **Mediterranean**

“Commander, we are detecting a new radar signal coming from the North.”

The operations officer of the nuclear cruiser HMS TIGER, Commander Edward Bisley, hurried to the electronic warfare station of the command center and studied for a moment the newly detected signal.

“I don’t recognize those parameters. What type of radar is this?”

“Unknown type, Commander.” Answered the electronic warfare officer, or EWO, a young lieutenant. “However, the signal is not fixed, which indicates some sort of airborne radar. It is also very powerful and sophisticated. In my opinion, this could mark the approach of that American air wing that we have been expecting since yesterday, sir.”

“I believe that you are right, Lieutenant.” Said Bisley, remembering the message received yesterday from the British headquarters in India, signaling the transit of a large group of American aircraft round the southern tip of India. The New Delhi headquarters

had also warned that the Americans had waved away in a very impolite manner the British fighter patrol sent to identify them. The American planes must have transited via Iran, which presently had rather tense relations with Great Britain, then via Turkey. The arrival of those planes was going to be a very bad piece of news for the Arab air forces attacking the Jewish holdings in Palestine. Bisley then looked at the air watch officer.

"Cummings, what do you have over Palestine at this moment?"

"I have a substantial Egyptian air raid package on its way to Tel Aviv, sir, plus another formation in the process of taking off from Alexandria."

"Well, if those approaching Americans get here in time to intercept them, those Egyptians are going to get clobbered. Electronic Warfare Officer, do you have something else apart from that airborne radar coming from the North?"

"I have a few rare radio conversations from the same direction, Commander, but they are all encrypted and I can't break their code."

That made Bisley pause for a second. Great Britain bragged about possessing the most advanced technology in the World, especially in the military domain. The three last months had however shown that, at least in the aeronautical domain, the Americans had more than caught up to British technology. Now, this!

"Very well! Warn me the moment that you have something new."

"Yes sir!"

Going to a small compartment adjacent to the command center of the cruiser that was used as a resting lounge, Bisley sat down with a sigh of relief and had the duty steward serve him a cup of tea. The hours spent standing in the command center could be long and tiring, even if nothing was happening. Ten minutes later, as he was about to return in the command center, a sailor went to him urgently.

"Sir, two aircraft are approaching from the North at an impossible speed."

Leaving his cup behind, Bisley hurried to the radar consoles to check by himself the air surveillance screen from behind its operator. His jaw dropped when he saw at what speed two dots were approaching Tel Aviv and the Egyptian planes that were about to bomb the city.

"Dear God! How fast are these planes, Lieutenant?"

"They are now at 2,400 miles per hour and still accelerating, sir." Said in a tense voice the young officer, making heads turn around him. going "I just checked twice their speed. These two planes will definitely be able to intercept the Egyptians before the

latter can drop their bombs. I know of only one plane possibly capable of such speeds, sir: the American F-83.”

“Agreed!” Said Bisley, still shaken up, before looking at the EWO. “Lieutenant Rose, what do you have now on your detectors?”

“I still have the initial airborne radar from the North, plus two new radar signals. I however can’t manage to fix the position of those new signals, sir.”

“If they are going at 2,400 miles per hour, then no wonder that you can’t get a fix on them.”

Bisley then grabbed a telephone and called the bridge.

“Bridge? This is the operations officer: pass me the Captain at once.”

There was a delay of a few seconds before the voice of the captain of the cruiser came on line.

“Captain Maitland here! What do you have for me, Mister Bisley?”

“Captain, we just detected two probable American planes coming from the North and rushing towards Tel Aviv at a speed of 2,400 miles per hour. It seems that they intend to intercept an Egyptian air formation about to bomb the city.”

“Did you say 2,400 miles per hour? But, our new LIGHTNING interceptor can’t do better than 1,300 miles per hour.”

“Captain, those American planes probably are F-83 interceptors coming from Vietnam. The Egyptians are thus about to face the elite of the American fighters. Should we intervene, sir?”

“No! Simply warn the Egyptians about those American planes and prepare a report to the Admiralty, with in particular the top speed attained by these F-83s. I am coming down to the command center.”

“Understood, sir.”

Bisley put down the telephone receiver, then grabbed a message pad to start writing a short message. He was soon interrupted by a shouted warning from his radar officer.

“SIR, THE TWO AMERICAN PLANES ARE NOW BRUTALLY SLOWING DOWN AFTER ATTAINING SPEEDS OF 2,600 MILES PER HOUR... I HAVE MISSILE LAUNCHES FROM THE AMERICAN PLANES AT THE EGYPTIANS FROM A DISTANCE OF THIRTEEN MILES. THEY FIRED FROM THE FRONTAL ARC, THUS THOSE MISSILES MUST BE RADAR-GUIDED.”

“Damn! Those Americans keep surprising us today.” Grumbled Bisley to himself. The radar officer soon spoke again.

"THE TWO MISSILES HAVE HIT THEIR TARGETS, SIR!"

"Two hits from thirteen miles away? Hell, the R.A.F. will choke on that."

"Two more missiles have just been launched, sir... HITS! Those two missiles also went true. The Egyptians are now turning around and fleeing back to Egyptian airspace, but the Americans are still in pursuit."

Captivated by the combat's blow to blow description by the radar officer, Bisley took some time to write his message to the Admiralty and another message for the Egyptian Air Force headquarters. The eight Egyptian jet aircraft that had been heading for Tel Aviv were all shot down by the time his draft messages were completed and ready for the Captain's signature. A new report from the radar officer made Bisley's skin crawl just as Captain Maitland was entering the command center.

"Sir, eight more F-83s just appeared on my screens, doing over Mach 3: they are heading for the Egyptian jets now flying towards Beersheba, in the Negev Desert."

"Christ! Those Egyptians are about to eat their socks."

"What is happening, Mister Bisley?" Asked Maitland, his tone showing his concern as he stopped besides his operations officer. Bisley's answer was preempted by yet another report from the radar officer.

"Salvo of eight American air-to-air missiles on the way from a distance of twelve miles!... The missiles have broken through Mach 3... Multiple hits! Seven out of eight missiles have hit their targets... The Egyptian survivors are now turning around, with the American in pursuit, sir."

Maitland's eyes opened wide at those reports.

"That would make a total of eleven hits out of twelve missiles fired. Those American missiles are pure murder. After such a beating, the Egyptians will refuse to return to Palestinian airspace."

"I would tend to agree with you, sir." Said Bisley before hesitating and lowering his voice. "If the Americans show the same caliber of combat performance on the ground, then our strategic plans concerning Palestine could very well fizzle out, sir. We could be forced to intervene ourselves to support the Arabs, Captain."

Maitland made a grimace at that last suggestion.

"I would let the imperial general staff decide about that option, Mister Bisley. To directly fight the Americans or even to act in support of Arab attacks against them would not be to my taste at all. Our material military support to the Arabs is already quite

unpopular at the United Nations...and in Washington. If we do anything in direct combat support of the Arabs, it will be solely on London's orders."

"Uh, yes Captain!"

### **08:54 (Jerusalem Time)**

#### **Ramat David airbase**

#### **Galilee, Palestine**

Eli Shomron, standing besides Major Moshe Eshkol on the open observation gallery of the base's control tower, watched with total fascination the arrival of the American air armada in Ramat David. A total of 26 big four-engine transport aircraft, ten of them jet aircraft, had just landed one by one on one of the runways of the base, to then roll towards the main tarmac and let out hundreds of persons and dozens of vehicles. The heavy duty forklifts that had come from the USS EMPRESS AUGUSTA were now hard at work, entering the big C-142 and C-152 transports by their rear cargo ramps and coming out with pallets loaded with various equipments and supplies. Those pallets were then put down on top of flatbed trucks waiting in long files to carry those supplies to the various storage sites of the base. A fleet of big tanker trucks were also circulating around the cargo planes, refueling them as a long column of jeeps and armored cars mounting machine guns that had rolled out of the transports was forming up on the tarmac.. Shomron returned his eyes towards the main runway as another thirteen aircraft started landing. Twelve of them looked like some types of cargo planes, while the last one was a smaller, much sleeker-looking aircraft. When that smaller transport aircraft stopped on a designated spot of the tarmac and started letting out a dozen passengers, the tiny size of one of those passengers attracted the attention of Major Eshkol.

"Wait! Is that a child I see coming out of that plane, Eli?"

A glance from the Jewish Agency representative was enough to confirm Eshkol's sighting.

"Uh, effectively. This is weird! Who would bring a child into a war zone? The presence of so many women in this American force is already surprising. We will have to ask General Dows about this."

Continuing to watch the arrival of American planes, the two Jews finally saw twenty big, intimidating-looking jet fighter-bombers land last. The American major in charge of the

base installations then joined them and pointed one of the F-83s now rolling on the taxiways towards the now crowded main tarmac.

“Gentlemen, Major General Dows has now landed. If you may follow me.”

Going down via the internal staircase of the control tower, the trio then went to Eshkol’s jeep, which was parked at the foot of the tower, with an Israeli woman at the wheel. Major Winslow sat in his own jeep, also parked beside the tower, with Eshkol pointing the American jeep to his driver.

“Follow that jeep, Deborah.”

“Got it, Moshe.” Replied the driver in the informal manner common between the combatants of the Haganah, irrespective of rank. Starting her jeep, the woman followed Winslow’s jeep to the southern tarmac, towards which the first F-83s were approaching via the taxiways. To the surprise of Eshkol and Shomron, another American jeep was already waiting there, a tiny little girl sitting in it with an female soldier and with a young woman dressed in an Arabic robe. Stepping out of his jeep, Eshkol went to that jeep and smiled to the cute Asian little girl, speaking to her in English.

“Hello! You came from Vietnam with the planes?”

The child nodded her head and pointed the last F-83 in the file of approaching fighter-bombers and spoke in an hesitant English.

“My mother...in last plane.”

“Her adoptive mother is Major General Ingrid Dows.” Added in Hebrew the young woman in Arabic robe. “I am Sarah Ur, Hien’s nanny.” Eshkol shook hands with her, secretly admiring her remarkable beauty.

“And I’m Major Moshe Eshkol, Commander of the Hanita Battalion. This is Mister Eli Shomron, representative of the Jewish Agency.”

“Pleased to meet you, Miss Ur.” Said Shomron, also shaking the hand of the teenager. “You have a decidedly biblical sounding name, miss.”

“I was born in Ur, in Irak, Mister Shomron. However, my parents went early to live in Germany, then in France, before moving to Lebanon and finally to then Indochina in order to escape the war. I am also a childhood friend of Ingrid Dows, when she was living in Berlin.”

Eli Shomron nodded his head at that, having read in the past the book Ingrid had written and published about her early career as a fighter pilot, plus many newspaper articles

about her. He thus already knew, like Eshkol, that Ingrid Dows was a German Jew and that she had served briefly with the Luftwaffe during World War Two.

“And she adopted this adorable little girl in Indochina, I presume?”

“Yes, in January. Her English is still limited but she is making rapid progress under my tutelage. She however can speak French, on top of Vietnamese.”

The group then fell silent, the growing noise of the jet engines of the F-83s precluding conversations. Denise Bateman put a pair of ear muffs over Hien's ears, distributing more ear muffs around before herself putting a pair on. A good hundred aircraft mechanics and technicians, all women, were waiting around the group with a variety of maintenance vehicles and equipment and got busy as soon as the first F-83s came to a stop on the tarmac and shut down their engines. Denise Bateman soon started up her jeep and led the two other jeeps to a F-83 with 'LADY HAWK' painted in large pink and black letters on the side of its nose, along with a staggering number of little Japanese and German miniature flags and over two dozen red stars, each one denoting a past air victory. Eshkol couldn't help being impressed by that display of air combat mastery as he approached on foot the plane with Shomron, Winslow, Bateman, Ur and the little girl. Two young women wearing flight gear were now climbing down from the cockpit. The pilot, a very beautiful young woman with reddish-brown hair and big blue eyes, hurried first to the little girl, greeting her with open arms and hugging and kissing her.

“Hien, my love! How was your flight?” Said Ingrid in Vietnamese between two kisses.

“It went well, Mommy.”

“Good! I unfortunately have to take care of a few things now, but I promise to have lunch with you afterwards.”

Putting Hien Dows, Ingrid then faced Major Winslow, who saluted her.

“Major Barney Winslow, designated logistics officer for this airbase, General.”

“At ease!” Said Ingrid, returning his salute. “Did the landing of our troops and support equipment and supplies go as planned?”

“Yes, General! All our vehicles are now on the base and our truck convoys are in the process of bringing in our supplies from our ships in Haifa. We also have a single line railroad linking us with Haifa, with a train presently helping to move in our stocks of



bombs and other heavy ordnance. Everything should be in storage here within two days.”

“Excellent! We may need them quickly, in fact: we already had to shoot down two groups of Egyptian aircraft bent on bombing Tel Aviv and Beersheba and I expect more Arab attacks to follow up soon.”

Winslow then half turned to show her the two waiting Israelis standing to his left.

“General, this is Mister Eli Shomron, representative of the Jewish Agency, and Major Moshe Eshkol, Commander of the Hanita Battalion, which is helping us defend this base.”

“Major General Ingrid Dows, Commander of the Palestine Interposition Force. Pleased to meet you.” Said Ingrid while shaking hands with them. “I propose that we all go right away to the base operations center, so that we could discuss the tactical situation around Palestine.”

Ingrid looked next at Julia Miller, her radar and weapons officer.

“Julia, have our plane rearmed and refueled, then go get your quarters with the other aircrews.”

“Right away, General!”

As Julia was giving orders to the mechanics around their plane, Ingrid went to the baggage compartment of her F-83, situated under the cockpit, and extracted from it two suitcases, one locked briefcase and her M2A1 carbine, putting them in Denise Bateman’s jeep before looking at Winslow.

“Guide us to the base operations center, Major.”

“Yes, General!”

The trip was short, the base operations building being less than one kilometer from the southern tarmac. Like most of the other buildings on the base, it was a low brick building whose walls had been whitewashed and which had the minimum of amenities, the base having been built in a hurry by the British during World War Two. By the frantic activity she found inside the building, it was quickly evident to her that the personnel that had come from the ships in Haifa harbor were still busy setting up their equipment. She however found map boards and functioning radios and telephones ready to be used in the operations center, enough for her immediate needs. She found there as well Lieutenant Colonel Tucker, the commander of the Marine Corps battalion group attached to her force, plus Colonel Aaron Bank, who commanded the Army

special forces battalion that had come with her from Vietnam, and a Colonel Alfred Smithers, who commanded the Army contingent that had come by ship from Germany. A number of other unit and squadron commanders that were part of her substantial joint task force were also present, evidently waiting for her orders. There was however one notable absence in that group of senior officers: her own force deputy commander, a Navy rear admiral. Grabbing Winslow, she spoke to him in a low voice.

“Where is Rear Admiral Felt, Major?”

“Uh, I believe that he elected to stay on his flagship, the carrier WASP, which is cruising off Haifa.”

Ingrid repressed a scowl of anger with difficulty on hearing that.

“How the hell is he supposed to function as my deputy if he stays at sea, disconnected from the main action, which will be on the ground and in the air? Have a message sent requesting him to come in by helicopter, and quickly!”

“Yes, General!”

As Winslow walked away, Ingrid reflected on the hurried arrangements that had led to the formation of her joint task force. As in nearly all American military planning and operations, inter-service rivalry had quickly shown its ugly head in Washington, with the Navy insisting that the deputy force commander should be a Navy officer, due to the large number of ships attached to the force. Somehow, the fact that the main missions and tasks of the force would imply separating opposite ground forces and restraining irregular militias on both sides of the conflict, and not combat at sea, had escaped the mind of the Navy commanders in the capital. Worse, the Navy had then nominated a rear admiral, a man of a rank equal to hers, for the position and General Bradley had let that fly, thus nearly ensuring a dysfunctional chain of command for her task force. She had not however had the time to argue against that decision during the last busy days.

Promising to Hien to see her again as soon as she could and asking her to be patient and follow Sarah Ur, Ingrid then walked to the front of the large operations room and spoke up in a strong voice.

“If I may have your attention, ladies and gentlemen. Please gather around me and this map of Palestine. Mister Shomron, Major Eshkol, you are welcomed to join in on this.”

Waiting for the men and women to form up in a semi-circle facing her, Ingrid then spoke again.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the Palestine Interposition Force is now starting its mission. That mission in fact has already started to be enforced, with two groups of Egyptian aircraft bent on bombing Tel Aviv and Beersheba having been intercepted and shot down by our fighters. Our mandate has been approved by the United Nations but has actually been written by me and was then vetted by President Dewey. So were our rules of engagement. Our force mandate is simple and covers five points. First, our force will enforce the new borders of the Jewish and Arab states in Palestine as mandated by the United Nations. Second, we will do the maximum to prevent any interethnic violence or abuse against the civilian population of Palestine, be it Arab or Jewish. I will be particularly inflexible on that point and will deal roughly with anyone responsible for violence or abuses against unarmed civilians."

Shomron and Eshkol exchanged a quick glance then: certain elements of the Jewish forces were known to be ill disciplined and to be more than ready to commit abuses and even atrocities against Arab civilians. Ingrid however continued on, not letting time for the two Jewish men to ask questions or present objections.

"Third, and in the spirit of my second point, our force will do the maximum to protect the rights and the security of all the present inhabitants of Palestine. This means no forced relocation of civilians or intimidation against them. Fourth, our force will maintain the neutrality of Jerusalem and will keep its access corridors open. Finally, our force, with the support and resources of the United States, will provide humanitarian aid as needed to the inhabitants of Palestine. As for our rules of engagement, they are simple indeed. Any member of the force has the absolute right to self-defense and can use up to lethal force if threatened or attacked. Our force will also have the right to use lethal force in order to protect unarmed civilians or prisoners of war, as implied in the Geneva Conventions. Also, and most importantly, we will have the right to use lethal force in order to enforce our mandate and the demarcation lines as approved by the United Nations. We just exercised that mandate by shooting down Egyptian planes violating Palestinian airspace and I fully expect more such Arab armed incursions in the hours and days to come. That clause however is not restricted to attacking Arab forces: Jewish forces will also have to refrain from attacking legitimate Arab territories, while any third party trying to militarily support any incursion or invasion of parts or all of Palestine may be subject to a lethal response from us."

More than a few heads then rose from their notepads, with Colonel Smithers asking a question.

“Uh, what do you mean by ‘any third party’, General?”

“Exactly what it says, colonel Smithers. If some other nation tries to interfere with the mandate of our force or assists someone attacking us, then it will expose its forces around Palestine to retaliatory strikes. Such interference includes electronic jamming of our sensors or communications in support of an attack against Palestine or directly against our force, plus unauthorized overflights of Palestine by military planes for reconnaissance or intelligence purpose. That point has been made clear at the last session of the United Nations Security Council, thus pleading ignorance of that rule will not be an excuse. I have mostly Great Britain and the Soviet Union in mind concerning that rule.”

“We could be firing on British planes or ships, General? But, that could start a larger war, even a nuclear confrontation.”

Ingrid gave Smithers and the officers facing her a resolute look.

“That may be so, Colonel, but making rules that you are not ready to seriously enforce is pointless, as someone will then eventually call your bluff. Those who know me well know that I never bluff. If someone thinks that he can push us around in Palestine, then that someone will learn quickly enough that messing with us is a costly proposition. Does anyone else have questions about our mandate or about our rules of engagement?”

Doing a pause, she continued when she saw that no questions were forthcoming.

“Now, I realize that we still have a lot to do to be properly installed here. However, I don’t intend to be caught flat-footed in the next few hours by a retaliatory air attack by Arab air forces. Colonel Meserve, I want a fighter alert element on a five minute alert status established within one hour, as well as a permanent radar and electronic warfare watch of Palestinian airspace and its approaches.”

“I will be right on it, General.”

“Excellent! Finally, before you all disperse, I will ask our force intelligence officer, Major Judith Meyer, to give us the main points of the latest intelligence report received from USEUCOM SOUTH HQ, in Naples. Major...”

Judith Meyer, a file in hand, came forward and started reading from her file, while a sergeant assisted her by pointing on the map of Palestine and of its surroundings the various locations she mentioned.

“ First, the main Arab airfields representing the closest threats to Israel are Ras El-Nakab, Sharm El Sheik and Bir Gifgafa, in the Egyptian Sinai, Amman in Jordan and

Damascus in Syria. The British have airfields in Akrotiri, Nicosia and Limassol, in the nearby island of Cyprus, and use as well the Egyptian airfields in Cairo and Alexandria. Of particular note is the fact that a squadron of sixteen newly operational LIGHTNING supersonic interceptors has recently been moved to Akrotiri, in Cyprus. They also have four photo-reconnaissance variants of the LIGHTNING, also based in Akrotiri, while a flight of four Avro SHACKLETON prop-driven airborne early warning aircraft are based in Limassol. One point of particular interest is the presence off Tel Aviv of a British flotilla, composed of the nuclear cruiser HMS TIGER and of two destroyers. Up to now, they have only been monitoring the local situation and have not intervened in this conflict.”

Ingrid stared for a moment at the map, then turned to face Teresa James, her chief of staff for this operation.

“Teresa, I want one of your F-83 flights to be loaded up with 2,000-pound armor piercing bombs and to be on standby for a possible anti-ship mission on a 30-minute notice. If we have to strike that flotilla, we will use the Tornado funnel tactic.”

“Got that!” Replied Teresa, while Moshe Eshkol looked questioningly at Ingrid.

“The Tornado funnel? What’s that?”

“A tactic that we developed while in Vietnam and that proved very effective at countering enemy air defenses while also delivering a devastating and extremely accurate blow. We have kept that tactic very discreet up to now and I doubt that the British know about it. If they make the mistake of involving their ships in this conflict, then they will regret it.”

“Well, I can’t say that I will mind seeing the British eat some humble pie for a change.” Said Eshkol, making Eli Shomron nod in approval.

“The same here, General. The British have been doing about everything to support the Arabs against us short of entering the conflict directly. We even suspect that some of the Egyptian Air Force aircraft are actually piloted by British pilots.”

“So, they are imitating the Soviets, hey? Well, too bad for them if we catch them over Israel. Anything else, Major Meyer?”

“Not for the moment, General. I have for you and your unit commanders, locked in my office, copies of the latest regional air, ground and electronic order of battle publications, courtesy of USEUCOM SOUTH HQ. I can give them to you right after this meeting.”

Ingrid nodded and put back her notepad in her pocket, then looked around the table.

“Excellent! Well, we have much to do, so let’s call this meeting to an end so that we can go back to our respective jobs. You are dismissed! Mister Shomron, Major Eshkol, could I speak with you in private for a moment.”

The two Jews, expecting some kind of verbal warning from Ingrid after hearing how she intended to protect equally the Arab and Jewish civilians, followed her to a nearby office that was still empty. Ingrid closed the door behind them before facing the two men, her expression somber.

“Gentlemen, believe me when I say that I am all for a safe haven in Palestine where the Jews persecuted around the World can rebuild their lives and their dreams. However, as I just said in the operations center, that will not be done at the expense of the Arabs that already inhabit Palestine and have done so for centuries. You both certainly know that I have had access to much information from the future thanks to my dead adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante. You should also know that I remember the souvenirs from my past incarnations, spread over 7,000 years. Am I correct about that?”

“We have seen the newspaper articles about your revelations made in Indochina, General.” Replied Shomron in a guarded tone. “What does that have to do with our situation here?”

“Everything! For one thing, in Nancy’s history, the early leaders of Israel secretly directed a succession of military operations early in the infancy of the new state, operations meant to intimidate, chase away from their villages and towns or even simply kill the Arabs living in the Jewish portion of partitioned Palestine. Those leaders denied at the same time that such policies were being applied, lying even to their closest allies, like the United States. Now, this may be a different historical timeline, but I don’t believe that David Ben-Gurion and the other main Jewish leaders are significantly different from those known in Nancy’s timeline. I also happen to have some very good sources of information about the actual plans and operations of the Jewish forces in Palestine. I know for a fact that your Haganah’s Alexandroni Brigade is presently engaged in an ethnic cleansing campaign meant to chase away by force the Arabs living in villages dispersed along the coastal strip south of Haifa, while your Golani Brigade is clearing the Arab villages around Beisan, blowing houses as they go. I also know that your people are systematically bulldozing and blowing away the Arab Quarter of Haifa as we speak. Furthermore, I know that the Jewish forces are planning to eventually take and empty of its Arab inhabitants the towns of Lydda and Ramleh, near Jerusalem, both of which are

clearly in Arab designated territory. I want all of those activities to stop, immediately! If not, you will force me to send American soldiers to those villages and towns to ensure the security of the Arab inhabitants of the region.”

By then, Eli Shomron was ready to explode.

“How do you dare pretend to dictate our conduct after all the tragedies that the Jewish people has gone through in the past years? I thought that the United States had sent you to protect us, not to impede us from securing our new state from Arab threats.” That reply earned Shomron a hard stare from Ingrid.

“So, you are not even trying to deny the fact that your forces are engaged in ethnic cleansing. I do want Israel to be safe and secure, Mister Shomron, but not at the expense of the non-Jews already living here. Two wrongs don’t make one right! Having been persecuted for so long doesn’t give you the right to persecute others in return, especially when those you want to force away are your blood brothers.”

“Are you crazy? The Arabs are no blood brothers of ours.”

“You need to better study the history of this land, Mister Shomron, and not only of the parts that fit with your views. When the Romans crushed the Jewish rebellion in Judea in the First Century, they destroyed Jerusalem and exterminated the Jewish rebels, but they did not kill everybody in Judea, far from it. The majority of the Jewish population was left in place, albeit under heavy Roman surveillance, and continued to live on as best it could, paying its taxes to Rome and providing it with surplus grain. Even the Bar Kochba rebellion of the Second Century didn’t result in the complete depopulation of Judea, Idumea, Samaria and Galilee. The surviving Jews went on, until the Arabs came in and conquered Palestine. The Jews there still continued on, but most were forced by the Arabs to convert to Islam. The descendants of those Jews that converted to Islam, or to Christianity thanks to the Crusades, are now what you call Palestinian Arabs, Mister Shomron. They have the same ancestors as you, plus they have stayed on in Palestine during all these centuries of hardships, while the Jews of the Diaspora went on to live all over Europe and Northern Africa and, eventually, the Americas.”

“All that is nonsense, General! How could you believe such mistaken notions?”

“How?” Replied Ingrid, now fired up. “Because one of my past incarnations was as Agar, the Egyptian slave girl with which the great patriarch Abraham had a son, Ishmael. I fully remember what Abraham did, said or heard while in Canaan. He was told that he would get ‘A’ land in Canaan, not ‘The’ land of Canaan. Unfortunately, a lot

was lost in the translation since then and too many people have used those old stories to make them fit their views and wishes. Well, I am now here and I fully intend to straighten things up and to ensure the safety and wellbeing of 'ALL' of Abraham's descendants, be they Jewish, Muslims or Christians."

Both Shomron and Eshkol stared at her with shock and disbelief for a moment, then walked out without another word, averting their eyes from hers.

### **11:31 (Jerusalem Time)**

#### **Office of the Commander, Palestine Interposition Force**

#### **Headquarters building, Ramat David Airbase**

Ingrid had just finished a long telephone conversation with General Glubb Pasha, the British officer who commanded the Arab Legion of Emir Abdallah, the ruler of Transjordan, when someone knocked on the door of her new office.

"Come in!"

Ingrid smiled warmly when Navy Lieutenant Commander John Henry entered: the Navy liaison officer was a very handsome man in his mid thirties, with wide shoulders and an athletic body.

"What may I do for you, Commander Henry?"

"Uh, I came to bring you the response of Rear Admiral Felt about your request for him to come to Ramat David, General."

Ingrid's smile faded on seeing the embarrassed expression on Henry's face as he spoke.

"And what is the admiral's response, Commander?"

"That he prefers to stay on his flagship and requests that we instead send him regularly all the pertinent situation and intelligence reports, so that he could personally direct the actions and movements of his ships, General."

"Is he aware that my request was in reality an order, Commander?" Said Ingrid, visibly not pleased. Henry hesitated before answering her.

"I believe that he is, General."

"Then, he should understand that he has no choice but to come here, as requested by me. I need him here, ready to stand for me whenever I have to fly or travel to meet various political and military players in Palestine."



Henry then seemed to go through an intense mental debate, hesitating to speak further. Seeing his conflicted expression, Ingrid patiently waited for him to make his mind and listened on politely when he finally spoke.

“Permission to speak freely, General.”

“Permission granted, Commander.”

“General, I have served with Rear Admiral Felt, both at sea and on land. I may be betraying the Navy by saying this, but you don’t want Admiral Felt here, in charge of your command staff, especially your female staff.”

Ingrid sat back in her chair while staring at Henry, then pointed a nearby chair.

“Please pull a chair and explain yourself, Commander Henry. Don’t be afraid to be brutally frank with me: I intensely dislike bullshit.”

Henry grabbed the designated chair, setting it in front of Ingrid’s desk, then sat in it and looked back at her.

“General, the truth is that the morale of your staff would quickly go down the drain if you allow Admiral Felt to order them around. The morale of our Navy component is already quite bad, thanks to his leadership style.”

“And what kind of leadership style does Admiral Felt favor?” Asked Ingrid, who already could guess the answer from Henry. The latter hesitated yet again.

“Could I ask you to keep to yourself what I am about to tell you, General? If it comes to the ears of the Navy, my career would then be utterly finished.”

“What you will say here will not leave this office, Commander. Is Rear Admiral Felt some kind of bully?”

Henry nodded at that.

“A mean, arrogant and caustic bully, to be more precise, General. He actually has a rather terrifying reputation in the Navy. He is verbally abusive to his staff and officers and is even known to be physically rough with subordinates. With the proportion of women in your staff and air units, I am afraid that he could very well end up abusing or even assaulting some of them: he despises the presence of women in the armed services. As I said before, I served with him in the recent past and I would not wish him on the rest of your staff.”

“I see!” Said Ingrid tersely. It was her turn to be silent for a moment while she thought this new problem over. She had heard in passing a few things about Felt’s character and what Henry had just told her only confirmed those hearsays. Furthermore, the fact that a Navy officer was ready to disparage a more senior Navy

officer in front of an Air Force officer, a cardinal sin in Navy eyes, told her a lot about how much Rear Admiral Felt had to be hated by his own Navy subalterns. Henry had been correct in thinking that Felt should not be inflicted on her Army and Air Force personnel. She would never stand for someone abusing her staff anyway. There was however some Pentagon high power play at here. The Navy would raise quite a stink with General Bradley if she made a move against Felt, who was of the same rank as her but had a lot more seniority than her in terms of years of service. She however rejected that argument as quickly as it popped up in her mind: she was not the kind to let herself be pushed around by Pentagon politics. She finally got up from her chair and went around her desk to go shake hands with Henry, who also rose from his chair.

“Thank you for your frankness, Commander. Do not bother to send a reply to Admiral Felt: I will take care of that myself. By the way, don’t feel bad about what you just did, even if other Navy officers would crucify you for it: you did the right thing.”

“It wasn’t easy for me to do, General, believe me. Thank you for listening to me.”

Henry then saluted her, with Ingrid saluting back, before leaving her office. Ingrid stared for a moment at the now closed door as frustration swelled in her. It was not enough for her to have to fight lying Jewish politicians and bloodthirsty Arab irregulars: now she had to deal as well with an insubordinate deputy.

## **12:40 (Jerusalem Time)**

### **Flag quarters, carrier USS WASP**

#### **Fifty kilometers off the Palestinian coast**

Rear Admiral Harry Donald Felt was finishing a late lunch in his admiral’s suite when a ring prompted him to grab the receiver of his ship’s intercom system. He then announced himself in a terse, rough tone.

“Yeah?”

“Admiral, we have an helicopter on approach from Ramat David, carrying the Force Commander.” Said the operations officer of the fleet. “It should land in about fifteen minutes.”

Those words brought a mean smile to Felt’s face: so, that upstart bitch had not had the balls to give him a direct order to come to Ramat David and was now instead coming to

plead with him on his own flagship. Manipulating her should be easier than he had expected, after all.

“Very well! I will wait for her on the command bridge. Have her escorted up once she has landed.”

There was a slight delay on the intercom as the operations officer measured the level of disrespect this would normally constitute. According to Navy customs, Felt should have greeted a fellow officer of the same rank on the flight deck, right at arrival. The Navy commander however didn't dare raising that point with Felt and answered in a neutral tone.

“Understood, Admiral.”

Felt then put down his receiver, a renewed smile on his face, then took the time to finish his lunch before getting up from his chair to go to the command bridge.

He arrived on the command bridge a mere minute before an Army light helicopter landed on the deck of the big, 43,000 ton carrier. He was a bit surprised but not overly impressed to see that the only person to leave the helicopter had been in the pilot's seat. He was himself an accomplished naval aviator and had flown plenty of combat missions in the Pacific during World War Two. If that young Dows meant to impress him by flying herself in, then she was sorely mistaken. None of the duty staff on the command bridge dared make a comment as he went to sit in his command chair to wait for his visitor.

Ingrid's expression was as hard as rock when she stepped on the command bridge, with an officer calling the bridge to attention: she fully realized what kind of calculated insult Felt was serving her by making her come to him, even though he was supposed to be her subordinate. Her eyes locked at once on the diminutive man in his early fifties that was now getting out of his command chair to 'greet' her with a false smile. He was a good half head shorter than her and, while apparently fit for his age, his physique was not the least impressive. She returned at once the salute from the bridge duty officer but waited for Felt to salute her, in vain. Instead, Felt walked to her with an extended hand, with no sign of saluting her.

“General Dows, it is an honor to have you on my flagship.”

Refusing his handshake, Ingrid spoke in a hard tone while staring into Felt's eyes.

“We need to speak, Admiral, in private.”

The sailors and officers on the bridge held their breath as their irascible admiral stopped cold, with his welcoming smile fading at once, to be replaced by an angry expression. Felt however managed not to explode then and pointed a steel door on the aft wall of the bridge.

“Then, let’s go to my day cabin, General.”

Ingrid simply nodded at that and followed Felt through the door, walking a few paces down a steel corridor before entering a relatively small cabin behind Felt. A quick look around showed her that the cabin had a captain’s bed and a locker on one side, plus a work desk and a chair and what appeared to be a private bathroom in the back. Felt let his anger show as he closed the door of the cabin and faced Ingrid.

“How dare you show me disrespect on my own flagship’s bridge the way you just did, refusing to shake hands with me? I am your senior in terms of years of service, and by a big margin.”

“Admiral Felt, I will be blunt with you, since I have no time to waste. You refused to show up in Ramat David, as directly requested by me, even though you are supposed to be my deputy force commander. Explain yourself!”

“I already explained my reasons to stay on my flagship in the message I sent to you this morning, General. I believe that this should be enough for you.”

Ingrid’s eyes could have thrown lightning bolts as she stared down at the small Navy man.

“First, you dismiss a direct request from me, then you snub me by making me come to your bridge to meet you. Do you think that I am so ignorant of the most basic Navy rules of etiquette that you expected me to let pass such an insult? I am the force commander, not you!”

“That should not be!” Spat back Felt, all pretense at civility gone. “By all rules I should have been the force commander, by virtue of seniority.”

“Seniority has nothing to do with why I command this force, Felt. The President put me in command of this force because he believed me to be the most qualified person for the job. We are talking about a political powder keg and a civil war mixed with a territorial dispute in a region you can’t possibly know as well as me.”

“Bullshit! You probably got the position by giving blowjobs to President Dewey. You are an overrated upstart and your stories about so-called souvenirs of past incarnations are probably only that, stories.”

Felt then stepped very close to Ingrid and jabbed his right index hard between her breasts.

“I will command from where I deem it most practical for me, Dows, whether you like it or not.”

Ingrid’s response came at once, but not with words. Grabbing Felt by the front of his uniform jacket with one hand, she then lifted him off the deck without apparent effort and, taking two steps, brutally sat him down on top of his work desk before going nose to nose with him.

“Rear Admiral Felt, I am relieving you of command for insubordination and for assaulting your superior. I expect you to fly out to Naples by tomorrow at the latest. Your deputy fleet commander will take your place as commander of the naval component of the Palestine Interposition Force, while the post of force deputy commander will be filled by Brigadier General James. You may start packing your bags now.”

Left stunned for a moment, Felt then truly became enraged and tried to grab the front of Ingrid’s flight suit with both hands. She however reacted to that with lightning speed and slapped away his hands, then grabbed him again and raised him high in the air with one arm, making Felt’s head knock hard against the low ceiling of the cabin.

“You either fly out to Naples as ordered by me or you will face a court martial on charges of insubordination in a theater of war, Felt.”

She then put him down on the deck with enough force to make his knees buckle, sending him on his posterior. Not giving him another look, Ingrid walked out of the cabin and walked back to the command bridge, where she pointed the bridge duty officer.

“Lieutenant Commander, advise at once by radio Rear Admiral Brown on the USS LAKE CHAMPLAIN that he has now command of the naval element of the Palestine Interposition Force. Rear Admiral Felt has been relieved of command by me for insubordination and will have to fly out to Naples by no later than tomorrow. The deputy commander of the force is now Brigadier General James, who is presently in Ramat David. I will send a formal...”

Felt, a crazed look in his eyes, then appeared on the bridge and shouted at her, interrupting her.

“YOU CAN’T DO THAT, YOU BITCH! NO WOMAN IS GOING TO RELIEVE ME OF COMMAND LIKE THIS.”

Everybody on the bridge then froze, everybody but Ingrid, that is. Grabbing and keying the microphone of the portable UHF radio transceiver hooked to her flight vest, she spoke with a deliberate tone in it.

"Watchdog Six, this is Lady Hawk: come up at once to the command bridge with your two personnel to put Rear Admiral Felt under arrest for gross insubordination, over."

"Watchdog Six to Lady Hawk: I am on my way up, out."

As Felt stood there dumbstruck, not fully comprehending what had just been said, the lieutenant commander on bridge duty understood with a shock that Ingrid had been ready all along to relieve his admiral and had even brought military policemen with her to arrest him if need be. Now, with Felt having publicly insulted his force commander, the latter would easily be able to justify her actions. Ingrid then addressed Felt again.

"You could have avoided all this and kept your command if you would have been ready to do something as simple as following my orders, Admiral Felt, but you chose instead to play king of the mountain with me. I asked you to come to Ramat David as my deputy so that our force could continue to react quickly to developing threats even when I have to be absent from our airbase. Trying to react to the situation in Palestine by relying simply on dated reports sent by periodic couriers simply wouldn't have done."

"You shouldn't be the force commander, dammit! You're way junior to me!"

"It wasn't your place to decide who could be the force commander, Felt. Your job was to assist me and obey my orders and directives in the most competent way possible. This could have stayed between you and me in your day cabin, but you thought that you could bully me the same way you bully your staff and crews."

Three Air Force policewomen, one of them a tall and strong lieutenant colonel, stepped on the bridge at that moment and reported to Ingrid, saluting her. Ingrid, saluting back, then pointed Felt to the policewomen.

"Colonel Dickinson, place Rear Admiral Felt under arrest for gross insubordination in a theater of war. He will be held in Ramat David until he can be flown out to Naples."

"Yes, General! Sergeant Rivers, handcuff Admiral Felt."

As the two big and strong policewomen walked to him with handcuffs ready, Felt looked angrily at his bridge duty officer.

"DON'T JUST STAND THERE, COMMANDER WALSH! STOP THESE WOMEN!"

That was when the months of abuse and screaming he had dished around him caught up with Felt: nobody on the bridge moved a finger to assist him as he was forcibly handcuffed. He was being pushed out of the bridge by the policewomen as Ingrid looked at the bridge duty officer.

“As I was about to say before being rudely interrupted, Commander, I will send a formal message this afternoon to announce the relief of Rear Admiral Felt. Don’t forget to call at once Rear Admiral Brown to tell him that he is now the naval component commander of the force.”

“I’m on it, General.” Replied Walsh as he saluted Ingrid. The latter saluted back, then left the bridge, heading down towards the flight deck and her helicopter and leaving the Navy officers and sailors on the bridge to look at each other with bemusement.

“Damn!” Said softly a lowly ensign. “The CNO<sup>9</sup> is going to go bonkers about this!”

### **01:54 (Jerusalem time)**

**Monday, March 16, 1953 ‘C’**

### **Sky above Tel Aviv, Israel**

The orbiting EC-200R, its navigational lights blinking, started to turn gently for yet another circuit over Tel Aviv while on its night watch mission. A bit below and behind it, the two F-83s assigned to the night combat air patrol escorting the EC-200R also started turning, following the big surveillance plane. With each fighter carrying two big external fuel tanks hooked to their bellies and flying at economical speed, the F-83s were able to stay in the air for over seven hours, thus avoiding the always risky procedure of night air refueling. The real problem for the pilots of the fighter aircraft was to not fall asleep from boredom during those long hours of night flying. Ingrid Dows had actually found a partial solution to that, issuing to each pilot on night CAP a small thermos bottle full of strong Arabic coffee.

Gertrude Meserve, who was leading the present night CAP in order to give a brake to her more junior pilots, had just finished sipping some of her coffee and had

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<sup>9</sup> CNO : Chief of Naval Operations. In effect the head of the United States Navy.

closed and stored away her thermos bottle when a radio message came from the tactical officer of the EC-200R flying above her.

“Angel One, this is Halo Two, I have two unidentified bogeys approaching from slightly different headings from the West. They are now approximately 110 miles northwest of Haifa and probably come from Cyprus, heading southeast at a speed of 300 miles per hour, over.”

“I copy, Halo Two.” Simply said Gertrude on her radio, keeping her communications to the minimum as directed to prior to leaving on her night mission. The EC-200R came back after a few seconds.

“Angel One, this is Halo Two. The two bogeys are now separating, with one accelerating sharply towards Haifa while the second bogey is veering south and staying at...”

The grumble of strong electronic jamming then covered up the end of the transmission from the EC-200R, making Gertrude swear while she came to full alertness. The voice of the tactical officer however came back quickly on the secondary radio frequency of the flight.

“Angel One, we are being jammed but have managed to burn through with our radars. The southward bogey appears to be the source of the jamming, while the faster bogey is heading straight towards Ramat David at close to Mach one. Engage your ECCM gear, over!”

Just before Josephine Silverman, Gertrude’s radar and weapons officer, could switch on their electronic counter-countermeasures suite, powerful jamming noise also blocked the secondary frequency: whoever was attempting to enter Israeli airspace was making a good try at it. It wasn’t good enough though, as her radio channel was switched automatically to one of the twenty pre-selected frequencies still clear from jamming. With her ECCM suite on, her radio would monitor automatically all twenty frequencies, sending on all twenty of them but then receiving only on channels not jammed. Their present opponents, which were more than probably British, would thus need to find and jam all twenty frequencies at the same time in order to effectively counter the American communications. Unfortunately for the British, electronic warfare was one domain in which the United States had pushed progress relentlessly, following the brilliant successes of the first EC-142s during the Second World War. The British, which at first had possessed the same level of technology than the Americans, had simply not put the



same priority in electronic warfare and were now lagging behind, a fact that they were about to learn the hard way. Gertrude was next to speak on the radio.

“Halo Two, stay on station! Angel Two, head for the jamming aircraft by using home-on-jam mode and shoot it down, over.”

Shirley Slade briefly acknowledged her instructions before Gertrude veered true North and accelerated to 650 miles per hour. Gertrude watched briefly Major Shirley Slade as she veered on her own intercept course, then thought about her next moves for a few seconds before speaking to her radar and weapons officer, or RWO.

“Josephine, run on passive sensors for the moment, but be ready to switch your radar on active mode on my signal.”

Dashing north at near sonic speed for a number of pre-calculated minutes, Gertrude then told her RWO to switch her nose radar in search mode. She smiled to herself when a single dot appeared at once on her radar screen, traveling quickly from left to right.

“We have him, Josephine.”

As Gertrude was turning around to the right in order to get behind the intruder, her radar screen suddenly filled with an expanding cloud of dots. Gertrude understood at once what was happening.

“The bogey is releasing chaff countermeasures! Go to Doppler mode and FLIR, Josephine.”

While some of the clutter stayed on her screen afterwards, most of it disappeared after they had gone to Doppler mode, which would filter out any non-moving target on their radar. The British was however proving to be a worthy game up to now, forcing her to use all the assets of her aircraft in order to be able to keep tracking him. After another minute of chase, the British aircraft became visible in her forward FLIR viewer.

“I have visual track!” Announced Gertrude at once to Josephine while arming a heat-seeking missile. She examined for a few seconds the British aircraft as she closed in on it, noting the highly swept wings and the two turbojet engines mounted one above the other in a most unusual arrangement. When she was within four kilometers, she fired one AIM-1A COBRA air-to-air missile, closing one eye to avoid being completely blinded by the bright flame from her missile. The AIM-1A flew off its launch rail and sped towards the British jet, followed anxiously by the eyes of both Gertrude and Josephine. To their disappointment, the British jet fired away a number of decoy flares and turned

hard to port, avoiding the missile in-extremis. Gertrude at once turned to chase after the British, dropping her external fuel tanks.

“A tough customer, hey? Let’s see if you can decoy cannon shells.”

Accelerating and gaining quickly on the British, Gertrude kept the intruder in her gun sight despite her opponent wiggling constantly around to try shaking her off. Her first burst, fired from 600 meters away, made parts break away from the British aircraft. Now in real trouble, the British pilot abandoned for good his original mission and concentrated on trying to evade his pursuers, performing brutal turns and snap barrel rolls. Gertrude was however an old pro at this and hit for a second time the British aircraft, putting its engines on fire. Bare seconds after that second hit, Gertrude saw the British pilot eject from his doomed aircraft. She glanced at once at her map display, noting her position, and spoke on her radio, calling her base.

“Ramat David Control, this is Angel One. I have one British pilot ejecting from a LIGHTNING fighter approximately six miles west of Nazareth. I need a pick up for that pilot, over.”

“Understood, Angel One. Be advised that your wingman has also splashed their target. Report on your fuel status, over.”

“Ramat David Control, I am now on internal fuel tanks and have enough for about four and a half hours of loiter at economical speed, over.”

“Roger that, Angel One! Resume station with Halo Two and keep patrolling for another two hours. Your wingman will also resume station with Halo Two, over.”

“Understood, Ramat David Control! Am heading south now, out.”

As she turned around towards Tel Aviv, Gertrude’s radar picked up the three British warships sailing off the Israeli coast. That sight sobered somewhat her triumph: this was probably only the start of a crisis that could too easily turn into a war between two superpowers.

## **06:14 (Jerusalem Time)**

### **Ramat David Airbase**

#### **Israel**

After stepping down from her aircraft and taking off her flight gear, Gertrude Meserve walked at a lazy pace to Shirley Slade’s aircraft, her legs cramped from seven hours of flying. Shirley was already down on the tarmac, talking with her RWO. The

three women were obviously describing to each other the action of the night, judging from the way their hands imitated the moves of aircraft as they spoke. Shirley smiled to Gertrude when the later approached her.

“Hell, Gertrude, you got quite a first: the first British LIGHTNING we ever encountered and you shot it down. That plane is supposed to be hot.”

“Yes, and no!” Replied Gertrude, confusing Shirley and her RWO, Lieutenant Roberta Holmes. “The British pilot was good and shook his aircraft like a pro. He just happened to face a better pro...and a better aircraft. Our F-83s are I believe faster, more agile and more powerful than the LIGHTNING. With that plane, the British produced an excellent interceptor but I don’t think that they produced a really good all-around fighter-bomber. From what I saw of it, it has a limited number of weapons carrying points and I never felt in danger of being outmaneuvered by it. The real unknown for us and also the real threat is how good the British missiles are. The one I shot down didn’t carry any, however.”

“It must have been a photo-reconnaissance variant, as Ingrid had predicted.”

“It most probably was. And you, Shirley, what did you find?”

“An Avro SHACKLETON AEW aircraft. It tried to flee back to Cyprus but it never stood a chance. I dove steeply on it, so its tail gunner didn’t have an opportunity to shoot at me. The way it caught fire and broke up in midair, I don’t believe that any of the crew members had time to parachute out.”

“I wonder what the British will do next.” Said soberly Josephine Silverman, making the others pay attention to her. “They could interpret our intercepts as acts of war and launch a full-fledged attack on us.”

“They would show a lot of bad faith if they did that.” Pronounced Roberta Holmes. “They were the ones who violated Israeli airspace despite of our warnings. Besides, do the British really want to start a war with us?”

“Hopefully not.” Said Gertrude. “However, politics are probably the thing most remote from logic that you could think of. We may have to stay at maximum alert for quite a while.”

“Damn,” replied Holmes, “we just flew a seven-hour mission, and that the day after arriving from Vietnam. We will be on our knees if this goes on for any length of time.”

“Which is why you girls will stop chatting and will go have breakfast before going to bed, and I mean without a man!” Said Gertrude firmly. “Just make sure that you fill properly your flight report before going for zee time.”

“Yes, Colonel!” Replied Shirley, coming to attention like the two others. Gertrude knew that this was more for plain fun than for showing iron discipline, so she simply smiled and let her pilots go. She was starting to walk towards the squadron dispersal hut when Ingrid’s jeep came to her at near full speed. Ingrid sat in the front passenger seat and wore combat fatigues and her pistol belt. As soon as Sergeant Bateman screeched to a halt besides Gertrude, Ingrid signaled her to get in.

“The British pilot you shot down was captured and just arrived on the base. You are interested to meet him?”

“Of course I am!” Said Gertrude at once, then jumping in the jeep and sitting on the back seat. Bateman drove off at once, speeding towards the base security section building.

With Bateman staying in the jeep, Ingrid and Gertrude jumped out and entered the security section building, made of concrete blocks and sporting steel bars on some of its windows. The lieutenant in charge of the section and the Air Force policeman manning the reception desk came to attention and saluted on seeing Ingrid.

“General!” Nearly shouted the lieutenant. “The prisoner is being checked by a medic now: he apparently sprained an ankle on landing.”

“Show me to him then, Lieutenant.”

The lieutenant nodded and, turning around, led both women down a short hallway, arriving at a steel door and making the policeman on duty there unlock and open it. Walking inside a short, bare concrete hallway, the trio then stopped in front of an opened cell inside which a British squadron leader in a dirty flight suit was having his left ankle checked by an American medic. Two armed policemen stood outside the cell door, ready to react to any suspicious move by the prisoner. The latter, grimacing with pain as the medic cautiously examined his ankle, saw Ingrid and Gertrude and gave them a funny look.

“Blast! Female interrogators! And I thought my balls were safe for a while.”

Ingrid and Gertrude grinned at that typical piece of British humor, with Ingrid replying to the squadron leader in the strongest German accent she could muster.

“But you rated German female interrogators: you should count yourself lucky to be in such professional hands, Squadron Leader.”

Ingrid then became most serious, looking critically at the fit man in his early thirties and reading the nametag sewn on his flight suit.

“You are lucky to have survived today, Squadron Leader Burnham. I am Major General Ingrid Dows, Commander of the United States Palestine Interposition Force. This is Colonel Gertrude Meserve, the pilot who shot you down.”

“Dear God!” Said Burnham, faking distress in his voice. “I will be the laughing stock of the mess: being shot down by a woman.”

Gertrude didn't laugh at that one: the British had probably meant that with derision and not humor.

“Well, you will be in good company, mister: you are my 54<sup>th</sup> victim in the air. You are however my first British one. My wingman took care of your SHACKLETON.”

Burnham stared hard at her, all pretence of humor gone now.

“You will pay for that soon enough, the lot of you Yanks. This is only the first round, General.”

Ingrid didn't like the tone Burnham used with the word 'General' and entered the cell, stopping two paces from the British and looking down hard at him.

“I may look too young for my rank, Squadron Leader, but I am actually 27 years old and I earned my rank in combat, with a total of 164 air victories to date in my career. Just remember where you are and what could happen to you if you play the smart aleck. You violated Israeli airspace and was captured on Israeli soil, so I would be more than justified to hand you to the Israeli soldiers that are helping defend this base.”

That seemed to shake some of the assurance of the British pilot, who shut his mouth while staring back at Ingrid. Ingrid then went on.

“Believe me when I say that I do not wish to fight the British, Mister Burnham, not because I am afraid of fighting you but rather because of the larger consequences of such a war. I fought from England during World War Two and it truly pains me to see to what depths our relations have sunk. You are however the ones to blame for that, with your obsession about keeping your petty British Empire making you forget old allies. Your country has already let me down twice, leaving us alone to fight the communists in both Korea and Indochina, where I lost many good friends and comrades. This time, the United States has promised to help a friend, Israel, and you won't be allowed to play the unconcerned one while providing arms to all the Arab enemies of the Jews.”

“What are you planning to do with me, General?” Asked Burnham in a neutral voice.

“Don’t worry, mister: you will be well treated. I will let the politicians decide what happens next in your case. In the meantime, just be quiet and behave.”

Ingrid was turning around to leave when Burnham shouted at her.

“Hey! Aren’t you going to question me?”

Ingrid turned back and smiled to him.

“What for? We already know everything we need to know, Squadron Leader.”

Ingrid then left with Gertrude, letting Burnham free to ponder her words.

**13:26 (London time) / 15:26 (Jerusalem time)**

**Cabinet Room, 10 Downing Street**

**London, Great Britain**

Seeing that all the persons required to be present were actually in the cabinet meeting room, the 78 year-old Prime Minister Winston Churchill rapped his knuckles on the big polished oak table.

“Let’s take our seats and start this meeting, gentlemen: the hour may be grave and we need to take urgent decisions.”

As soon as the dozen or so ministers of the restricted cabinet and the military and security heads of services were seated and his secretary, Jennifer Collins, was ready to stenotype the minutes of the meeting, Churchill declared the meeting open and looked at Sir John Harding, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

“You may present the military news from the Middle East, Sir John.”

The marshal thanked him and in turn signaled to a waiting colonel of Military Intelligence to start his presentation. The senior R.A.F. officer, standing beside a projection screen on which a big map of the Middle East was being shown from an overhead projector, grabbed a file and a pointer and started speaking in a formal tone.

“Mister Prime Minister, gentlemen. At about two o’clock local time this morning, a photo-reconnaissance LIGHTNING aircraft sent from R.A.F. Akrotiri in Cyprus to take pictures of the airbase of Ramat David in Israel was shot down by an American F-83 fighter plane. An Avro SHACKLETON flying off the Israeli coast and providing protective electronic jamming was also shot down by American fighters without warning. While the

pilot of the LIGHTNING was able to eject over Israel and was subsequently captured, none of the ten crewmembers of the SHACKLETON survived.”

Outraged and angry comments flew at once around the table, forcing the colonel to pause until some quiet had returned.

“Six hours ago, our local headquarters in Cyprus received a radio call from Major General Dows, the commander of the American task force operating from Ramat David Airbase. In that call, General Dows announced that our LIGHTNING pilot, Squadron Leader Burnham, was safe but held as a prisoner for the time being. General Dows also passed a warning that any further electronic jamming on our part, even from outside Israeli territory or waters, would be considered an act of direct support to Arab attacks against Israel and would attract a lethal response. Shortly after that message was received, ten Jordanian Air Force planes penetrated Israeli airspace and were promptly shot down by American fighters. It seems in that case that the Egyptian Air Force, which had already lost 22 jet aircraft yesterday, had neglected to inform the other Arab air forces around Israel about the fact that a whole squadron of American F-83 jet fighters had just arrived in Ramat David from its previous base of Da Nang in Indochina. We also learned that, shortly afterwards, two Egyptian mechanized columns pushing through Gaza and the Negev Desert were set upon and destroyed by American planes and attack helicopters. Other ground attacks by Syrian and Iraqi columns against the region of Galilee were similarly destroyed from the air.”

Air Chief Marshall Sir Dermot Boyle, Chief of the Air Staff, threw his arms up in frustration.

“The bloody incompetents! When will they learn to work together for a change?”

“Probably never, sir.” Replied candidly the colonel. “Anyway, now they know.”

“What is exactly the composition of that American task force and what do we know about that General Dows, Colonel?” Asked the Permanent Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs for the Middle East, Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick. The Military Intelligence colonel went to his projector and changed the transparency on it to show a picture of a powerful jet fighter with American markings.

“The core of that task force is composed of the 170<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron, previously based in Da Nang, Indochina. That squadron is equipped with two dozen F-83 fighter planes like the one you are now seeing. Apart from flying what is deemed to be the best jet fighter aircraft in the World at this time, the pilots of that unit are also considered the elite of the United States Air Force and include the top American air

aces. That squadron was part of the air raid on Beijing that decimated the Chinese Communist leadership three months ago.”

The ministers and generals around the table exchanged worried looks then: that raid had been a big story all over the World and had caused a number of cabinet members to wonder aloud about the true military capabilities of the United States. The official view from the Imperial General Staff that the United States was gradually becoming a second rate military power had taken quite a bashing then. The Military Intelligence colonel went on with his presentation, changing transparencies again and showing a heavily modified cargo aircraft with numerous antennas and radomes.

“Another key part of the American task force now operating in Israel consists of two EC-200R electronic warfare and surveillance aircraft like this one. The electronic equipment aboard these aircraft is very sophisticated and has proved itself over Indochina. The Americans presently use them over Israel as flying radar stations and as radio monitoring stations. The American task force also has a squadron of the new A-3 attack aircraft, a few transport aircraft and a whole helicopter group. Before those planes arrived in Israel, an American amphibious flotilla docked in Haifa with an ammunition ship and a tanker ship. The amphibious ships landed what appeared to be a reinforced battalion of marine infantry, complete with tanks, amphibious troop carriers and anti-aircraft guns, plus a long convoy of airfield servicing vehicles and equipment. Our assessment is that this battalion is there to provide local protection to Ramat David Airbase, which the Americans now use. Officially, the mission of the American task force is to ensure the continued existence of the new state of Israel and the respect of the United Nations resolutions on Palestine.”

“The state of Israel...” Scoffed the chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, Patrick Dean. “A bunch of ragtag Jewish refugees doesn’t make a state. Within a month or two they will be swept into the sea by the Arabs. Then, we will have true peace over the Middle East and will be able to fully take care of our interests in the region.”

Dean didn’t have to mention that those interests were pretty much all about oil and its continued supply to the British empire at preferential prices.

Sir Anthony Eden, the Vice Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, gave a dubious look at Dean.

“For an intelligence specialist, I find your analysis based on ethnic considerations rather simplistic, Mister Dean. These Jews caused us enough grief to finally force us to



evacuate Palestine. Let's not make the mistake of underestimating these people. Yes, they are poorly equipped and badly trained, but they have plenty of courage and determination. With the arrival of that American force, they now benefit from a first class air umbrella. On top of that, this interposition force is commanded by Major General Dows, who is rightly considered by many as the best fighting general the Americans have at this time. Dows can turn around by herself a situation that would be considered by many as desperate. In fact, she did precisely that, by calling the Jordanians and by convincing them to suspend their planned attack on Jerusalem."

"How did she manage that?" Asked Churchill, stunned.

"By coming to a gentleman's agreement with General Glubb Pacha, the commander of the Arab Legion, and with Amir Abdallah. She told them that she would let them advance and take the Transjordan, which was already designated by the United Nations as an Arab zone, in exchange for the Jordanians promising to respect Jerusalem's neutrality. She also promised them to do her best to protect the Arab villages that exist inside the Jewish zone from excesses and forced expulsions by the Jews. Our embassy in Amman sent me an urgent message about this less than one hour ago."

"Well, this young woman is certainly not wasting any time." Said with a half smile Churchill. Ivone Kirkpatrick seemed irritated by that comment and replied in a barely polite tone.

"Mister Prime Minister, this young woman had two of our planes shot down, killing ten British service members, on top of turning upside down our strategic plans for the whole Middle East. Our oil supply at preferential price depends on an Arab victory in Palestine and on us preserving our influence on the Arabs. Hundreds of millions of pounds sterling per year are at play, sums that our economy can't afford to lose. We should at a minimum protest strongly the destruction of our planes and, ideally, neutralize that American interposition force by political or military means."

A concert of approving comments greeted those words, with Anthony Eden proposing a first suggestion.

"We could suggest to the Arabs to threaten the United States with an oil embargo if it doesn't withdraw that interposition force."

"A most practical idea." Said Churchill approvingly. "Any other ideas, gentlemen?"

"We could sabotage on the ground the American planes in Ramat David." Suggested Field Marshal Harding, a man known to favor extreme solutions. "One of our SAS<sup>10</sup> units, disguised as Bedouins, could infiltrate the Ramat David airbase at night and destroy those damn F-83s. With its most dangerous component eliminated, the American interposition force would find itself highly vulnerable and would then have to withdraw."

"And what if one of our men is captured by the Americans?" Asked Eden, skeptical.

"Our men would not carry any identification or any British uniforms or equipment. As to make them confess who they are, I don't believe that the Americans have the stomach to seriously harm them."

"If we launch a commando raid on Ramat David," cut in Brigadier Stanley, the new head of the Secret Services, "then we should use that opportunity to eliminate this General Dows. She has proved to be a growing threat to the interests of the empire."

"You want to have her assassinated?" Asked Eden, shocked. Stanley nodded his head, his expression hard.

"We did try to assassinate General Rommel in 1941, no? We also sank the French fleet in Mers el Kebir when it refused to sail to England. This woman planned the design and introduction into service of all the new American planes. The commercial versions of the new American transport aircraft are just now entering service with various American airlines and are threatening to bankrupt both our aeronautical industry and our own commercial airlines. If we let her a free hand now, she could very well reverse the political balance in the Middle East and install the United States in our place. After the quasi miracle she pulled in Indochina, we should take her very seriously and treat her for what she is: a potential enemy of the British Empire. She has to go!"

"Come on, Stanley, don't you think that you are exaggerating her importance?" Replied Patrick Dean, attracting a severe look from the head of the Secret Services.

"In case you are not reading the intelligence reports that I am sending you, my services uncovered a few indications during the past few years suggesting that Dows has intermittent contacts with the future and draws her inspiration from those contacts. She also said more than once that the British Empire should be dismantled and is one of

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<sup>10</sup> SAS : Special Air Service Regiment. A British unit specialized in commando raids and clandestine operations.

the most trusted advisors of President Dewey. All this makes Dows a very dangerous potential enemy for us, an enemy that we should eliminate as quickly as possible but in an anonymous manner.”

Seeing that many of the men around the conference table seemed to agree with Stanley, Churchill, who was himself a die-hard supporter of a strong British Empire, called for a vote on the subject of a commando raid on Ramat David, including the assassination of Dows. The result was a solid majority in favor of the raid, with Anthony Eden being one of the rare opponents of that plan. Once the vote was tallied, Churchill looked gravely at the men around the table.

“Gentlemen, we are now taking a dangerous road, a road that could lead to a conflict with the United States. However, the future of the British Empire is at stake. Our nuclear missiles should be enough to persuade the Americans to not push back too hard. Sir Anthony, arrange with the Arabs a threat of an oil embargo against the United States. Sir John, send as quickly as possible a commando unit that will strike under disguise the airbase in Ramat David. Their mission will include the destruction on the ground of the American fighters and the elimination of General Dows. Gentlemen, I now call this meeting to a close.”

### **10:52 (Jerusalem Time)**

**Monday, March 22, 1953 ‘C’**

**Head offices of the Jewish Agency**

**Tel Aviv, Israel**

Yigael Yadin, Chief of Staff of the Haganah, was both tense and apprehensive as he sipped his cup of tea: the discussion between David Ben-Gurion and Major General Dows was quickly degenerating into a verbal confrontation. Ben-Gurion, with which Yadin himself often had differences of opinions, was showing the pig-headedness he was famous for, while Yadin could see that Dows could be as forceful as Ben-Gurion, on top of having better military and political arguments. Also sitting in Ben-Gurion’s office was a tall, athletic blond female lieutenant colonel of the American Air Force military police who had escorted Dows to this meeting.

“...and I tell you again that your people in Jerusalem are too alarmist, Mister Ben-Gurion. I have the word of General Glubb Pacha, of the Jordanian Arab Legion,

that his forces will not try to take Western Jerusalem, nor the Jewish Quarter of the Old City, and will only protect the Arab districts of Jerusalem against Jewish attacks.”

“And you really believe that he will keep his word, or that he will be able to control the Arab irregulars in Jerusalem, General?”

“Mister Ben-Gurion, I frankly have more confidence in the word of General Glubb Pacha than that of some of your military leaders in Jerusalem, especially those from the Irgun and of the Lehi, whose indiscriminate attacks have greatly contributed to inflame the present situation.”

Ben-Gurion jumped to his feet, apparently incensed.

“Are you daring to say that we are the attackers rather than the victims, General?”

Ingrid, not intimidated or convinced one second by the Jewish politician’s indignation, stared hard at him but kept her voice even.

“Let’s see! In the course of last week, my soldiers and observers have caught Jewish forces red-handed as they were expelling Muslim and Christian civilians and blowing up their houses in villages around Beysan, Acre, Nazareth and Jaffa. My soldiers had to threaten lethal force to make your units involved in this ethnic cleansing campaign leave. I also had to destroy your bulldozers which were in the process of flattening the Arab districts of Haifa and Jaffa, stopping at the same time some of your troops from looting abandoned Arab houses.”

Those sentences further infuriated Ben-Gurion, while they brought a bitter taste to Yadin’s mouth. Armed with apparently first class intelligence information about Jewish and Arab operations, two of the three infantry battalions under Dows’ command, strongly backed and supported by a fleet of helicopters and attack aircraft, had deployed observation posts around Northern and Central Palestine, near contested villages and towns, both Jewish and Arab. While those observation posts had actually saved a few Jewish communities from Arab attacks, most of the time it had been Jewish troops which had been confronted by American heliborne quick reaction forces and had been forced to turn back. In a couple of instances, Jewish units that had been too slow to accept to withdraw had been forcibly disarmed, while one Irgun unit that had fired at American soldiers had been quickly wiped out by American attack helicopters. Also, the Haganah battalion that had helped at first to protect the airbase at Ramat David had been politely asked to leave by Dows four days ago, after the first armed clash between American and Jewish soldiers. Overall, Jewish combat operations in Northern and Central Palestine

were now at a near standstill. And now Dows wanted to involve herself with the problem of Jerusalem. She was however not finished with Ben-Gurion.

“As for the Jerusalem sector, you concluded in the past a secret pact with Emir Abdallah of Transjordan, who promised you to keep his forces inside the territory allotted to an Arab state as per the United Nations Partition Plan. I also came to an understanding with Emir Abdallah and General Glubb Pacha, who repeated their pledge to not attack Jewish territory and also promised to give free passage to your supply convoys to Jerusalem. On the other hand, your forces are still attacking Arab villages around the towns of Lydda and Ramleh, on top of firing a few times at the fort of Latrun, which is held by the Arab Legion.”

“We had no choice in that, General Dows: the Arab irregulars in those localities keep firing at our convoys and are blocking the way, thus starving out our people in Jerusalem.”

“The way your convoys are aggressively pushed, with your men firing on sight at the Arab villages they go by, I am not too surprised by that, Mister Ben-Gurion. There is also the fact that, despite my repeated warnings, you are still secretly encouraging your fighters in intimidating and expelling by force the non-Jews living in the portion of territory allotted to the Jewish state in Palestine. If you really want the protection and air cover of my force, then you will finally have to play straight with me and stop lying to me, Mister Ben-Gurion. If not, I will advise President Dewey to withdraw my force from Palestine.”

Yigael Yadin put down his cup of tea on hearing that, worried. He became squarely alarmed when Ben-Gurion hotly replied to Dows.

“Go ahead, General! Leave Palestine with your force if you are not ready to defend Israel! We are strong enough to protect our young nation, now that we have seen how weak the Arab forces really are.”

“Mister Ben-Gurion, you can't be serious!” Protested Yadin, getting up from his chair. “We would then be without effective air cover, while our isolated kibbutz in the Negev and in Galilee would again be left to themselves. We also can't risk to see the arms shipments from the United States stop. We still don't have enough rifles for all of our combatants and we have no heavy artillery, tanks or jet fighters, while the Arabs are still getting considerable military aid from the British.”

Ben-Gurion hesitated, recognizing the validity of the points raised by Yadin. He finally looked with reticence at Ingrid.

"After all this is said, we still have 100,000 Jews about to starve in Jerusalem if our convoys keep being blocked by the Arabs. What do you propose to do about that, General?"

"What I propose is some quick negotiations between me and the Arab commanders of the units posted between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, to obtain free passage for supply convoys. Then, American military convoys would take care of running that supply line. However, those convoys will carry only food, humanitarian aid and medical supplies, and no weapons or ammunition."

"No weapons or ammunition?" Exclaimed Ben-Gurion, outraged. "But, that would leave our people in Jerusalem out of ammunitions within days."

Ingrid eyed Ben-Gurion severely, tired of his bad faith.

"My soldiers and the Arab Legion will take care of preventing Arab irregulars from firing at the Jewish residents of Jerusalem...as long your own fighters restrain themselves and stop shooting at the Arabs. By the way, the situation in Jerusalem would be a lot quieter if the bastards from your Irgun and Lehi stopped throwing grenades and bombs in the Arab public markets of the city. The more things go, the more I am starting to doubt that you have effective control of those thugs. If you don't deal with them, I will, and I'm not ruling out the use of my planes against them."

Yadin thought for a moment that Ben-Gurion would explode again, but the latter managed to control himself...barely.

"Very well, General Dows! I will give you a chance to prove that you can indeed resupply Jerusalem, even if I don't really believe that you can succeed. We will talk again once the first convoys have gone through intact."

"And all I am asking from you is some goodwill and sincerity, Mister Ben-Gurion." Replied Ingrid, her tone neutral. "I will keep you informed by telephone of the results of my negotiations with the Arabs. Shalom!"

Ingrid got up and saluted Ben-Gurion, who nodded his head but did not offer his hand for a handshake, then left the office. Once alone with Yadin, Ben-Gurion sighed and gave a discouraged look to his military chief of staff.

"President Dewey should have sent an officer that is easier to deal with than her, Yigael."

"Maybe, but he did send us his best fighting general, David. Her force has done a lot already to ensure the survival of Israel, whether we may agree or disagree with her methods."

"True, but she is also sabotaging our strategic plans for the future of our young state. We will never be able to secure correctly the territory of Israel if all those Arabs are not expelled from it."

"Those 'Arabs' are the blood brothers of your ancestors, David Ben-Gurion." Both Ben-Gurion and Yadin turned abruptly to look to their left, where the male voice speaking Hebrew had come. Their eyes widened, while their knees became weak at the sight of the luminescent shape of a bearded man wearing an ancient robe and standing over two meters tall in one corner of the office. The old man, his face full of wrinkles, also held a walking staff as he eyed severely the two Jews.

"Is this what the Jewish people has come to be? From being persecuted and exterminated only a few years ago, it is now itself committing injustices and atrocities, using the old promise of a land in Canaan to justify its misdeeds."

"Who...who are you?" Barely managed to ask Yadin.

"I was known as Avram<sup>11</sup>, nearly four millenniums ago. My servant Agar just warned you to change your ways and you would be better to heed her warnings."

"Agar?" Said hesitantly Ben-Gurion, who was nearly hypnotized by the apparition. "You mean General Dows?"

"Yes! Amdira, Agar, Ingrid Dows: different names for the same great soul."

"Did God send you, great patriarch?" Asked Yadin, who had knelt on hearing Avram's name. The look the being of light gave to him then was much less hard than the one he reserved for Ben-Gurion.

"I was sent by The One, to support and enforce the actions and words of his Chosen in Palestine."

"Dows is God's Chosen?" Asked Yadin in a strangled voice, getting a nod from the being.

"She has the mission of making this World a better place for all. She will protect the Jews in Palestine, but not at the expense of the descendents of your ancestors who stayed in Palestine after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. The ancestors of those you call 'Arabs' were the brothers of your ancestors who fled the Holy Land to escape the wrath of the Romans. The majority of them were however forced in the centuries that followed to convert to either Islam or Christianity in order to survive as new

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<sup>11</sup> Avram : The original name of the great patriarch Abraham, before his name was changed to fit Hebrew spelling. The name of his wife was similarly changed from Saraï to Sarah.

invaders came to Palestine. Those so-called Arabs have more rights than you do to live in this land, but you have already forcibly expelled or intimidated hundreds of thousands of them into leaving, even killing many of them. This has to stop, NOW!"

"This can't be true!" Protested Ben-Gurion, regaining some of his combativeness. "We were promised this land and..."

He suddenly stopped speaking, as if being strangled, while his body levitated off the floor as the being of light stared harshly at him. A powerful voice then resonated inside the brains of the two Jews, making their whole bodies vibrate.

**"FROM DUST YOU CAME AND DUST YOU WILL BECOME AGAIN IF YOU PERSIST IN OPPOSING THE WILL OF THE ONE! YOU WILL STOP THE PERSECUTION OF THE NON-JEWS IN PALESTINE AND WILL INVITE BACK THOSE WHO FLED THE DEPREDATIONS OF YOUR SOLDIERS. DO NOT MAKE ME COME BACK, OR YOU AND YOUR ACCOMPLICES WILL REGRET IT!"**

The being then vanished into thin air, at the same time as Ben-Gurion fell back hard to the floor, his knees giving up and ending on his back, shaken to the core. Yadin hurried to help him up at once.

"Are you alright, David?"

"Ye...yes, I think so."

Yadin helped him sit back in his chair and let him have a few seconds to regain his composure before cautiously asking a question.

"What are we going to do now, David?"

"We will do as Abraham said." Replied Ben-Gurion, his voice bitter. "We don't have any other choice, do we? Damn! How am I to explain this to my cabinet members?"

Returning to her M-20 armored command car, on which a big American flag flew from its HF radio antenna, Ingrid showed a number of points on her map to Angie Dickinson, the commander of her Air Force security unit.

"We will now take the Jaffa-to-Jerusalem road. Our first stop will be in Ramleh, where I intend to speak to the local Arab military commander and to the mayor, in order



to obtain their cooperation about letting our convoys to Jerusalem pass unhindered. I will then go visit the Arab leaders in the nearby town of Lydda and also inspect in which state is the airport there. From there, we will take again the road to Jerusalem to go to the fort of Latrun, a strategic position that controls the main road and is held by the Jordanian Arab Legion. Finally, once in Jerusalem, we will select an appropriate spot that could act as our terminal for your convoys and will go speak with the local leaders on both sides. We will probably have to spend the night in Jerusalem, at our consulate compound, before coming back.”

“Hey, I always dreamed of visiting Jerusalem one day.” Replied with a smile the ex-roller derby player. “Let’s hope that the Arabs will listen to us.”

Ingrid gave her a malicious smile then.

“And why would they not listen to Agar, the matriarch of the Arab people, or to Aïsha, the Mother of the Faithful? Well, we have a lot to do today and little time to do it, so let’s mount up and roll.”

Climbing quickly aboard her M-20, which was driven by Denise Bateman and was armed with a .50 caliber heavy machine gun served by a female MP, Ingrid pointed in the direction leading to the Jerusalem road.

“Let’s go, Sergeant Bateman, and remember that they drive on the left side in Palestine.”

Denise Bateman rolled her eyes as she started her engine and engaged the first gear. The local driving methods had been a shock for her and for the other American drivers of the interposition force, when there were any methods at all.

## **18:16 (Jerusalem Time)**

### **United States consulate, Jerusalem**

Ingrid and her M-20 crews arrived in Jerusalem, covered with dust, as the Sun was about to set. Driving to the American consulate, they finally parked inside the consulate’s walled compound, which was guarded by a small contingent of marines. Ingrid was alarmed at once on seeing the near panicked state of the consulate’s diplomats as she jumped on the ground. Walking quickly to the main entrance, she stopped the first diplomat she encountered.

“Could you tell me what is going on here? Where is the Representative, Mister McDonald?”

The young man looked at her with a bewildered expression.

“You don’t know, General? Mister McDonald was killed this afternoon by a sniper. He died of his wounds one hour ago in hospital.”

“SHIT!” Exclaimed Ingrid, suddenly both furious and sad.

### **15:40 (Jerusalem Time)**

**Tuesday, March 23, 1953 ‘C’**

**Base commander’s residence**

**Ramat David Airbase, Galilee**

**Palestine**

Ingrid beamed with joy on seeing Hien, carried in the arms of Sarah Ur, as she was entering the two-storey brick house that had been the base commandant’s residence and that was now occupied by her, Hien, Sarah and Denise Bateman. Hien wiggled out of Sarah’s arms and ran to Ingrid, who opened her arms wide to greet her and grab her, covering her with kisses.

“It’s so good to see you again, my sweet little angel.”

Hien playfully passed one hand in Ingrid’s hair, making dust fall off.

“You’re covered with dust, Mommy.”

“That’s no surprise, after driving along those dirt roads between here and Jerusalem, Hien. I in fact came here with Denise to wash off all that dust before having supper with you and Sarah. Just give me time to clean up and change and I will be with you.”

Ingrid then climbed the main wooden staircase that led from the lobby up to the top floor bedrooms, followed closely by her driver. Both women went in their respective bedrooms to shed their dirty clothes and went nearly at the same time to the common bathroom of the floor, wearing bathrobes and with their hygiene kit and towels in hand. Ingrid gave a knowing smile to Denise as she opened the door of the bathroom.

“Should we shower together, to save hot water?”

“Any excuse will do, General.” Replied Denise, grinning with anticipated pleasure. A closet lesbian, the shapely blonde had been very discreetly having a secret relationship for close to three months now with Ingrid, who was a closet bisexual thanks to her souvenirs from the male incarnations she had lived in the past. She realized that their relation was purely sexual and could not go on for very long until their respective

military careers made them part, but Denise was more than content to make the most out of it while it lasted.

Both women came back down fifty minutes later, finding Sarah Ur in the process of giving an English teaching lesson to Hien in the living room with the help of lettered dominos. Ingrid watched for a moment her five year-old daughter as she answered Sarah's questions in her laborious English, then bent down to kiss her on her head.

"Good show, Hien! You are really making rapid progress with your English."

"Thank you, Mommy."

Sarah Ur, who was kneeling besides Hien on the carpet, then looked up at Ingrid and spoke to her in Old Sumerian.

"Keep a straight face right now, Ingrid, as if I am telling you something routine. I have a warning to pass to you from The One: a large British commando force in disguise will strike this base after midnight, with the mission of blowing up on the ground your F-83 fighters and of killing you. I will personally make sure that Hien stays safe, so you will be free to concentrate on protecting your planes. A large coordinated Arab air attack will then follow in the early morning. If anyone asks, say that a source in Jerusalem discreetly warned you."

Ingrid had to do her best to stay impassive at those words, finally answering back in Old Sumerian while keeping a neutral expression.

"Thank you for the warning, Sarah. I will go prepare for that at once."

She then switched to Vietnamese, so that Hien could understand her.

"Well, I will have to go brief my officers about my trip to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. That should take less than one hour. Then I will be back to have supper with you. Sarah, could I ask you to take care of the cooking?"

"No problem, Ingrid. I have everything here to be able to prepare a good chicken couscous."

"Aaah, that would be perfect! I will see you in about one hour then. Be nice with Sarah in the meantime, Hien."

"I will, Mommy."

Going out to her Jeep with Denise, Ingrid had her drive them to the base headquarters building, where Ingrid went at once to the main operations center of her

force. Posting herself in the middle of the large room, she shouted around at the staff present.

"LISTEN UP, PLEASE! I WANT ALL UNIT COMMANDERS AND PRINCIPAL STAFF OFFICERS HERE FOR AN EMERGENCY MEETING AS SOON AS EVERYBODY CAN BE HERE. TERESA, CAN YOU COME SEE ME IN MY OFFICE?"

As staff officers started making telephone or radio calls, Ingrid went to her office, closely followed by her chief of staff and deputy force commander, Teresa James. Once in her office, Ingrid looked gravely at her longtime friend and combat comrade.

"Teresa, I picked up a critical piece of intelligence that was passed to me by a source best left unnamed in Jerusalem. According to that source, a commando force is slated to attack this base tonight, after midnight, with the goal of destroying on the ground our fighters in order to give back air superiority to the Arab air forces. That commando attack will in turn be followed in the early morning by a mass coordinated air attack against Ramat David. The source also said that those incoming commandos will be disguised but are not Arabs."

Teresa's face hardened on hearing the last sentence and nearly spat out her reply.

"The British! Those hypocritical bastards! It isn't enough for them to push the Arabs in putting in place an embargo on oil exports to the United States?"

"They may be hypocritical bastards, Teresa, but they are also very dangerous bastards. They will probably send part of their best commando unit at us tonight, meaning their Special Air Service Regiment. You are talking about top notch soldiers, possibly the best in the World and easily the equals of our paratroopers and Army special forces men. We will have to show some ingenuity in order to stop them without incurring heavy casualties. Also, since we cannot afford to lose our F-83s on the ground, we will have to organize a defense in depth. Our women will have to provide the last line of defense nearest to our planes, while our marines will hold the first lines. We have enough plastic explosives, scrap metal and empty ammunition boxes around to make quite a few claymore mines, I hope?"

"I believe that we do, but I will go check on that right away."

"Excellent! In the meantime, I will start drafting a warning message to our Navy component, so that they can be ready to provide us with extra fighter cover for tomorrow morning. With luck, and thanks to that source in Jerusalem, we will be able to turn around those attacks and teach a lesson to these British. Oh, one last thing: have my F-83 rearmed with six 2,000 pound armor-piercing bombs. If any British ship tries to

support this coming air attack in the morning by electronically jamming our radars and communications, then I will personally take care of it. If we have to sink a British warship, then I will be the one taking full responsibility for it.”

Teresa gave her a concerned look at those last words.

“I hope that we won’t have to come to that, Ingrid. The consequences could be awful.”

“Not as awful as if those British commandos kill our men and women and destroy our F-83s on the ground, Teresa. It is high time that we expose their hypocrisy to all in this conflict. I am ready to go roast in Hell if need be to protect our force and expose the British, consequences be damned!”

### **00:45 (Jerusalem Time)**

**Wednesday, March 24, 1953 ‘C’**

#### **Southern perimeter fence, Ramat David Airbase**

Only the faint metallic noise from his wire cutters could be heard as the British soldier quickly but discreetly cut a hole through the base perimeter fence to let his comrades through. Three other British soldiers were similarly occupied along this side of the base, with a total of 132 S.A.S. soldiers waiting anxiously for their four comrades to open breaches in the fence for them. As soon as a hole had been cut out, the platoon of men hiding on each side of the soldier then started crawling through, as quiet as ghosts. The 42 men of that group hid in the wild grass and brush on the other side of the fence for a few seconds while they regrouped and observed their surroundings. The captain in charge of them then took the lead and started cautiously towards the long line of aircraft revetments strewn along the taxiway that formed an irregular loop connecting both of the main runways and the parking aprons. Even in the poor light from a half moon, the characteristic twin tails of F-83 fighter aircraft could be seen sticking above the protective walls of the revetments, thus guiding the S.A.S. towards their main targets. They could see as well a few of the soldiers guarding the base, standing in the watch towers spaced along the inside of the perimeter fence. The S.A.S. ignored those guards and alternatively crawled and ran at a crouch from cover to cover towards the aircraft revetments. Another group of raiders was going to take care of the transport and tanker aircraft parked on a more distant apron, while yet another group would scour the various

aircraft hangars. The last group of raiders however had a special mission of its own and had already separated from the three other groups.

The first group of British soldiers, all wearing old non-descript uniforms devoid of patches or even rank insignias and with Arab keffieh head scarves, soon arrived at the edge of the loop taxiway, with the nearest aircraft revetment about 300 meters away. Stopping for a moment behind a bush, the captain that commanded the group raised a night vision scope to his left eye and scanned carefully the terrain to his front and sides. He didn't see anything out of place at first but his heart jumped in his chest when he looked at the nearest aircraft revetment: a tank was positioned near it in a hull scrape, its main gun pointed directly at him. Swearing quietly to himself, the captain continued his observation for a few more seconds, finding a second tank similarly positioned on the opposite side of the taxiway from the first tank. He then saw a number of heads sticking above the parapets of trenches and sandbag positions facing him. Now getting both nervous and pissed, he activated the microphone of his radio headset and spoke in a low, urgent voice.

"Alpha Niner, this is Alpha One, over."

"Send, Alpha One." Replied the S.A.S. force commander nearly at once.

"Alpha Niner, I can see two tanks dug in near the first fighter aircraft revetment, plus men manning trenches dug along the outer sides of that revetment. The enemy is waiting for us, over."

There was a noticeable delay before the S.A.S. major replied to that.

"Understood, Alpha One. It could however still be only precautionary measures taken by the enemy. The opposing commander is supposed to be smart, after all. Stay in position while I advance forward with my group, over."

"Alpha One Wilco, out!" Answered the captain, who then laid down behind the bush and pointed his assault rifle, a German-produced StG-44 captured along with considerable quantities of other German weapons at the end of World War Two. Using his night scope again, he soon located his commander, who was presently dashing across a small side road to his right, bent over and followed by a dozen men. The rest of the major's group was dashing across as well after he had taken cover behind a tree when the captain heard a faint pop in the distance. Being an experienced soldier, he hugged the ground at once and whispered forcefully to his men around him.

"Parachute flare coming up! Don't move!"

As he had predicted, a bright light suddenly lit up high in the sky, illuminating the area where the major's group was hiding. Two more flares went up in quick succession, lighting up the whole southern area of the base. Nothing else happened for a few seconds. Then, as the captain thought that maybe the other group was out of big trouble, a machine gun opened fire, sweeping through the patches of trees where the major and his men were hiding. A second, then a third machine gun opened fire, sweeping that space as well in a dense, murderous pattern. Some of the bullets ricocheted on the ground and whistled over the captain's head. The voice of the major then came on the radio, sounding urgent.

"To all Alpha call signs, this is Alpha Niner. Go for your objectives at once and destroy them, out!"

Swearing at their bad luck, the captain looked at his platoon warrant, an old hand with good tactical judgment.

"We are going to rush across the taxiway and take cover in the trees on the other side. Once there, we will form an assault line and try to roll the enemy's flank. Remember: those fighter aircraft are our main targets."

"Understood, sir!" Replied the veteran through clenched teeth, probably realizing already that they were going to suffer heavy casualties no matter what tonight. The captain then shouted at his men.

**"FOLLOW ME ACROSS THE TAXIWAY AND FORM AN ASSAULT LINE ONCE ON THE OTHER SIDE! UP AND RUN!"**

Jumping on his feet, the captain then started running across the over eighty meters of open space facing him, his heart beating furiously and expecting to be shot at any time now. To his horror, a machine gun that he had not seen started firing from the cover of bushes and trees he was trying to get to, followed by the fire from numerous automatic rifles. By some miracle, the captain managed to run across the taxiway without being hit. He was however hit in the upper left leg as he was rushing at the hidden machine gun position while firing his StG-44 rifle. Rolling on the ground with a scream of pain, he hurriedly dragged himself behind a tree and looked back across the taxiway. What he saw made him furious: lying across the open asphalt surface, either very still or trashing and moaning, were what seemed to be most of his men. Some had however apparently made it safely across, as a furious firefight was going on around him now. Doing his best not to scream with pain because of his leg wound, the captain moved a bit to his left in order to have a clear field of fire around the tree, then fired his StG-44 towards the

enemy machine gun. That earned him back half a dozen bursts from as many enemy assault rifles that forced him to return behind cover. Feeling blood coming out profusely from his left leg, he took out of a pocket a field dressing pad and ripped it open, then applied it as best he could on his wound, grimacing with pain as he did so. His face was covered with cold sweat when he was finished, by the time much of the firing around him had died down. There was however plenty of firing further in the distance, including the loud booms from tank main guns and some powerful explosions. The captain then heard steps approaching cautiously and grabbed back his StG-44. Before he could point it, though, a flashlight was pointed at his face from a distance of a few meters, while an American voice shouted harshly at him.

“DROP YOUR WEAPON NOW AND RAISE YOUR HANDS OR YOU ARE A DEAD MAN!”

With the bitterness of defeat overtaking him, the captain had a last look at his men, dead or dying across the taxiway, then raised his right hand in a flash to grab one of his hand grenades. He didn't have a chance to pull out the safety pin before being shot a dozen times in the chest.

The fourth group of S.A.S. men and also the smallest, with fourteen men in it, was nearly at their objective when a heavy firefight started in their back. They then received the ultimate radio message from their commander. The lieutenant in charge of the group hesitated for a moment, looking at his second in command, a crusty sergeant that would have fit well inside a penitentiary if he had not been in the army.

“Somebody betrayed us, Sergeant. The Americans were waiting for us.”

“Maybe, sir, but they haven't found us yet. We might as well do what we came for before they do find us.”

“Uh, right, Sergeant.”

Peeping from behind the tree he used as cover, he examined the small cottage that was his group's objective: there were lights now at two of the upper floor windows.

“It looks like our target is home and up. Let's rush the house before she can run or drive away. Follow me, men!”

Sprinting past the last trees towards the house, the British got to the cottage in fifteen seconds and crouched besides the main entrance door. Using hand signals, the lieutenant sent his sergeant and four men to cover the back door and to position a covering team. With that done, he then got up and violently kicked the door in before



rushing inside with his StG-44 pointed and ready. Seeing no one, he rushed up the staircase leading to the bedrooms, four men at his back. He stopped abruptly just before getting to the upper floor and turned, readying his rifle in order to cover his men while sticking only his head and shoulders above the level of the upper floor. To his short-lived surprise, a strange, highly-focused beam of red light then shone in his eyes from a distance of a mere meter before a bullet crashed through his brain. Projected backward by the impact of the .45 caliber pistol bullet, the lieutenant fell dead in the staircase, slowing down the two soldiers trying to rush past him. Those two soldiers were next to be shot from point blank range. The two other soldiers following them braked abruptly and stepped back down in a hurry. In a common accord the two British S.A.S. raiders pointed their rifles at the ceiling over them, where the unknown shooter had to be, and emptied their magazines, shooting that part of the ceiling to splinters. The two soldiers were hurriedly changing magazines on their rifles when a small woman appeared at the top of the stairs and shot her compact pistol twice, killing both soldiers with head shots. The woman, wearing an Arabic robe, rushed down the stairs and holstered back her pistol before grabbing one of the StG-44 assault rifles, along with five full clips of ammunition and four hand grenades. Now well armed, Sarah quietly went to the main door, which was still wide open. Listening carefully for a few seconds, she heard no other British soldier inside the house. She could however hear the terrified sobs of little Hien, who was presently hiding under her bed. The angel was resolved to give no quarters here as she scanned the night outside: trying to assassinate Ingrid inside her residence was bad enough but putting little Hien in danger was much worse in her mind. Seeing four more British soldiers posted outside behind shrubs and trees and turning their backs to her, Sarah aimed her captured StG-44 and shot four times in quick succession. She could have done all her killing tonight using plasma energy balls or by causing brain aneurisms in the British's' heads, but that would have attracted some embarrassing questions afterwards, so she had resolved to fight strictly with common firearms. Shouted orders and footsteps then alerted her to more British soldiers. The noise of the back door being kicked in then made her withdraw back up the staircase, as she could not allow any British to get upstairs past her.

When the S.A.S. sergeant ran inside the lounge, his rifle at the ready, he saw nobody except the bodies of his lieutenant and of four soldiers, lying in and around the staircase. He then saw the four men of the covering team outside, dead. Passing a

hand on his sweaty forehead, the NCO tried to figure out what to do next. Whoever was defending this house was obviously a deadly shot. The clock was also ticking fast for him and his four remaining men if they wanted a fair chance to exit this base alive and free. The thought of running away when they were so close to finishing this part of their mission was however too much for him to accept. Looking at his four soldiers, who had joined him inside, he pointed at the ceiling.

“Cover me while I throw a few grenades upstairs. We will then rush the upper level and kill anyone we find.”

The sergeant barely had the time to climb cautiously the first steps of the staircase before Sarah appeared out of thin air behind his men, her StG-44 at the ready. Before the five British could react, she gunned them down in a hail of automatic fire. Looking down at the dead British, she spat on the sergeant, who had a still unprimed grenade in one hand.

“You can be really proud of yourselves tonight, bastards!”

### **01:37 (Jerusalem Time)**

#### **Main aircraft parking apron**

Ingrid shook her head angrily as she examined the steadily growing line of enemy bodies lying on the asphalt: none of these men wore patches, nametags or other insignias. None carried any identity papers or dog tags either. Even their weapons gave no clues about their nationality. The only thing she had up to now as hard fact was the recordings of the enemy radio messages intercepted by her electronic warfare technicians. Those radio messages had in fact helped in alerting her forces of when exactly the enemy was coming, thus contributing greatly in closing the trap on the enemy. It had been a costly night for those attackers but it also had not gone perfectly for Ingrid's people. The enemy had proved both ferocious and skillful and had cost her 25 dead and 38 wounded, some of them critical. Those casualties included airmen as well as marines, since she had beefed up the close defenses of the aircraft revetments and hangars with ground support personnel. The enemy had even managed to destroy one tank with a portable anti-tank weapon. Thankfully, the raiders had been given no chance to get close to her precious fighter aircraft and none of the F-83s had been destroyed or even damaged. An airman then stopped her jeep near her and jumped out, presenting herself while saluting.

“Maam, the duty officer received a call from your residence. Miss Ur reports that soldiers attacked your house but that they are all dead now. Your daughter is reportedly safe and well.”

“Thank God!” Said Ingrid, blowing air out in relief. “Did the duty officer send someone to my residence to secure it?”

“Yes maam! Four Air Force policewomen were sent ten minutes ago.”

“Good! You may return to your duties, Airman.”

“Yes maam!” Replied the airman before turning around and getting back in her jeep. That was when Ingrid saw Lieutenant Colonel Marion Tucker approach her at a quick step.

“Are there any raiders left roaming inside the base, Colonel?”

“I can’t say for sure yet, General. My men are still sweeping the grounds but it could take hours before we can feel more secure. Up to now, I got a count of 93 enemy dead, plus 21 wounded and eight captured intact. The enemy wounded are being treated under heavy guard at the base infirmary while the intact prisoners are being questioned. Up to now they are clamming up and not saying a single word, which gets me to this question, General: do we treat those bozos as genuine prisoners of war or like terrorists?”

“Technically, these raiders violated about every single rule of the Geneva Conventions concerning the definition of a prisoner of war, Colonel. They have no distinctive signs or markings on their uniforms, they have no identity papers or even dog tags and they have no clear leaders, since they are not wearing any rank insignias. Are your prisoners refusing as well to give their names, ranks and serial numbers?”

“They are, General. In fact, they refuse to speak even a single word.”

“Then they are to be treated like terrorists, Colonel. Just don’t execute them yet: I have an idea that could make them talk. In the meantime, everybody is to stay on stand to until we are certain that no infiltrator is left free inside this base.”

“Understood, General. If you are looking for the prisoners, they have been regrouped inside Hangar Number Four.”

“Thank you, Colonel. I will go see them shortly. First, I want to see our casualties.”

Tucker nodded soberly once: the American losses were not catastrophic, but they were still very painful.

“We put the bodies inside a vehicle maintenance garage, General. I can lead you to it.”

“Please do, Colonel.” Said Ingrid weakly, her heart sinking. She always hated losing any of her people. The fact that she had been losing friends and comrades in wars along the last twelve years now had not made it more bearable, on the contrary.

Giving a ride to Tucker in her jeep, Ingrid let the marine senior officer guide Denise Bateman to a garage about 250 meters away, near the lineup of main aircraft hangars. Despite bracing herself in advance, Ingrid felt tears coming to her eyes nearly as soon as she entered the lit garage with Tucker and Bateman: over half of the bodies lined side by side on the concrete floor were of Air Force personnel. Half of those bodies were also women. As she approached the bodies with Tucker, she heard Denise Bateman cry out in despair and then rush to the body of a young blonde.

“Christine! Nooo!”

Denise knelt by the head of the dead woman, who had her belly and groin blown open, probably by a grenade, and started caressing her blood-smeared hair while crying. Ingrid looked for a few seconds with Marion Tucker at that pitiful scene, then let Denise with her grief and reviewed one by one the 25 bodies. About two thirds down the lineup Ingrid had to stop, suddenly overwhelmed at the sight of the body of a big, powerful man with graying hair.

“Jack, not you!” She barely managed to say before sobs choked her voice. Walking slowly to the body and kneeling besides it, Ingrid touched with trembling hands the dead face of Chief Master Sergeant Jack Vicenza, then started crying shamelessly. She had known Jack Vicenza since 1942, when he had become the chief aircraft mechanic of her newly formed female air group. Now he was gone, leaving behind a wife and three children, whom Ingrid had met a few times. It took her a good minute to regain control of herself. Giving a last kiss on Jack Vicenza’s forehead, she then got up and joined Marion Tucker, who had watched quietly.

“Let’s finish this inspection, Colonel.” She said in a hard, cold voice full of contained anger. Tucker understood her feelings, as he himself was quite pissed by now, having seen a number of old comrades in the lineup. He walked down the rest of the line with her, then faced her, examining her expression. There were still a few tears on her cheeks but her eyes now showed resolution bordering on ferocity.

“What are your orders, General?”

“We go on with our tasks, Colonel. Release the Air Force personnel from security duties as soon as you feel the base secure from any possible remaining intruder and bring me a full situation report in terms of the ground defenses then. Have our dead properly tagged and bagged and then put in the cold storage room of the Officers’ Mess pending their transportation to the United States. I will go see the prisoners now. Carry on!”

“Yes General!” Snapped Tucker, saluting her crisply. She returned his salute sharply, then looked at Denise Bateman, who was still looking down despondently at the dead bodies.

“Sergeant Bateman, let’s move to Hangar Number Four.”

“Yes maam.” Replied much less firmly Denise. The driver however managed to go over her grief and went out to her jeep, starting it as Ingrid jumped in.

The ride to Hangar Number Four was short and Denise actually drove inside the hangar through one of the huge sliding doors that was open at the time. What they found were eight men sitting in a corner, their hands tied in their backs and with blindfolds over their eyes. No less than eighteen marines guarded them, pointing assault rifles at them and eyeing them with hatred. Ingrid made Denise stop the jeep quite far from the prisoners, not wanting to present them with an easy escape mean, then got out with her and walked slowly towards the prisoners. All of the latter wore the same non-descript khaki uniforms as the dead raiders she had seen earlier. Stopping first besides a marine lieutenant who seemed to be in charge of the guard force, Ingrid exchanged salutes with him and then looked at the pile of captured weapons and equipment nearby.

“Anything interesting on them, Lieutenant?” She asked in a low voice, so that the prisoners couldn’t hear her.

“Nothing except for that map, General.” Replied the young officer, handing her a folded map. Examining it quickly, Ingrid saw that it was a tactical high definition map of the base and of the surrounding area. It was a British-produced map but that didn’t mean much, as nearly all maps of Palestine had been made in Great Britain. It however had a few words in English written with grease pencil on it.

“Well, at least they won’t be able to easily claim that they are Soviets. Did they say anything or give their names, ranks and service numbers, Lieutenant?”

“They didn’t say a damn word yet, General! It is as if they are mute.”

Ingrid looked sharply at the prisoners as she replied to that.

“We will see about that.”

Examining carefully each prisoner first, Ingrid then approached one that looked a bit older than the others and also looked quite assured, at least in appearance. Suddenly grabbing the man’s collar with both hands and pulling him up hard, she forced the surprised man to his feet, then held him at arm’s length and took his blindfold off. The man blinked for a few seconds, blinded by the big ceiling lights of the hangar, before eyeing Ingrid with studied indifference. He couldn’t help show some surprise though when he saw her rank insignias of major general. Ingrid was however staring hard into his eyes by now.

“If you want to be treated like a prisoner of war, mister, then you will give me your name, rank and serial number, as required by the Geneva Conventions. You will also tell me to which armed forces you belong.”

The man made a smirk but didn’t say a word. That smirk finished to convince Ingrid on what to do with that man now. Drawing her Glock pistol, she jammed the muzzle of her weapon against the man’s groin, making the smirk disappear in an instant.

“So, I gather that you don’t want to be treated according to the Geneva Conventions, asshole! I now have the right to execute you and your comrades as simple terrorists and saboteurs. You killed 25 of my men and women and tried to kill me at my residence, endangering my five year-old daughter, so you better believe that I really hate your guts right now. YOUR NAME, RANK AND SERIAL NUMBER, NOW!”

The man stiffened but didn’t answer. Carefully pointing her gun at a specific angle that would let the bullet barely graze the man’s genitals, Ingrid pressed the trigger. The loud detonation made the guards and the prisoners alike stiffen, while the man Ingrid was interrogating shrieked involuntarily with terror and shock as the blast burned and ripped the groin area of his trousers, with the .45 caliber bullet splattering against the concrete between his feet. The man’s trousers became wet nearly at once and his legs nearly gave way but Ingrid held him up while smiling at the guards.

“Don’t worry about him: he only peed in his pants.”

That got knowing laughs from the marines, who obviously felt no sympathy for the prisoner. Ingrid then stared back at her prisoner, who looked much less arrogant now.

“Do you know your Geneva Conventions or are you such an incompetent? I want your name, rank, serial number and your nationality.”

With cold sweat flowing down his forehead, the man clenched his teeth and kept quiet. Ingrid shook her head contemptuously, then pointed her pistol straight at the man's nose. She was by now too full of grief and anger to really care what happened next.

"By refusing to provide me with the minimum required by the Geneva Conventions to qualify as a prisoner of war, then you leave me with no choice but to find you guilty of terrorism and murder in a time of war. Burn in hell, asshole!"

"WAIT!" Screamed the man barely a fraction of a second before Ingrid could complete her pull on the trigger. "I'M SERGEANT CLIFFORD ROSS, SERIAL 224509633! I'M BRITISH!"

Ingrid stared coldly at him for a long moment, her pistol still pointed and her index still tight around the trigger. She then slowly straightened her index but kept pointing her pistol.

"That wasn't so hard, wasn't it, Sergeant?"

"Fuck you, bitch!"

Ingrid immediately punched him in the groin, making him collapse on his knees from the pain.

"It's fuck you General to you, Sergeant! If you think that I wouldn't have pulled the trigger and killed you, think again."

She then shouted at the other prisoners facing her.

"LISTEN, YOU BASTARDS! I AM ONLY ASKING THAT YOU GIVE YOUR NAMES, RANKS, SERIAL NUMBERS AND NATIONALITY IN ORDER FOR YOU TO GAIN THE PROTECTION DUE TO PRISONERS OF WAR UNDER THE GENEVA CONVENTIONS. YOU REFUSE TO DO THAT AND I WILL EXECUTE YOU ON THE SPOT AS TERRORISTS, NO IFS OR BUTS! LIEUTENANT, START TAKING THEIR PARTICULARS ON PAPER!"

"Yes General!" Replied the young marine officer, stunned by her ferocity but also pleased by her success. Taking a pen and a notepad, he approached the man roughed up by Ingrid and made him repeat his particulars, also writing those down on the prisoner of war tag attached to the man. Then, with Ingrid following him closely with her pistol at the ready, he went to each of the other seven prisoners and took their blindfold off before asking them their particulars. Quite pale by now and with Ingrid's pistol against their heads, the seven men all answered him. At the end of it, Ingrid holstered her pistol and faced the marine lieutenant.

“Throw them in the brig and keep them separated at all times. Don’t take any chances and always have a minimum of two guards per prisoner when moving them around, with the prisoner’s hands tied in his back during transits. For the moment, they will get only bread and water. Understood?”

“Yes General!”

“Then carry on.”

The marine lieutenant waited until Ingrid was well out of earshot before speaking to himself.

“Jesus! Talk about a fury!”

Getting back in Denise’s jeep, Ingrid gave her a terse order.

“To my residence!”

Herself filled with grief and violent emotions, Denise drove the jeep out of the hangar and took the road leading to the living quarters area of the base, the darkness of the night broken only by the headlights of the vehicle. Denise waited until they were halfway before asking a question in the most polite manner she could.

“General, would you have shot that Brit?”

“Yes!” Answered Ingrid at once without a trace of hesitation or doubt, something that sent a shiver down Denise’s spine. The image of her dead friend Christine then came back in her mind, bringing back grief as well. Grief was quickly followed by anger and hatred at those who had killed her friend. The men and women of the task force had killed plenty of enemies in the last few days but they had done so in the open, in American uniforms and in planes bearing the proud star of the United States Air Force. If those enemies wanted a rematch, they knew where to find the task force, as it was no secret. The same had been true in Indochina. For someone to pretend to be out of a war and then send killers in the night who wouldn’t even divulge their nationality was to Denise both cowardly and despicable. Denise, having thought over that, now felt that she could understand Ingrid’s murderous urge in the hangar. By the time she stopped her jeep in front of Ingrid’s residence, Denise’s unease had changed to resolute support for her commander’s actions. Four Air Force policewomen, helped by Sarah, were busy lining up the bodies of no less than fourteen raiders on the front lawn as Denise and Ingrid stepped out of the jeep. Denise noticed at once the assault rifle slung in Sarah’s back and the captured web gear with spare magazines she wore. She also saw the nearly awed looks the policewomen kept throwing at Sarah, who was acting as if piling



dead bodies was an old routine for her. As Denise was looking on, she saw Ingrid run to the front door, to be met there by little Hien, who threw herself into Ingrid's arms to hug her. Denise felt her heart melt as she watched the two hug each other tearfully for a long moment. Ingrid then went inside with Hien, leaving Denise with Sarah and the policewomen. Their macabre job done, the policewomen walked away a short distance to have a smoke and probably also to talk freely between themselves. Seeing that, Denise went slowly to Sarah, smiling meekly to her before looking at the bodies lined up on the grass.

"Did you kill all fourteen of them, Sarah?"

"I had to, for Hien's sake."

"Where did you learn to kill like that, Sarah?" Asked frankly Denise, speaking softly. Sarah didn't seem to be offended by her question, instead staring calmly back at her.

"From long practice, Denise...Very long practice indeed. You lost a friend tonight?"

"Yes! More than one in fact. So did Ingrid."

Sarah lowered her head in genuine sorrow for a moment, then looked back up at Denise.

"We all have to die one day, Denise. Their loss is tragic but their spirits will go on. Ingrid will also die one day, and so will Hien, whether I like it or not. The best we can hope for is to live full, happy and useful lives before dying."

"But Christine was still so young." Protested meekly Denise, making Sarah nod once.

"I know a song titled 'Only the good die young'. It unfortunately is too often quite prophetic, Denise."

"But that's so unjust." Said Denise, breaking in tears. Sarah hugged her at once to console her. They were still together when Ingrid came out of the house with Hien. Seeing that, Sarah patted a last time Denise's shoulder and went back to the porch, taking Hien's hand and leading her inside after exchanging a few soft words with Ingrid. The latter then went to Denise and smiled weakly to her.

"Time to go back to our duties, Denise. We will have more fighting to do soon this morning, this time in the air."

**06:54 (Jerusalem Time)**

**Duty EC-200R electronic reconnaissance and command aircraft**

**12,000 meters above Tel Aviv**

“Colonel, I have large formations of aircraft forming up over three Egyptian airfields.”

Lieutenant Colonel Dorothy Avery, the commander of the 171<sup>st</sup> Reconnaissance Squadron, ‘The Foxes’, hurried to the radar station of her chief air watch officer and looked over her shoulder at the glowing screen.

“What do you have exactly?”

“Over a hundred bogeys taking off from El Arish, Cairo and Alexandria, Colonel. I now can detect as well more aircraft starting to take off from airfields in Syria and Lebanon.”

“What about in Transjordan?”

“Uh, nothing there yet, Colonel.”

Dorothy Avery nodded her head at that, not surprised.

“At least, it seems that the Jordanians are ready to keep their word about not attacking us. Still, this leaves us with an awful number of enemy aircraft to deal with. However, if those Arab pilots were counting on our F-83s being destroyed on the ground, they are in for a shock. This certainly looks like the big coordinated air attack predicted by General Dows yesterday. We better scramble all our aircraft in order to deal with this.”

Going to her command station and putting on her radio headset, Avery spoke on the air command net of the Palestine Interposition Force.

“Halo One to Ramat David Control: Steamroller! I say again, Steamroller! Massive aircraft formations forming up over Egypt, Lebanon and Syria. Scramble all aircraft! Acknowledge, over!”

“From Ramat David Control, we cop...”

The growl of electronic noise suddenly filled her headset, cutting Ramat David Control in mid sentence. Avery understood quickly what was happening and shouted to her operators.

“WE ARE BEING JAMMED ON OUR AIR COMMAND FREQUENCY! FIND THE SOURCE OF THIS JAMMING AT ONCE!”

“WE ARE ALSO BEING JAMMED ON OUR RADAR FREQUENCIES, COLONEL.” Replied her chief air watch officer. The electronic warfare officer was next to speak.

“THE JAMMING SIGNALS ALL COME FROM THE BRITISH CRUISER HMS TIGER, COLONEL.”

That made Avery swear under her breath: the worst scenario that Ingrid had predicted was now becoming reality.

“ENGAGE ECCM MEASURES, BURN THROUGH THAT JAMMING!”

After a few frantic seconds, Avery finally could hear normal static in her headset, prompting her to send an urgent radio message.

“Ramat David Control, from Halo One. We have strong jamming coming from the British cruiser HMS TIGER. I say again: we have strong jamming coming from the British cruiser HMS TIGER. Pass this info at once to Six<sup>12</sup>!”

“We acknowledge, Halo One. Six is being advised right now. Our fighters are starting to scramble off, over.”

With their electronic counter-counter measures gear having overcome the British jamming, Avery and her operators were now able to do their job properly and direct those scrambling fighters towards the incoming enemy aircraft. Out to sea, more American fighters soon were taking off from the carriers USS WASP and USS LAKE CHAMPLAIN. Soon, the airspace over Palestine turned into a deadly ballet of competing aircraft, with plenty of dying being done.

## **07:02 (Jerusalem Time)**

### **Main parking apron**

### **Ramat David Airbase**

“My pressurized suit, quickly!” Shouted Ingrid to her ground crew while jumping with Julia Miller out of the jeep driven by Denise Bateman. As a mechanic fetched her high altitude flight suit, Ingrid started at once to undress, undoing first her boots and taking them off. Then, to the amazement of her ground crew, she took off her standard flight suit, ending up with nothing but her panties and socks, imitated by Julia. She

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<sup>12</sup> Six : In American military radio procedure, ‘Six’ is the callsign for the unit commander.

grabbed her pressurized suit from the mechanic before looking back at her ground technicians.

“Get the rest of my flight gear and help my radar officer suit up!”

The technicians hurried to prepare her F-83 for takeoff and to take out the safeties from the six big bombs and four air-to-air missiles hooked inside her bomb and missile bays. Ingrid was fully suited up and ready to climb in her cockpit four minutes later, helped in this by Denise Bateman, who laced back her boots while Ingrid adjusted her suit and helmet on. Another two minutes and she was strapped in her seat, starting her two engines in quick succession once Julia Miller was also in her seat and once her mechanics stepped back from her aircraft. Rolling out of her revetment, she took the shortest way to the runway but had to pause for a few seconds as the second EC-200R of her task force rolled past her, its wheels about to lift from the ground in an emergency takeoff. Ingrid turned on the runway and followed in the trail of the EC-200R, taking off in a much shorter distance despite her six tons of bombs. With her engine afterburners on at full power, she zoomed skyward towards the East, hoping this way to fool the British, who were probably following the air battle on their own radars, about her real intentions.

Ingrid's F-83 was well over Transjordan by the time she leveled off at an altitude of 21,000 meters. Turning around and heading West, she took up speed and broke through the speed of sound before climbing again, this time to 28,000 meters. Now well above the electronic detection lobes of any of the radars present in the region, she consulted her navigation mapping unit and did a slight course correction towards Tel Aviv. Julia then spoke on the intercom from her rear seat.

“I have the jamming signals from the HMS TIGER. Take heading 283!”

Ingrid obeyed and homed on the source of the powerful electronic jamming still making life difficult for her task force. Without realizing it, the HMS TIGER was painting itself as one big target. She soon detected the cruiser and its two escort destroyers on her downward FLIR camera, the cruiser's heat signature being three times as big as that of the destroyers despite its lack of funnel. She then saw what looked like four tiny dots turning around the British flotilla. Looking carefully at them, she quickly realized that they must be aircraft circling the cruiser, probably to protect it. Julia was quick to confirm that with her.

“I have four airborne radar signals coming from above the British cruiser.”

Ingrid reviewed mentally her attack tactic then but decided to proceed according to her original plan: she could deal with those aircraft after taking care of the cruiser, which was still the most serious threat to her task force.

When the flotilla went out of the field of view of her forward-down FLIR, which pointed down at an angle of 45 degrees, Ingrid clocked the distance on her digital watch until she had to be right above the cruiser, then rolled on her back and dove down at a vertical with her airbrakes extended and her engine thrust reversers engaged. Now diving at a speed of less than 700 kilometers per hour, Ingrid had over a minute to refine her dive trajectory, aiming squarely at the cruiser getting progressively bigger in her aiming sight. She put her engine nozzles back in 2D mode a few seconds before diving past the four British LIGHTNING interceptors circling above the HMS TIGER. The British pilots never saw her, as she altered slightly her trajectory in order to dive in their back. Then returning her aim on the nuclear cruiser and knowing that she was still well within the dead zone of the ship's radars, Ingrid concentrated on her bombing. She was going to have only one shot at this. Thankfully, the war in Indochina had given her a few opportunities to practice the 'Tornado funnel attack' and to develop it into a tactic that was nearly impossible to counter with normal radars. She was close to Mach one when she released her bombs at an altitude of 2,400 meters, then immediately pulled her nose up in a crushing recovery while retracting her airbrakes at the same time. She didn't see the impacts of her six bombs when they hit, seeing red despite her G-suit and nearly passing out from the centrifugal force. Instead, she felt a monstrous shockwave that shook her aircraft as she was finally starting to climb up again under full power, having recovered from her dive at an altitude of only 500 meters. Three of her six bombs, tightly grouped at release, hit squarely the British cruiser forward of the bridge structure, with a fourth bomb barely missing the side of the ship and penetrating fifteen meters underwater before exploding. The three bombs that hit the cruiser easily pierced the lightly armored weather deck, one passing through the roof of the forward six-inch gun turret and the two others penetrating the forward vertical launch missile silos. Being set on short delay fuses, all three bombs penetrated deeply before exploding in the six-inch shell magazine and inside the missile farm, setting off a catastrophic chain of explosions. The onlookers aboard the two escort destroyers saw only one huge explosion that ripped open the cruiser over a length of at least fifty meters. A powerful underwater explosion then raised the cruiser half out of the water, finishing to break it in two. With

the watertight doors of four of the surviving main compartments blown open by the explosions, both parts started sinking fast at the vertical amidst a huge cloud of smoke and steam, with the tip of the stern disappearing last from sight after a mere twenty seconds, its propellers still spinning. Only a handful of the 840 sailors and marines from the crew were seen jumping off from the stern before it sank under the surface of the water.

The four British fighter pilots turning overhead realized that something was horribly wrong only when they were shaken by a huge shockwave. Looking down, they saw the cruiser they were supposed to protect break in two and sink. A blip appearing suddenly on his radar screen then took the enraged flight leader's attention from the wreck. His eyes opened wide when he realized that the blip was extremely close and approaching fast. The British pilot just had time to look through his forward windshield before it exploded in his face, hit by one of many 30mm shells to strike the LIGHTNING. With the pilot killed instantly, the interceptor fell in a terminal corkscrew dive, hitting the surface of the ocean after a few seconds. The three surviving British pilots broke formation at once, each turning to try to chase after the aircraft that had sunk the HMS TIGER. Despite turning as tight as their aircraft would let them without stalling, they still found themselves being easily outturned by their attacker, which they could now recognize as an American F-83 fighter-bomber. They were thus unable to fire their heat-seeking FIRESTREAK missiles, never having a chance to aim at its tail to let the seeker heads acquire it. It was rather one of the LIGHTNING pilots that soon found himself with a missile on his tail. He then made the mistake of waiting to turn first before launching some decoy flares, a delay that proved fatal to him. His wingman, seeing his comrade's aircraft explode, fired a missile out of desperation while he was still not properly aligned on the F-83. The missile flew wide, as he half expected. Just as he thought that he finally had a clean shot at the American plane, the F-83 suddenly appeared to brake on a dime as if by magic while performing a barrel roll, making the LIGHTNING overshoot it in a fraction of a second. Turned from hunter to hunted, the British pilot anxiously started yet another tight turn but felt multiple impacts on his aircraft at the same time that he saw tracers pass by his canopy. His instrument panel then lit up at once like a Christmas tree. Reviewing the damage in one quick look, the British knew at once that he would have to bail out, as one of his engines was on fire and the other had flamed out. Swearing at his bad luck, the British pulled the ejection chord of his seat and was

rocketed out of his doomed plane. Once his parachute had opened and he had a chance to look around him, he saw that the dogfight had brought him a good ten kilometers from the nearest destroyer. Looking around the sky, he was unable to see his flight's last comrade. What he saw instead was the American F-83, flying directly at him. Near panic and expecting to be shot while hanging from his parachute, the British saw instead the F-83 pass close to him while on its way back towards the nearby Palestinian coast. He was thus easily able to read the wide letters painted on the nose of the fighter-bomber.

"YOU LADY HAWK BITCH! YOU WILL PAY FOR THIS!" He shouted while shaking his fist at the American fighter-bomber.

**09:13 (Moscow Time)**

**Saturday, March 28, 1953 'C'**

**Politburo conference room, The Kremlin**

**Moscow, Soviet Union**

"You may begin, Colonel."

"Yes, Comrade Secretary!" Replied the GRU<sup>13</sup> colonel that was waiting to brief Joseph Stalin and his top aides. Standing beside a large map of the Middle East and with a captain to assist him by pointing various spots on the map, the senior officer started reading his notes, keeping his voice strong enough to be clearly heard.

"The situation in and around Palestine and between the United States and Great Britain has now changed very significantly in the last four days since the Americans sank the British cruiser TIGER, Comrade Secretary. The Americans and British in the Mediterranean are still facing each other in a tense standoff, but the French just declared yesterday their support for the Americans in this crisis. Apparently, the French have grown weary enough of British arrogance to make them forget their humiliating withdrawal from Indochina, which they owed to the same Major General Dows that sank the cruiser HMS TIGER and shot down four British interceptors last Wednesday. The British, who were quite indignant at first and even threatened war with the United States, have by now toned down their protests as the Americans exposed their role in sending an anonymous commando force to attack the Ramat David Airbase, which is the main

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<sup>13</sup> GRU : Soviet military intelligence department.

base of the American Palestine Interposition Force. A big factor in that toning down of the British is the serious heart attack suffered four days ago by Prime Minister Churchill. Churchill's political deputy, Sir Anthony Eden, has now taken over the reins of the British government and is trying to defuse the present crisis as best he can. Indications are now that both the Americans and British are ready to escalate down the tension between them, but President Dewey, widely supported by American public opinion, is not ready to forget the British actions and has refused to relieve or discipline Major General Dows, instead praising her decisiveness and promising her his full support."

"What about that earlier business about Dows relieving her deputy commander, Colonel?"

The GRU colonel made a slight smirk then before answering Stalin.

"Actually, that was a typical piece of leadership style by General Dows, Comrade Secretary. We learned since then that her deputy, a Rear Admiral Felt, was relieved of command on his own flagship by Dows, for gross insubordination. Apparently, the old American inter-service rivalry was at play here, with that Admiral Felt feeling that, as a more senior officer, he should have been the commander of the Palestine Interposition Force. Dows flew to his flagship, the carrier WASP, and relieved him on the spot when Felt refused to obey her directives. That apparently started some fierce debates in the American Pentagon, where the heads of the American Navy tried to have Dows relieved. The American Defense Secretary, Dwight Eisenhower, however told the Navy commander to back down, supported in that by President Dewey. A potentially significant fallout from this is the fact that General Omar Bradley, the American Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was reportedly quietly reprimanded by Eisenhower for having shown so-called 'unsatisfactory leadership' in this crisis by bowing to Navy pressure and naming a deputy commander that had the same rank as General Dows. As a result of all this, the American military command is now quite divided, with its Navy at odds with the Air Force and the Secretary of Defense. In the meantime, General Dows named a new force deputy commander, a female Air Force brigadier general, and has continued bashing both the Arabs and the Jews who break the rules in Palestine."

It was Stalin's turn to make a smirk at those last words.

"Too bad that this young woman is against us. She is the kind of general I like: decisive, ruthless and efficient."

The GRU colonel didn't dare comment back on that, not wanting Stalin to remember that the same American general had delivered a decisive beating to both Soviet and Chinese



forces around Indochina a mere three months ago. Instead, he continued his briefing, jumping to another aspect of the Palestine conflict.

“Another significant development in Palestine is the inexplicable and abrupt about-face made by Israeli Prime Minister Ben-Gurion three days ago, when he publicly invited in a radio address the Arabs who had fled their homes in the past to return to their villages and houses in Israel. Apart from creating a bitter rift inside the Israeli leadership, that announcement at first didn’t result in more than a handful of Arabs returning to their homes. However, the American interposition force then encouraged more Arabs to return to Israel, notably by sending landing barges to a number of refugee camps established along the Lebanese coast and by opening special border crossing points for returnees along the Syrian, Jordanian and Egyptian borders and organizing truck convoys to transport those returnees to their respective villages. The Americans also opened a number of refugee camps inside Israel besides the various Arab quarters and villages that had been destroyed by the Jews, so that the Arabs could be sheltered while rebuilding their homes. As a result of those measures, significant numbers of Arab refugees are now returning to Israel, to the anger of many Jews.”

“And why would Prime Minister Ben-Gurion have done such a surprise about-face, Colonel?” Asked Stalin, who was no dummy when it came to political calculating. The GRU became visibly uncomfortable as he did his best to answer him.

“We have only some wild rumors about this, Comrade Secretary. One report we got said basically that God appeared to Ben-Gurion and ordered him to change his policies concerning the Arabs. We however lend little credence to that report and are still researching the question.”

“God...” Said in a derisive tone Stalin. “These Jews and their invisible, omnipotent god! And how are those Jews and their state of Israel doing right now?”

“The military situation of the Jews has improved quite a lot since the intervention of the American force basically eviscerated the various Arab air forces and stopped cold their advancing mechanized columns, Comrade Stalin. The Jewish forces are now concentrating on helping relocate the masses of Jewish immigrants that are coming by sea from British internment camps in Cyprus and from various European and North African ports, including our own ports in the Black Sea. Overall, the situation on the ground in Palestine is now much more peaceful, although the refugee situation is still very complicated and delicate and is swallowing a lot of American and European resources.”

“Something that suits me just fine.” Pronounced Stalin, visibly satisfied by what he had heard up to date. “Hopefully, that American-British tiff will go on long enough to let us finish our preparations for our planned invasion of Eastern Europe. Well, comrades, I believe that our work is all cut out for us. Let’s get back to work!”

### **17:55 (Jerusalem Time)**

**Monday, March 30, 1953 ‘C’**

**Arab district of Khalisa, Haifa**

**Northern Palestine**

Ingrid shook her head sadly as she looked at the ruins of this part of the Arab district of Khalisa, in Haifa, from her jeep. Despite having forced a stop to the demolition of Arab houses by Jewish forces as soon as she had been able to, much of the district had already been blown up or bulldozed before even the arrival of her interposition force. Some of the old Arab inhabitants that had been brought back from Lebanon via American landing barges in the last few days were now halfheartedly searching the ruins of their houses, hoping to find some personal souvenirs or intact possessions. Other ex-refugees, more lucky, were living as best they could in their bare houses, which had been looted by Haganah soldiers weeks ago.

“What a mess! To properly lodge all these people will take a lot of time and resources.”

“You were right to say that war brings only misery and suffering, and not glory, General.” Said Denise Bateman, sitting behind the wheel of their jeep. Ingrid nodded her head and sat back on the front passenger seat, pointing the direction of the port.

“Go towards the port, Denise: we will go take the road back to Ramat David and return to base before night falls.”

Denise engaged the first gear and started rolling slowly along the narrow street half blocked by debris and by the carts of Arab residents. The noise of an engine approaching from their rear soon made her look in her rear view mirror.

“General, a pickup truck is approaching from the rear, with men in uniforms inside.”

Ingrid turned her head, suspicious, to examine the pickup truck. The relations with the Jewish forces were still poor, with many Jews still not ready to see their dream of a strictly Jewish Israel vanish. Five men in beige tropical uniforms typical of those of the

Haganah were in the truck, including two in the cab and three standing in the back. The men in the back were holding weapons and their eyes were fixed on the American jeep. Ingrid immediately had a bad feeling about them.

“Accelerate, Denise! Don’t let that truck overcome us.”

As the blonde sped up, Ingrid grabbed her M2A2 folding stock carbine and armed it while turning around in her seat. The truck also accelerated, while two of the men in the back of the vehicle leaned on the top of the cab to point their rifles.

“ZIGZAG, DENISE!” Shouted Ingrid just before one of the men fired a shot. She heard the bullet zip only a few centimeters from her head. Now understanding that they were in grave danger, Denise started driving like a maniac, her jeep bumping over debris lying on the pavement. On her part, Ingrid started firing short bursts as best she could despite the chaotic movements of her jeep, while bullets whistled past her ears or hit the body of her jeep with metallic noises. One man crumbled and fell out of the pickup truck at her third burst, but the two other men in the back continued firing. Ingrid’s sixth burst hit the windshield of the truck, killing the driver and sending the pickup to violently crash against a stone wall. Ingrid didn’t have time to celebrate, as a shouted warning from Denise made her turn her head.

“WATCH OUT AHEAD!”

Just after Denise shouted those words, six 9mm bullets hit the front of the jeep and its windshield. Denise jerked in her seat as one of the bullets pierced her chest, going through her left lung. Another bullet bounced on the hood before going through the windshield and hitting Ingrid in the back in the area of her left shoulder blade, making her scream with pain. Her vision quickly becoming blurred, Denise braked as hard as she could, not wanting to kill Ingrid by hitting a wall. A second bullet then hit her in her left shoulder, making her left arm useless. The last conscious act of Denise was to make her jeep veer sharply to the right, literally making her jeep roll inside the ruins of a blown up house, where the vehicle brutally stopped against what was left of a stone wall. Ingrid was projected out of the jeep by the impact, but Denise’s initiative gave her some precious cover for a few seconds. Getting back up with difficulty and grimacing with pain, Ingrid put a fresh magazine in her carbine before going to the jeep to shake Denise, who was crumpled over the steering wheel, while more bullets hit around her.

“GET TO COVER QUICKLY, DENISE!”

She then saw the opened, immobile eyes of her driver and understood with horror that she could do nothing more for her. Her sadness immediately changed to rage.

“YOU BASTARDS! YOU WILL PAY FOR THIS!”

One of the four men who had been lying in ambush ahead of her jeep and who was now running towards the American vehicle fell like a broken puppet under her first burst, soon followed by another attacker. The two survivors from the ambush point hurriedly took cover behind a half-crumbled wall and returned fire with their STEN submachine guns. Ingrid, using her jeep as cover, then engaged in a gun duel with the two men, managing to wound one of them. Using the fact that she was concentrated on that fight, a survivor from the pickup truck, shaken but alive, took that chance to approach her from her left flank. Taking cover behind one of the walls of the ruined house used by Ingrid, the Irgun fighter primed a grenade and, carefully calculating his throw, sent his grenade fly over the wall protecting him. The grenade rolled under the jeep and exploded just under the fuel tank. On top of badly peppering Ingrid's legs with shrapnel, the grenade's explosion violently projected her back against a wall, knocking her out, while part of the flaming gasoline from the ripped fuel tank splashed on her. Smelling victory, the two surviving Irgun fighters then came out of cover and went forward to finish off their target.

Sergeant Rhonda Stuart, patrolling the port area in her M-20 armored car of the Air Force Police, heard like her three crew members the first shots. Her trained ear recognized at once the characteristic noise from a .30 caliber M2 carbine, a weapon that was used solely by women of the American Air Force in Palestine. Alarmed at once, Stuart patted the shoulder of her driver.

“ONE OF OUR GIRLS IS IN TROUBLE IN THE KHALISA DISTRICT. STEP ON IT!”

As Senior Airman Kate Robinson started speeding along the narrow, busy streets as best she could, Airman First Class Mary Vanderbilt armed her .50 caliber M2 heavy machine gun, while Airman Sonia Komarowsky armed her M2A1 carbine and got ready to fire from her seat. The noise of the gunfight redoubled as Stuart was sending an urgent radio report to Ramat David.

“Damn! This is quite a hard fight over there.” Exclaimed Mary Vanderbilt. “At least our girl is still firing.”

The four military policewomen, worried for their comrade, soon turned into the street that was the scene of the combat. Rhonda Stuart saw nearly at once the pickup truck that had hit a wall about 200 meters away, plus a handful of men in beige tropical uniforms

firing towards a blown up house. The noise of a burst from a M2 carbine then told her where her endangered comrade was.

“OUR GIRL IS IN THAT RUINED HOUSE. MARY, GIVE HER SOME FIRE SUPPORT!”

The explosion of a grenade inside the house, followed by the rise of a fireball from the ruins, then made Rhonda swear. The two men firing at the house, not having seen yet the armored car, started running at once towards the ruined house. Mary Vanderbilt then opened fire with her heavy machine gun, shredding one of the attackers to bits and making the lone survivor run away in panic. Sonia Komarowsky however shot that man down before he could flee with a well adjusted burst of her carbine. The two women then saw the American jeep that was now burning up inside the ruins, with a body lying immobile over the steering wheel. Rhonda finished off with a short burst a wounded man still holding a STEN submachine gun, then jumped out of her armored car and ran to the jeep to extract as quickly as she could the driver, who was literally roasting up. Her sadness at seeing that the American woman was already dead was replaced with shock when she recognized.

“MY GOD! IT’S SERGEANT BATEMAN, GENERAL DOWS’ DRIVER!”

“SERGEANT, COME HERE, QUICK!” Shouted Sonia Komarowsky from the other side of the burning jeep as Rhonda was pulling away the body of Denise Bateman. Running over the debris and around the jeep, Rhonda saw Sonia, bent over a woman with reddish-brown hair who was still moving slightly. Her mouth opened up with horror on seeing in what state was the woman over who Sonia was kneeling.

“My God, no! KATE, CALL FOR MEDICAL HELP AT ONCE! GENERAL DOWS IS GRAVELY WOUNDED.”

Hurrying to Ingrid, Rhonda inspected quickly her wounds and decided that she could be moved.

“Sonia, take her legs, while I take her from under her arms. Let’s bring her to our vehicle.”

“Understood, Sergeant.”

Carrying Ingrid Dows to besides the M-20 took them nearly a minute. One of the Arabs that had cautiously approached with their hands up then made gestures to attract Rhonda’s attention. The latter, busy giving first aid to Ingrid, ignored her, but Mary

Vanderbilt signaled from the M-20 to the Arab to approach her and spoke with him for a moment in English before addressing Rhonda.

“Sergeant, this man says that the men who attacked General Dows are Jewish. He just gave me a Star of David pendant that he took on a dead attacker.”

That made Rhonda look up with indignation.

“The bastards! Kate, jump down and go search those who were firing at the General’s jeep. Bring me anything that could identify them.”

“Right away, Sergeant!”

Kate Robinson jumped down from her driver’s position and started searching the bodies around the ruined house. She then went to the dead men in the crashed pickup truck, followed by the Arab who had alerted them. She was not surprised to see that the occupants of the truck that had not been dead had been knifed to death by the furious Arab refugees, who had also taken the Jews’ weapons. Closing her eyes to that detail, Kate quickly searched the dead men, ending up with a collection of wallets, identity papers and personal objects. The Arab that had been following her and who was speaking a limited but understandable English pointed one of the identity cards taken by Kate from the dead driver of the pickup truck.

“Irgun man!”

Kate understood him at once, having learned like all her comrades to distinguish the various fighting groups in Palestine. She smiled to the man and saluted him, using one of the few Arab words she had learned.

“Shukran<sup>14</sup>!”

She then gave the man the cash money found on the dead Jews as a reward and returned to the armed car. She looked down with worry at Ingrid Dows, now covered with a wool blanket and with the left side of her face and neck covered with bandages.

“How is the general, Sergeant?”

“She will live, but I can’t say in what state yet. Did you find something interesting on these dead men?”

“Yes! The ones who attacked General Dows were from the Irgun.”

Rhonda swore violently at those words.

“THE DAMN JACKALS! They will need to be made to pay for this. What did the base say, Mary?”

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<sup>14</sup> Shukran : Thank you in Arabic.

“An helicopter is about to lift off and will land in the port, near our docked ships. They asked us to bring the general to the port.”

“Very well! Kate, Sonia, help me pull her up into the vehicle. We will then load as well Sergeant Bateman’s body and their weapons.”

## **18:42 (Jerusalem Time)**

### **Base infirmary**

#### **Ramat David Airbase**

Sarah Ur came to the base infirmary while holding firmly little Hien in her arms, so that the near-hysterical child would not run inside the operating room where Ingrid had just been wheeled in. They were greeted there by Teresa James, Gertrude Meserve and Lieutenant Colonel Tucker, who were mounting an anxious vigil in the pre-operating room. Gertrude spoke to her at once, trying to reassure her and Hien.

“The operation just started, Sarah, but Doctor Ramsey is one of the finest surgeons I know. She should come out of this alright.”

“Are her wounds serious?” Asked Sarah in English, so that Hien would not fully understand them, even though the angel already knew the answer to her question. Gertrude nodded in response, her expression grave.

“Her life is not at risk, but her legs were peppered with grenade fragments and she was hit by a bullet in the back. She was also seriously burned. I...I’m afraid that Ingrid will be left disfigured and may also lose one eye. Her driver, Sergeant Bateman, was killed. Her body is the infirmary’s morgue, in this building. You should go wait with Hien in the visitors’ lounge, Sarah. It would...”

Some kind of commotion then was heard from inside the operating room, interrupting Gertrude and making everyone look at its access door. Tucker, who had been a young Marine captain serving in Guadalcanal in 1942, suddenly opened wide his eyes on seeing a very bright white light come out from the bottom of the door of the operating room.

“No! It can’t be! Not again!”

He was about to push in the door when one of the nurses, wearing full surgical garb, nearly ran out, her eyes wild.

“THE GENERAL, SHE’S GLOWING FROM THE INSIDE!”

Teresa James and Gertrude Meserve, who had also been in Guadalcanal in 1942, when Ingrid had been miraculously resurrected, immediately followed Tucker inside the operating room, while Sarah followed with Hien at a more measured pace. What they saw then was the naked body of Ingrid, readied for surgery, levitating a meter above the operating table and glowing so strongly that one could hardly look directly at it. Tucker, on seeing this, muttered to himself.

“Another miracle, like in Guadalcanal.”

Seeing that Doctor Ramsey was about to step forward to try to lower Ingrid’s body back down, Tucker made a firm sign to him.

“Let her be, Doctor! She is in higher hands right now.”

While Ramsey did not understand him, he nonetheless refrained from approaching the operating table and kept looking with the others as Ingrid’s body shone for another minute before gradually becoming normal again and slowly levitating down to the table. They now could see that Ingrid’s eyes had just opened and noticed at the same time that any traces of her wounds were gone. Looking slowly around her, Ingrid beamed with joy when she saw Hien near her, in the arms of Sarah.

“Hien, my little treasure! Come in my arms!”

Sarah brought Hien at once to her, putting the girl in Ingrid’s open arms, where she was deluged with kisses.

“Mommy, you scared me!” Hien said in Vietnamese.

“I know and I’m sorry about that, Hien. Fortunately, The One deemed that my time had not come.”

Something then apparently hit Ingrid’s mind, making her abruptly sit on the operating table, still fully naked, and with Hien still in her arms.

“Denise? Sergeant Bateman, where is she?”

“She’s dead, Ingrid.” Answered sadly Teresa James. “Her body is in the morgue nearby. I am so...”

“She’s not dead yet!” Replied at once Ingrid, who then surprised everyone by jumping off the operating table and by walking out of the room at a hurried pace. Her subordinates and Sarah followed her out, to soon see her go into the morgue’s cold storage room, a few doors down the main corridor of the infirmary. The group entered as well the cold storage room, where Ingrid was now bent over the gurney supporting the body bag containing the remains of Denise Bateman. Tears were rolling on her



cheeks as she unzipped the bag and contemplated the pale face of her driver and secret lover.

“I’m going to save you, Denise.”

Thinking that the shock of the recent events had made her delusional, Doctor Ramsey stepped forward and gently grabbed her shoulders, trying to pull her away. She however resisted him, turning around only long enough to give Hien back to Sarah before looking back at her dead lover and speaking in some kind of ancient language that none present except Sarah could understand. It in fact sounded like a kind of incantation, with Ingrid closing her eyes and apparently concentrating while muttering her mysterious words. Ramsay recoiled with surprise and shock when Bateman’s body started glowing with the same kind of light as the one within Ingrid just a few minutes ago. Tucker instinctively went to his knees, soon imitated by Teresa James and Gertrude Meserve, as Bateman gradually became too bright to be looked at directly. Two minutes passed before Bateman’s body stopped glowing. Tucker felt his hair stand on his head when Denise Bateman’s eyes fluttered open and when her head turned slightly to look up at Ingrid, who was tearfully smiling at her.

“What...where am I?”

“At the base infirmary, Denise. You were dead, but The One listened to my prayers and brought you back to life.”

Incomprehension showed on her face for a second before she seemed to understand everything.

“I was indeed dead. I saw all those white lights, heard all those voices. Then, your voice called me and I am now here.”

With Ingrid unzipping completely her body bag, Denise was able to sit up, still wearing her blood-covered and partially burned combat uniform. That was when she saw the group kneeling in reverence, except for Sarah, who was holding Hien. She also noticed the fact that Ingrid was naked and frowned while taking off her combat shirt.

“General, you can’t stay naked like this in front of your officers. Take my shirt!”

Now wearing only her bra on her torso, she got up from the gurney and draped her shirt over the shoulders of Ingrid, fastening the top buttons to hide her lover’s breasts, whose nipples stood hard and erect from the freezing temperature in the cold storage room, smiling as she did that.

“Now, that’s better, General!”

Denise then paused in apparent surprise as she stared at Ingrid's face from less than one meter away.

"General, your face! You look younger! Your skin is also...perfect."

The others only then noticed what Denise had just realized: from looking like the beautiful woman in her mid twenties that she had been, Ingrid now looked a good ten years younger and her facial skin appeared as smooth as that of a baby. The overall effect, plus the fact that the combat shirt Denise had put on her commander was a bit short and didn't cover Ingrid's closely shaved groin, made Lieutenant Colonel Tucker build an involuntary erection as he stared at Ingrid's haunting beauty. Teresa James, finally recovering from her shock and getting back on her feet, gave a curt order to Ramsey.

"Doctor, I need a medical gown or surgical suit for the general... DOCTOR!"

Ramsay, who had been frozen with stunned disbelief, finally got back control of himself and ran out of the cold storage room. Facing her subalterns, who were now all back on their feet, Ingrid spoke softly to them.

"I know that what you saw is very unsettling, but please do not misunderstand what happened here. While The One healed me in the operating room, I didn't resurrect Sergeant Bateman: I only pleaded with The One for him to show mercy to Denise and he listened to my prayers. I thus don't have the power to resurrect: only The One has it. Unfortunately, our men and women killed six days ago are now too far gone to be saved, with most of them already buried in the United States. For the moment, I want this double miracle to be kept confidential, until I can send an encrypted message to General Bradley and President Dewey to tell them what happened here. I suspect that the political implications of this may be significant, especially here, in and around Palestine. Teresa, I want you to gather all those who saw me wounded and saw Bateman's dead body and to order them to silence until further notice. Be assured, though: I fully intend to speak to our people in a day or two to explain to them what happened."

"General," said with difficulty Tucker, a ball up his throat, "this is the second time that I see you being the subject of a divine intervention. The first time, you were dead but were resurrected in Guadalcanal in 1942. Now, this! In fact, you now look as young as you were in Guadalcanal. What is your relation with God?"

"The One is not God as understood in the Bible, Colonel Tucker. While The One definitely exists, I am not sure that there is such an entity as God, who supposedly created the whole universe. The One is a spiritual entity from which all human souls

come and which has existed for billions of years now, since the universe came into being. In 1941, he marked me and Nancy Laplante as potential Chosen, seeing the potential of our souls to better this world. Now, I fully am a Chosen of The One, with a mission and some powers to help me in my task. This is however something that I intend to fully explain only to the President. I would thus appreciate if you would keep this to yourself. The same for you, Teresa and Gertrude.”

“Uh, I hope that you will also tell your nanny to keep mum about this, General.”

That made Ingrid smile with malice.

“Don’t worry about her, Colonel: I fully trust her. Well, with this said, I and Denise will go change at my residence as soon as Doctor Ramsey can come back with those surgical clothes, unless you want me to let your Marines admire at will the lower half of my body. Then, we will have a full staff meeting at the operations center at eight o’clock tonight, to decide how to deal with the bastards who attacked me: the Irgun will have to be neutralized before it can provoke more violence in Palestine.”

**15:47 (Washington Time)**

**Wednesday, April 1, 1953 ‘C’**

**The Oval Office, White House**

**Washington, D.C.**

**United States**

General Omar Bradley seemed overwhelmed and out of his depth when he escorted Ingrid inside the Oval Office, something that did not surprise President Thomas Dewey. Himself a man with a keen sense of observation, something he had built during his past career as a successful prosecutor, Dewey noticed at once Ingrid’s rejuvenated face and heightened beauty, which could now rightly be qualified as ‘angelic’. The multiple rows of medal ribbons on her dress uniform, along with the two Medals of Honor suspended around her neck, however reminded Dewey that Ingrid Dows was first and foremost a military leader of immense courage and vast abilities, despite her youth. He had in fact contributed partly to her quick rise through the ranks, having endorsed Joseph Martin’s assessment of her in 1948 and then supported her against the numerous personal attacks against her from jealous or misogynistic fellow general officers. Right now the American medias were full of stories about her recent successes in bringing back a modicum of peace and normality to Palestine while ensuring the

survival of the new state of Israel, something many had until recently predicted to be impossible to accomplish. Thankfully, the story of the latest miracle to affect her was still not known to the public. In a sense, one of the goals of this meeting was to decide if and when to make that miracle public, a decision that was probably be going to be a difficult one.

"Please, General Bradley, General Dows, have a seat and let's talk." Said Dewey as his two visitors saluted him at attention. Taking place in an easy chair facing the sofa in which Bradley and Dows took place, Dewey contemplated for a moment Ingrid's young, beautiful face. The late President Roosevelt, an inveterate womanizer, would undoubtedly have been fascinated by her.

"First, General Dows, I wish to tell you how pleased and impressed I am by your performance in Palestine to date. Many in Washington had said that the situation there was truly intractable but, as you often have done in the past, you have again proven your critics wrong."

"Thank you, Mister President. However, the men and women of my force are as much if not more meritorious in this than me. Without them, I could have accomplished nothing."

"A modest fighter pilot? You decidedly are in a class apart, General Dows." Replied Dewey, meaning it as a joke. It succeeded in breaking some of the formal feeling of the meeting, with both Bradley and Dows smiling slightly. Dewey then went on, becoming quite serious.

"Something else that I am grateful for is the fact that you exposed the hypocrisy and treachery of the British in Palestine to the rest of the World, General Dows. With the incensed American public behind me, I am able to act much more decisively against the British. Your beating down of the Arab forces lined up against Israel also made those same Arab states much more receptive to our diplomatic pressures. One unexpected bonus of all this has however come much nearer to home."

"Oh? What do you mean, Mister President?"

"I am talking about Canada, General Dows. It is officially a full member of the British Commonwealth and a faithful ally of Great Britain. However, it seems that both the Canadian public, especially in the francophone province of Quebec, and the Canadian government have grown increasingly tired of being taken for granted by London and by being treated as mere 'colonials' by the British high classes. While I

would not characterize Canada as being fully behind the United States, it is growing more and more apart from Great Britain and is not ready anymore to automatically endorse and support British foreign policies. Just two days ago my new secretary of state, Christian Herter, got a visit from the Canadian ambassador, who told him in confidence that the Canadian government of Prime Minister Saint-Laurent is disassociating itself from British Middle East policies and will not support the oil embargo against the United States. While we didn't get a similar visit from the Australian ambassador, indications are that Australia is also distancing itself from British policies. As for India, the so-called 'jewel in the crown of the British Empire', it is growing more and more restless, with the Indian population widely asking for independence. Only the presence in force of British units in India and the harsh repressive measures by the British against political dissidents has kept the pot from boiling over. However, that pot is going to explode one day in my opinion, whether the British like it or not."

"So, the British Empire is about to unravel from the inside, Mister President?"

"I believe that it already has started to unravel, General Dows."

Ingrid nodded at that, more satisfied than Dewey could realize: this was all helping her long-term mission from The One to prevent a future nuclear war by cutting down to size the British Empire. One positive side of the present situation was that the British themselves were to be thanked for most of this, courtesy of their dysfunctional foreign policies.

"I can't say that I will be sorry to see the British Empire fade into history, Mister President. Now, I could give you a quick briefing about the present situation in Palestine, if you wish so, Mister President."

"That would suit me fine, General Dows."

Ingrid then grabbed her secure briefcase and opened it, extracting from it two copies of a file she had prepared before flying out of Palestine, giving one to Dewey and the other to Bradley. With the help of the maps contained in the file copies, she then spent over fifteen minutes to tell President Dewey about what she had accomplished and what the situation was now in the various areas of Palestine. At the end, Dewey nodded, visibly satisfied.

"Again, excellent work, General Dows. There is however one subject that still needs to be covered: you!"

Having expected that, Ingrid put down her briefing file and looked calmly into Dewey's eyes.

"Mister President, what happened to me two days ago was a continuation of a process that started in early 1941, when Nancy Laplante secretly adopted me in London. I had then my first contact with The One, the spiritual entity that I follow. That was when I started remembering the souvenirs of the past incarnations of my soul. The One has existed for billions of years, since the appearance of the Universe, and is the origin of all the souls that lived in humans through history. Nancy Laplante, my adoptive mother, also started remembering her own past incarnations at the same time. The second time that The One touched me was in 1942, when he resurrected me in Guadalcanal after I had been shot down. He at the same time healed all the wounded or sick Marines present around Henderson Field, an incident that was kept secret from the public. From then on, I was not the same as before, Mister President. Apart from resurrecting me and healing all those Marines, The One also bestowed on me a number of powers and named me his Chosen for this time period."

Dewey frowned at those words, not sure if he had to worry or not about that.

"What kind of powers, and what is a 'Chosen' exactly, General? Is it some kind of prophet?"

"A Chosen of The One is tasked to help discreetly promote his words, which are compassion, justice, kindness and tolerance. The Chosen also can act as an intermediate between The One and other humans, so yes, he or she can in a way be called a prophet. But no need to worry, Mister President: I am not about to turn into some kind of preacher. As for my powers, they are quite diverse and I have been very discreet up to now about them. They include superhuman strength and speed, levitation, telekinesis, telepathy and touch healing. I escaped from the French secret services in Da Nang thanks to my powers."

Dewey was now frankly alarmed, having stiffened at the word 'telepathy'.

"Telepathy? You can read my mind?"

"Only if I actively try, Mister President, and I am not about to show you disrespect in such a way: I am an officer of the United States Air Force and are under your authority as Commander in Chief. Most of the time, I keep my telepathic power at a latent level, just enough to be able to detect the approach of hostile minds and to defend against them."

"That sounds quite impressive, General Dows," said General Bradley, looking skeptical, "but many would place little credence in your words alone."

In response, Ingrid calmly looked at him while floating up from her sofa, still in a sitting posture, attracting gasps from both Bradley and Dewey.

"I fully understand your point of view, General Bradley, and agree that my story is quite hard to believe. I hope that this will be enough to convince you and the President." While floating fifty centimeters above the sofa, Ingrid looked at the file she had put down on the coffee table, making it float up and towards her, until she was able to grab it without having to move more than one arm. Dewey was now looking at her with a mix of awe and uncertainty as she floated back down to the sofa.

"This...this is truly incredible, General Dows. Many could be scared by your powers, or could think that you could use them for your own personal benefit."

"Mister President," said soberly Ingrid while looking him in the eyes, "the day I will abuse my powers for my own benefit will be the day The One will strip them from me. He gave those powers to me and can as easily take them back from me if I go against his words or abuse them."

"This 'One', is he God?" Asked Bradley, who now had cold sweat on his forehead.

"No, not if you go according to the Bible's definition of 'God'. The One didn't create the whole Universe. Rather, it was created with it. I say 'it' because it has no sex, being purely an entity of spiritual energy. It can however manipulate matter and energy at will, can take any shape it wants and can even travel through time. It permeates the whole planet and beyond, out to the confines of this solar system, and has a microscopic part of itself in each of us. That part is what we call our soul. It inhabits the fetus just before birth and then leaves the body at death, to return to The One for a period of cleansing before going to inhabit another fetus."

"General Dows, you are speaking as if Chosen like you are rare. Am I correct?"

"Yes, Mister President! I am presently the sole Chosen in this time period and there have been only a handful in history before me, such as Mohammed, Jesus Christ and Buddha."

"And why you? Why now?"

"Why me, Mister President? Because The One deemed my soul and that of Nancy Laplante to be most appropriate for its purposes. Why now? Because Humanity is now at a dangerous crossroads, a crossroads where we are able to destroy ourselves utterly, thanks to nuclear weapons. My main mission from The One is to do my best to prevent through indirect means a nuclear holocaust that would put an end to Humanity.

This does not however entail that I will actually try to prevent nuclear weapons from existing: if we prove responsible about their use, we can survive them until we can regulate their use and scale back their stocks on all sides. Know that, while I dislike nuclear weapons, I will not oppose their service in the American arsenal, Mister President. I will only oppose demagogues and irresponsible idiots from advocating their use on a routine basis, like when some generals and politicians said that we could use nuclear weapons instead of conventional forces to prevent or stop every kind of war, including guerrilla wars and insurgencies. Basically, a nuclear war will have no winners, Mister President, only losers...by the millions.”

Dewey nodded, now mostly reassured.

“I certainly can understand the anxiety of your ‘One’ concerning nuclear weapons. I myself have nightmares from time to time about their possible use.”

“And so should you and all other sensible people, Mister President. Know that in the original timeline of Nancy Laplante, such a nuclear holocaust very nearly marked the end of Humanity, with barely a few million people surviving precariously out of an initial global population of over eight billion. My task is to do my best to prevent such a horrible tragedy from ever happening here. This said, I assure you that I will obey your lawful orders and will be ready to use nuclear weapons if need be to defend the United States from any nuclear attack. If you are however still unsure of my loyalty in this matter, then feel free to relieve me of command, Mister President.”

Dewey looked gravely at her for a moment before replying.

“I will relieve many other people before I ever contemplate relieving you of command, General Dows. You have amply proved in the past your loyalty to this nation through your blood and suffering and you have shown total honesty with me today concerning your powers and your links to this ‘One’. I will be honored to keep in my service someone that something I would personally call ‘God’ deemed worthy of representing him. Go back to Palestine and continue to be ‘God’s General’. I will deal with any public repercussions here.”

Both proud and happy, Ingrid got up from her sofa and came to attention, saluting Dewey and grabbing her briefcase before leaving the Oval Office at a lively step.



## **CHAPTER 6 – JEANNE DE BRISSAC**

**15:39 (Guadeloupe Time)**

**Monday, May 18, 1846**

**Anse des Grandes Salines**

**French colony of the Guadeloupe, Caribbean**

Knight Pierre Alphonse d'Orléans, wearing a simple shirt and short trousers, was supervising his black employees, who were busy extracting blocks of sea salt from the salt flats bordering the beach on which he stood barefoot. Pierre took a moment to admire the sea and sky of the l'Anse des Grandes Salines, situated at the southeastern tip of the island of Grande-Terre, the second largest of the archipelago of the Guadeloupe. His parents, like many aristocrats, had fled France after the start of the French Revolution and its bloody period called 'The Terror' in 1789, when thousands of nobles had been summarily executed by resentful mobs of impoverished peasants and common workers. After much hard times, his family, a minor branch of the House of Orléans, had managed to successfully establish itself in the Americas. Born and raised in New Orleans, Pierre had eventually decided to go live in the Guadeloupe, with its flourishing commerce of sugar and rum. Now, at the age of 36, he was the owner of a large sugar cane plantation, which included a sugar refinery and a small rum distillery, enough for him to live very comfortably. He had also created large salt flats on the coast near his plantation, with the salt produced there providing him with a substantial extra income. Despite the restoration of the monarchy in France at the start of this century, Pierre felt no urge to return to his country of origin, which he had never seen in his own life. France's economy was still fragile and the social climate there was poisonous, if he could believe the captains and passengers of the ships that regularly docked in the ports of Pointe-à-Pitre and Saint-François. He would be perfectly happy if not for the fact that he was without a wife. That didn't mean that he went without sex, though, with more than one young black woman among his freed ex-slaves being quite willing to sleep with him. However, young women of noble or respectable birth were rare in the Guadeloupe and were all married already...or were as ugly as frogs.

As he was looking at the Island of La Désirade on the horizon, his eyes caught on a number of floating objects on the surface of the waves, about 600 meters off the beach he was on. Focusing on the objects, he was soon able to recognize them as debris from a wrecked ship. He was not surprised by that, as more than a few ships sank every year around the Guadeloupe because of tropical storms or collisions with reefs. Calling his foreman and telling him to continue alone to supervise the work of salt extraction, Pierre got closer to the edge of the water in order to better see. The currents and waves seemed to be pushing the debris towards the beach of fine white sand he was standing on. Pierre's heart accelerated when he saw some movement near one of the floating objects. After looking for a moment, he was ready to swear that someone was clinging to that piece of debris. He however hesitated to enter the water to swim towards the debris: the waves were strong and the currents dangerous along this coast. He finally took a decision when he was able to clearly distinguish a human head and heard a female voice.

"Help! Help me!"

"FERNAND, COME HERE WITH TWO MEN AND THE ROLL OF ROPE WE HAVE IN OUR CART, QUICKLY!" Shouted Pierre to his foreman while starting to take off his shirt. Keeping only his short trousers on, he tied around his waist one end of the rope Fernand brought him at a run.

"Hold on tight to the other end of this rope with your two men, so that the currents won't wash me away. I'm going to get that girl."

"Understood, monsieur." Replied the foreman, who then tied the other end of the rope around his own waist and walked into the water with his employer. While Fernand and the two black workers with him stopped once water came to their upper legs, Pierre started swimming resolutely towards the girl in distress. The latter, seeing him approach, let go the piece of floating debris she had been clinging to and started swimming to join up with him. Twice the surf threw her back away from the beach, cancelling her efforts. With an ultimate surge of energy, the girl finally managed to link up with Pierre, who firmly grabbed her in his arms at once and shouted towards the beach.

"I HAVE HER, MEN! PULL!"

Fernand and the two black workers immediately started pulling on the rope with all their strength, towing Pierre and the shipwrecked girl towards the beach. Pierre was finally able to walk on the bottom but had to drag the young woman, who was apparently

exhausted, out of the water and onto the sand. Gently putting her down on her back once on dry sand, he examined her while he untied the rope around his waist, catching his breath. He quickly had to revise his first impression of the girl, who only wore a wet night shirt that was now clinging to her body. While very tall, her face was that of a teenager, not that of an adult woman. She was also beautiful, with long black hair and a sensual and athletic body. The foreman smiled while admiring the appetizing curves of the girl, whose nipples were visible through her wet shirt.

“Well, monsieur, it seems that you have caught quite a nice fish today.”

“It seems so, my good Fernand. Pass me your water bottle, please.”

Taking the tin flask offered by his foreman, Pierre knelt beside the teenager and gently raised her head while offering her the opened flask. The girl avidly gulped three long pulls of the water before looking up at Pierre, who could now see that her eyes were green.

“Thank you very much, monsieur. You are a most brave and kind man.”

“You are welcome, mademoiselle. I am Sir Pierre Alphonse d'Orléans, owner of a nearby plantation. And what is your name?”

“I am Jeanne Marie Céleste de Brissac, but call me simply Jeanne. Where am I?”

“On the southeastern tip of the Island of Grande-Terre, in the Guadeloupe. Do you know if there were other survivors from your ship, Jeanne?”

“I...I don't know. I don't think so. I didn't see a single person during the day following the sinking. The ship sank at night, without a warning sign. All that I heard was a terrifying crack just before water filled the under decks. I barely had time to leave by a skylight.”

“And your parents, Jeanne? You were traveling with your parents, didn't you?”

The teenager closed her eyes for a moment, as if reliving a nightmare, before answering in a weak voice.

“They had been dead for four weeks already, killed by the pirates who boarded our ship. I was then put on the pirates' ship, while my original ship went south with a boarding crew.”

Pierre nodded his head, not surprised by her story. Even in this century, there were still a few pirates around the Caribbean Sea, most of them coming from the coasts of South America. The French Navy, which was only a shadow of its past Napoleonic glory, rarely patrolled the waters of the Caribbean, something pirates used to their advantage.

The teenager however was awakening a particular interest inside Pierre's brain, even without her story about pirates.

"You have an aristocratic name, am I right, Jeanne?"

"I am of modest lineage, monsieur. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, just simple curiosity. Do you feel strong enough to get up now?"

"I think so."

Pierre helped her get up on her feet, finding out then that she was clearly taller than him. She was in fact taller than most men. Her wet shirt also revealed a muscular body...and a very appetizing chest.

"Come with me to my cart: I will bring you to my plantation, so that you could bathe and change. FERNAND, TELL THE MEN TO STOP WORKING: WE WILL CONTINUE THE EXTRACTION TOMORROW."

"YES, MONSIEUR!"

Jeanne looked at the two black men that started following the foreman, as well as at the dozen other black men visible further away.

"Are these black men slaves?"

"No! I freed all of my slaves a year ago. They now get a part of the profits from my plantation as their pay, plus a number of benefits."

Pierre thought that he saw an approving look in the teenager's eyes then before she followed him to the cart. Making her sit on the driver's bench, he waited for the blocks of salt already extracted from the flats to be loaded in the back before grabbing the reins and urging his two mules forward.

With his foreman sitting in the back of the cart and with the black workers walking behind, Pierre waited a moment before trying to start a conversation with the teenager, wanting to leave her some time to recuperate some of her strength.

"So, Jeanne, how old are you, if I may ask?"

"Sixteen, monsieur." Lied Nancy Laplante 'B', who just had attained the age of fourteen. Her body was however a lot more developed for her age than a typical 19<sup>th</sup> Century girl's body would be.

"Please, simply call me Pierre. And why were your parents bringing you to the Guadeloupe, Jeanne?"

"My parents were practically broke, following some disastrous financial speculations in France, and were hoping to build back their fortune here. Pirates then

intercepted and seized our ship, killing my parents in the process, along with the whole crew.”

“And what was the name of your ship? I will need to warn the authorities in Basse-Terre about this.”

“It was called the GROS GAILLARD. We were the only passengers aboard. It was captured a month ago.”

“So, it is the original pirate ship that sank near here, right, Jeanne?”

“That’s exact, Pierre.”

Something in her tone and attitude, which denoted unease, told Pierre that she was not telling him everything, but he didn’t insist and stayed silent during the four kilometer trip to his plantation. Finally arriving at the limits of his property, Pierre proudly showed Jeanne with a sweep of one arm the vast sugar cane fields, the sugar extraction plant, the rum distillery, the small workers’ village and his own house.

“This is my plantation, ‘Sweet Dreams’.”

Jeanne smiled with amusement and looked at him.

“I like that name. Was it your wife that gave it that name?”

“I am an old single guy, Jeanne. I am also a bit of a poet.”

“Not married, a strong and handsome man like you?”

The compliment made Pierre smile in turn.

“Let’s say that well-born girls are rare in the Guadeloupe, Jeanne. I am also in rather poor terms with most of my white neighbors, who think that I am way too soft on my black workers. I was even accused a few times of sheltering and protecting running slaves.”

“From what I have heard during my trip about the living conditions of those slaves, I can’t blame them at all for wanting to run away. Such cruel conditions could not be possibly condoned by God.”

“Very well said, my dear Jeanne. However, too many people here worship gold rather than God.”

“The same is true in France.” Replied the teenager, her expression hardening a bit.

“Well, enough about this! We will go to my house right away, so that you could wash and then rest.”

Jumping down on the ground with Jeanne once in front of his residence, Pierre let the cart in the hands of Fernand and showed the wooden façade of his house, which seemed to have been damaged and then repaired summarily.

"You will excuse the appearance of my house, Jeanne, but a terrible earthquake struck this island three years ago. My house actually resisted much better to it than many other houses. Just in Pointe-à-Pitre, the main port in the island, there were over 3,000 dead from that earthquake."

Jeanne nodded her head while inspecting the façade.

"A wooden house normally resists better than stone houses to earthquakes. The repairs you did seem adequate to me."

She then followed Pierre inside. The latter shouted at once when inside a large lounge.

"MARTHE! MARTHE! I NEED YOU!"

A stoutly-built black woman with a sympathetic face came in at once from the kitchen, to open wide eyes on seeing Jeanne, who was still only wearing her half-dried shirt.

"Dear Lord, monsieur, what happened to this poor girl?"

"She was shipwrecked off the coast and I saved her on the Grandes Salines beach, Marthe. Can you prepare a good hot bath for Jeanne and also wash her hair. Use some of my clothes to dress her up afterwards: I am afraid that she is way too tall to fit any dress in this plantation."

"Right away, monsieur." Said Marthe before walking to Jeanne and bow to her with a warm smile. "If mademoiselle will follow me."

With Jeanne following the servant, Pierre then ended alone in his living room. Going briefly to the kitchen, he advised his cook that there would be a guest for supper and then returned to the living room, where he poured himself a glass of rum before sitting down in his favorite sofa. Barely twenty minutes later, Marthe entered the lounge at a near run, looking and sounding troubled.

"Monsieur, the girl is now in the bathtub."

"Yes, and?" Said Pierre, not understanding her excitement.

"She was flogged and also branded repeatedly with red hot irons, monsieur! Her torso and buttocks are covered with scars."

Pierre got up at once from his sofa, shocked by this.

"WHAT? Did she tell you how she ended up with these scars?"

"I didn't dare ask her, monsieur. What do I do now?"

Pierre thought for a moment before looking again at Marthe.

“The branding marks, are they shaped like fleurs-de-lis?”

Marthe shook her head at that, understanding what he was alluding to. Prostitutes often were branded by the royal justice, which used irons shaped like a fleur-de-lis.

“No, monsieur. I believe that she was tortured, severely. Her scars seem to date from a few weeks at the least.

“Those pirate bastards!” Swore Pierre, suddenly understanding what could have happened to Jeanne. “Very well, Marthe. Continue to help her wash up and don’t mention her scars with her. I will talk with Jeanne afterwards.”

“Understood, monsieur.” Said Marthe before walking away, leaving Pierre alone with his thoughts.

Marthe returned with Jeanne a bit less than one hour later, as another servant was preparing the covers on the dining table, situated at one end of the lounge. Pierre smiled to Jeanne, who was now wearing a male set of clothes that ill fitted her.

“I believe that my first priority tomorrow will be to go in town with you to find some proper clothes for you, my friend.”

Jeanne, who seemed to be still disoriented, returned his smile.

“You already did a lot for me, monsieur. I don’t know how to properly thank you for saving me and now caring for me.”

“You can start by sharing this supper with me, Jeanne.” Replied Pierre while pointing at the dining table. Getting up from his sofa, Pierre led Jeanne to the table and helped her sit down before taking the chair facing her. Filling Jeanne’s cup with wine, then filling his own cup, Pierre raised it and smiled to the beautiful teenager.

“To your health, Jeanne.”

“And to yours, Pierre.” Replied Jeanne while raising her own cup and making it touch that of Pierre. They each drank a short pull of wine before putting back down their cups, looking at each other in silence while a servant brought in two plates of soup. Jeanne waited for the servant to be back in the kitchen before speaking, her eyes lowered and with embarrassment on her face.

“I noticed the reaction of Marthe, your maid, when she saw my scars. I suppose that she told you about them?”

“Yes, but if you don’t want to talk about them now...”

“You have the right to know about them, Pierre. That is the least I can do. When pirates attacked my ship over a month ago, killing my parents and the whole crew, I defended myself and managed to kill two pirates and to wound another before being overpowered. The pirates, enraged, punished me by flogging me. When I resisted again as the pirate captain was trying to rape me, he had me tortured with red hot irons to break my resistance, then took me by force. The next few weeks were like Hell for me, with the captain beating me when I was not cooperating. On top of killing my parents and taking all that we owed, those bastards also took away my dignity and sullied me in an unspeakable way. I am afraid that I am not worthy of your hospitality, Pierre.”

“Nonsense, Jeanne!” Said softly Pierre while putting his left hand over her right hand. “You have nothing to be ashamed of in all this. You were helpless and a prisoner. As for those pirates, they have now paid for their crimes and will not abuse anyone anymore.”

“But what will people think of me now? I am not even sure yet if those pirates didn’t make me pregnant or not. I also can’t prove who I am: all my family documents are now at the bottom of the sea and they took away my family ring.”

“Don’t worry about that, Jeanne. Just rest for the next few days and get over your misadventure. You are my guest here and you will always be respected at ‘Sweet Dreams’.”

Jeanne lowered her head, tears in her eyes.

“You are too good, Pierre. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.”

Moved, Pierre quickly got up and went around the table to go gently grab her shoulders and to speak softly in her ears.

“Forget about all this, my dear. You are a noble and will be treated as such here. Tomorrow, we will go together to Saint-François, the main town in this area, to buy some clothes worthy of you. Now, just eat and relax.”

Going back to his place, Pierre sat back and ate in silence, respecting her obvious embarrassment. He was however thinking furiously as he kept looking discreetly from time to time at Jeanne, who was eating slowly. The news that she had been tortured and raped by the pirates was saddening him for more than one reason. The idea of eventually marrying this beautiful girl he had saved from the sea was already in his head, but he would have to wait a few months to make sure that she was not pregnant before proposing marriage to her. If not, the busybodies around Saint-François would



not hesitate to call a baby born too quickly from Jeanne a bastard. He would thus have to temper his temptations towards her for a few months before courting her favors. Pierre felt that this was not going to be easy.

On her part, Nancy Laplante 'B' eyed discreetly Pierre, a handsome and solidly built man who wore black hair cut at the neck and who shaved his face. He was muscular and stood at about 175 centimeters, with gray eyes and a square jaw that reinforced his apparent strength of character. She had not needed to simulate her embarrassment when she had told him about her scars. Even though she had successfully resisted the tortures inflicted to her in the Bastille in 1651, that experience had deeply traumatized her and had marked her mentally as well as physically. She could have had her scars treated via the highly advanced medical science of the 34<sup>th</sup> Century and have made them disappear completely, or could have asked Nataï to heal her, but she had decided to receive only basic medical care. That decision had greatly pained her parents, but she had insisted on that, in order to keep her cover identity in 1651 plausible. A recovery that would prove too 'miraculous' would have attracted many questions and nasty rumors at the King's court. As a consequence, she had been forced to modify slightly her original cover story for her role as Jeanne de Brissac in 1846. Thankfully for her, Pierre Alphonse d'Orléans seemed to be the kind of man that she could truly love. The knowledge that Pierre had less than one year to live according to history then came back to her mind, attracting tears on her cheeks. Pierre, misunderstanding the cause for her tears, hurried up again to go comfort her.

"Do not cry, Jeanne: your misfortunes are over, I promise you that."

"Excuse me, Pierre." Said Nancy between two sobs. "So many things happened to me lately. I don't know what to expect anymore from life."

"Maybe some rest will do you good, Jeanne. Would you like to go to bed after supper?"

She nodded her head at that. Returning to his place, Pierre let her finish her supper, then escorted her to the guest room of his house, showing her the bed covered by a mosquito net and the chest of drawers.

"Marthe will bring you a night gown and some underwear. If you need anything, just ask."

"Thank you again, Pierre. You are too good."

“Not at all: I am only doing what a good Christian is supposed to do. Sleep now and forget about those pirates, Jeanne.”

He then left the bedroom and returned to the lounge, where he poured himself some more wine, drinking it while dreaming about the girl he had saved from the sea.

Next morning, Pierre had his cart readied and left with Jeanne for the small town of Saint-François, situated a few kilometers to the southwest of his plantation. Keeping to small talk on the way, Pierre did his best to relax Jeanne by chatting about the town and the local life. The dresses and other clothes he found for her in Saint-François, while of decent quality, were not however what a noble would expect to wear. Despite the fact that Jeanne seemed more than satisfied by his acquisitions, Pierre promised himself to one day bring her to Pointe-à-Pitre, the main port of the Guadeloupe and a place where he knew that he would find some gowns worthy of an aristocrat girl. On the other hand, Jeanne, with her uncommon height and athletic body, was well noticed in Saint-François, where the coming of new French settlers was fairly rare these days. Some of Pierre’s French neighbors were also in town with their wives that day and didn’t miss the tall and beautiful teenager going around with Pierre. Most of them being in rather poor terms with Pierre d’Orléans, the ideas that came to their mind then and the comments they made about the couple were not exactly charitable. Jeanne’s origin in particular attracted many questions in the heads of those neighbors. One plantation owner, intrigued by Jeanne, visited a tailor shop after Pierre and Jeanne and spoke with the tailor, who told him in turn about the scars on Jeanne’s torso. That made the plantation owner and his wife think about all kinds of hypothesis, which they of course diligently shared with other people around them.

Returning to the plantation by the end of the afternoon with a Jeanne apparently happy about their acquisitions, Pierre took an hour to go inspect the various works in progress in his fields and in his sugar extraction plant. As he was about to reenter his house just before supper, Pierre suddenly slowed down his pace and stopped in front of his door, perplex: somebody was playing the piano he had in his lounge. He was supposed to be the only one able to play the piano in ‘Sweet Dreams’. The answer that came to his mind made him smile and he resolutely entered his house, walking quietly to his lounge. He found Jeanne there, wearing one of her new dresses and playing with

brio a piece of music unknown to Pierre. Seeing him approach, Jeanne gave him a big smile while continuing to play.

"You didn't tell me that you had a square piano, Pierre. Do you have other musical instruments, by chance?"

"Uh, I have a guitar, plus a banjo that I bought in New-Orleans. You didn't tell me that you knew how to play piano. I must say that you seem to be quite good at it."

"Thank you! In truth, the guitar is my favorite musical instrument, but I am also well practiced with the piano and the harpsichord. I also like to sing."

"Really?" Said Pierre, ecstatic. "Could I then ask you to sing something for me?"

"But, with pleasure, my handsome knight." Replied Jeanne in a playful tone before changing her tune on the piano. Concentrating for a moment, she then started singing a song in French that Pierre had never heard before but that he found beautiful. He also found that she had a very pretty voice and that she seemed to have a clear talent for singing. His heart warmed up as he watched Jeanne sing and play, radiant with beauty and talent. He applauded her at the end of the song, truly impressed.

"Bravo, Jeanne! That was beautiful! Do you know many other songs?"

"I do, but many of them are in English, with a few more in Spanish and in German."

Pierre looked at her with big surprised eyes.

"You can speak four languages?"

"Seven, actually." Replied Jeanne, who didn't seem to be bragging. "I also know Gaelic, Greek and Latin. I do have a special talent for languages."

What Nancy didn't tell him was that her I.Q. of 153 made her a certified genius and that she already held a diploma in robotics engineering, a discipline marrying mechanical science, electronics and computer programming. On his part, Pierre then felt immense relief wash over him. The multiple talents just shown by Jeanne basically ruled out a possibility that had worried him since yesterday: that Jeanne had lied to him and was in reality a pirate herself, a thought brought by her tall and strong body and her torture marks. However, the chances that a girl raised among pirates could speak seven languages, play the piano like a virtuoso and sing the way she just did were about nil, her talents denoting instead the education of a true aristocrat.

Pierre listened to two more songs by Jeanne, who played the guitar for her last song. She then proved to be really good with a guitar, playing as well as anyone he had seen before, including in New Orleans. Now truly hooked on, Pierre shared an agreeable supper with Jeanne, whose morale seemed to have improved a lot since yesterday. After the meal, the two of them sat in a comfortable sofa of the lounge with glasses of rum, spending a good two hours conversing together. That time with Jeanne finished convincing Pierre that she had received a quality education that only a true aristocrat could get. The only point that detracted from that was when she told him that she liked to practice combat sports, including fencing. Her explanation that she had been fascinated since her tender youth about the girls of the ancient Greek city of Sparta however reassured him somewhat. In truth, Pierre wanted to believe her, conquered by her personality and her beauty. When the time came to go to bed, it took him all of his strength of will not to follow her in her bedroom. Sleep came with difficulty for him that night, with images of Jeanne filling his mind.

During the following days, Jeanne revealed herself to be a girl with a heart of gold and with liberal, progressive ideas, treating with respect and kindness the ex-slaves of the plantation and their families and showing interest in their welfare. Pierre, who was in bad terms with his white neighbors because of his so-called 'softness' towards his black workers, much appreciated that side of Jeanne, while she gained quickly the affection of the plantation's workers. Jeanne also proved to be singularly useful around the plantation and to Pierre. On the third day at 'Sweet Dreams', she told Pierre that she was going to go fishing at a nearby beach, leaving with a young black boy carrying a harpoon, a fishing net and a large haversack containing only a water bottle and a loaf of bread, plus a knife. She returned in the evening with her haversack full of shellfish and with nine big fish carried inside her fishing net, enough to provide a well-received extra for the supper of the workers of the plantation and their families. From then on, she went to swim and fish nearly every day, telling Pierre that the swimming helped her keep in shape and invariably returning with an impressive amount of fish and shellfish. She often returned as well with quantities of mussels harvested from the sea bottom, sometimes from impressive depths, proving herself to be a first class swimmer with impressive lung capacity. Pierre quickly realized how useful her fishing was to him when he saw the substantial savings he made in terms of food supplies for his workers and to the cost of his own table. Leaving early each morning with her young black assistant,

Jeanne would return by noon hour with her catches, then would wash and change into simple work clothes and would help Pierre run and maintain his plantation. She further surprised Pierre in that respect, proving to be incredibly knowledgeable about mechanical sciences and also being highly skilled at mechanical repairs, diagnosing and then repairing a problem with the gear mechanism of the crushing rollers used to crush sugar canes cut down by Pierre's workers. When Jeanne casually told him how she had done those repairs, Pierre could only look at her with his jaw wide opened in disbelief. After washing a second time before supper, Jeanne would put on a gown and become again an aristocratic girl, entertaining Pierre's evenings by singing, playing music and conversing with him. She also often went out to the small village housing the plantation's workers and would play her guitar and sing, to the enjoyment of the black workers and their families. Even though she was still officially only a guest at the plantation and had not had sexual relations yet with Pierre, the latter nearly felt like he was married and was now happier than he had ever been since his youth in New Orleans.

Two weeks after her arrival at the plantation, Jeanne went to see Pierre, a big smile on her face.

"I have a very good news, Pierre: my menstruations showed up last night. I don't have to worry anymore about becoming pregnant from those damn pirates."

"But, that's great news indeed!" Said Pierre, also smiling, before taking her in his arms and kissing her passionately. She returned his kiss with equal passion, letting his hands roam over her body. Now fully fired up, Pierre looked at her with utmost love.

"Jeanne, you are the most fascinating and precious girl I ever met. Would you accept to marry me once there could be no more possible doubts about the origin of a pregnancy in the eyes of the authorities?"

Jeanne's eyes became moist at those words as she eyed him in silence for a moment before replying in a very soft tone.

"Pierre, I would be most happy to be the wife of a man such as you."  
She then exchanged a long kiss with Pierre before looking at him again.

"I realize that it will take another couple of months at the least before it is evident to all that I was not made pregnant by those pirates. We should normally abstain from full sexual relations in the meantime, but do not wish to make you suffer by frustrating

your passion for me this long. I hope that you are not the type that believes that there should be no sex before marriage?"

That made Pierre smile in amusement.

"You are kidding, right? We are both French, thus from a country where sex is celebrated through our whole history and where half of the men are cuckold. You also must have noticed by now that I am not a very religious man."

"And neither am I, Pierre. I may be quite young still but I did play around boys before leaving France. I know ways to please you without risking a pregnancy. Come!" She then led him by one hand towards her bedroom while smiling warmly to him. Even if he would have wanted to resist her offer, Pierre knew that he would have lacked the willpower for that.

### **14:28 (Guadeloupe Time)**

**Wednesday, June 3, 1846**

**'Sweet Dreams' plantation**

**Island of Grande-Terre, Guadeloupe**

Barely a day later, a cart carrying a functionary and escorted by an officer and six mounted soldiers showed up at the plantation. Pierre saw them coming at the last minute, being busy at the time inspecting the big vats used to distill rum. A bad feeling growing in him at the sight of the soldiers, he returned in hurried steps to his house, in front of which the cart and its escort had stopped. The officer commanding the escort, still perched on his horse, asked him a question on a neutral tone.

"Are you Sire Pierre d'Orléans, monsieur?"

"That's me!"

The officer then saluted him with his hat.

"I am Lieutenant Dupré, sent by Governor Layrle with Monsieur De Mézières, the crown assistant-prosecutor in Basse-Terre. We were sent to inquire about a Jeanne de Brissac. Is she still in this plantation?"

"Uh, yes! I however do not understand why the Governor wanted Monsieur de Mézières to be escorted by soldiers for this."

"We could discuss this inside, monsieur. Could you tell the lady in question that we would like to speak with her?"

Despite the polite tone used by the officer, Pierre didn't like at all the way things were looking. He however hid his anxiety as best he could and walked quickly around his house, going to its vegetable garden, which Jeanne was helping to maintain. He did not miss the fact that the officer followed him with two of his soldiers, still on their horses. Jeanne, busy plucking out wild grass, only saw Pierre and the soldiers once they were only a few meters from her. Getting up slowly from her knees and hands, she gave a suspicious look at the soldiers before looking at Pierre.

"To what do we owe the visit of these gentlemen, Pierre?"

"They came from Basse-Terre with an assistant-prosecutor to see you, Jeanne." Jeanne then detailed the officer, who was in exchange noting her height and athletic built.

"Very well! Just let me some time to make myself presentable, gentlemen."

"Of course, mademoiselle." Replied the officer, who however followed her to the rear door of the house and entered behind her, followed by Pierre. The latter then led the young lieutenant and the assistant-prosecutor to his lounge, offering them to sit in a sofa.

"Please sit down, gentlemen."

"Thank you, Sir Pierre." Said De Mézières, sighing with relief after sitting for hours on the hard wooden bench of his cart. Pierre sat facing him in his favorite easy chair and examined the expression of the graying royal functionary.

"So, Monsieur De Mézières, you came to find out about my unfortunate guest? My letter thus got promptly enough to the Governor?"

"Yes, along with other pieces of information about mademoiselle de Brissac that we found a bit alarming."

"Her correct title would be Lady Jeanne, Monsieur de Mézières." Replied Pierre in a rather irritated tone. The assistant-prosecutor looked at him with some skepticism.

"If she is indeed who she pretends to be, Sir Pierre. Understand that the disappearance of the GROS GAILLARD, supposedly at the hand of pirates, has worried the authorities in Basse-Terre. Why don't you tell us now how you first met this girl?"

"As you wish, monsieur." Said Pierre before telling him in a few minutes how he had saved Jeanne from the sea and had then brought her to his plantation. At the end of it, Lieutenant Dupré whispered into the ear of the assistant-prosecutor, who nodded his head before speaking again to Pierre.

"Sir Pierre, have you seen the scars on this Jeanne de Brissac?"

"Yes, I did. She told me herself that she was flogged and branded by the pirates who captured her, for having resisted them."

"And you didn't think about the possibility that those scars could have been caused in different circumstances, monsieur?"

Pierre stiffened in his easy chair at once, indignant.

"Are you insinuating that Jeanne is not a true aristocrat, monsieur?"

"That possibility came to the mind of the Governor, monsieur. That is why he sent me with an escort to come question your guest. Lieutenant Dupré just told me that your Jeanne happens to be very tall and quite muscular...for a sixteen year-old aristocrat."

"She effectively is, but that does not make a liar out of her, monsieur."

"Sire Pierre, please put yourself in our place for a moment. Here is a tall, strong girl that arrived here from the sea following a shipwreck. She wears torture scars and has no paper or jewel that could prove who she is. One could be excused to think that she could be a pirate herself, a pirate girl that could have been tortured in the past by a rival band."

"A pirate girl that speaks seven languages, play the piano and the guitar with brio and can talk about the history of France for hours?" Shot back Pierre. "She may look to you physically like an Amazon, but I can assure you that she has the education of a true noble girl."

"Seven languages?" Asked De Mézières, suddenly less assured of himself.

"Yes monsieur! On top of French, she can speak and sing in English, Spanish, German, Gaelic, Greek and Latin. I can also certify to you that Jeanne has advanced notions in mathematics, geometry, astronomy and many other things."

De Mézières exchanged a surprised look with Lieutenant Dupré at those words.

"Uh, Sire Pierre, your Jeanne de Brissac seems nearly too good to be true."

"It is true that men keep thinking that women are inferior to them, gentlemen, in which they are sorely mistaken." Said a female voice, making the three men snap their heads towards the entrance of the lounge. Jeanne was now wearing a gown, while her hair was carefully combed and gathered in a horse's tail at the back of her head. She then walked up to them and bow politely in front of the assistant-prosecutor.

"Jeanne Marie Céleste de Brissac, at your service, Mister De Mézières. I am ready to do my best to prove to you who I am."



"Uh, well, I was actually planning to bring you to Basse-Terre, where our official registers that could help verify your declarations are, mademoiselle. It is also quite possible that I could have to send an official request to France to have the passenger registry of the GROS GAILLARD checked to see if you and your parents were indeed recorded as having left on that ship."

"But, such a procedure could take months!" Objected Pierre, frustrated. "Know that me and Jeanne were planning to marry in a month or so."

De Mézières gave him a cold look at those words.

"More the reason to be careful, Sir Pierre. Would you be ready to risk associating the name of your illustrious family, which is connected to the Crown, with a possible impostor? I believe anyway that the Governor will oppose such a marriage as long as he will not be certain about the identity of your guest."

Seeing that Pierre was suddenly struck by discouragement, Jeanne went to sit by his side to console him, one arm around his shoulders.

"Don't worry, Pierre. The doubts about me will vanish soon enough. The important thing is that I am here with you and will stay by your side."

"If you say so, Jeanne." Replied Pierre with little conviction. Jeanne then looked up resolutely at De Mézières and Dupré.

"Gentlemen, if you still want to bring me to Basse-Terre in order to complete your inquiry about me, I am ready to follow you willingly...as long as I am treated with respect. I know that your inquiry, if conducted competently, will eventually prove that I am who I say I am. Thus, think twice before making me travel while wearing shackles." De Mézières made a forced smile, realizing fully the consequences if he made a mistake and dishonored an authentic aristocrat.

"Do not worry, mademoiselle: you will be treated with respect, unless the inquiry exposes you as an impostor, in which case your punishment will be harsh indeed."

"Fair deal!" Said Jeanne before looking at Pierre, who was staring at his two 'guests' with little sympathy. "I am sure that we could accommodate our visitors for the night, right, Pierre?"

"Effectively, Jeanne. The escort of Monsieur De Mézières can go establish itself in the barn. I will leave my own bedroom to Monsieur De Mézières and Lieutenant Dupré."

"But, where will you sleep then, monsieur?" Asked Dupré.

“With Jeanne, of course!” Replied Pierre with a malicious smirk, making Jeanne giggle. “You are of course welcome to have supper with me and Jeanne, you and your soldiers.”

**16:49 (Guadeloupe Time)**

**Saturday, June 6, 1846**

**Fort Saint-Charles, town of Basse-Terre**

**Guadeloupe**

Jeanne looked around her with curiosity as the cart transporting her entered a stone fortress through a guarded gate. The fortress had been built according to the principles dear to Vauban, the famous French military engineer that had served King Louis XIV. The walls were low but thick and the octagonal star pattern included a series of sunken bastions situated behind wide and deep trenches. Cannons also were visible at the crenellations, especially on the side facing the nearby sea. Nancy ‘B’ knew that this fortress had seen many battles during the last two centuries, especially against the British, which had occupied the Guadeloupe a number of times in the past, the last time being between 1810 and 1816. The cart soon stopped in front of a long, single storey house made of wood and stone and situated in the center of the fortress. Pierre, who had made the trip atop of his horse, set foot on the ground with Jeanne, De Mézières and Lieutenant Dupré, letting the soldiers of the escort bring the cart and the horses to the stables. Jeanne, carrying in her hands a canvas bag and a guitar that she had used to provide some entertainment during the trip, was invited to follow De Mézières inside the house, which turned out to be the residence of the governor of the Guadeloupe, Monsieur de Layrle. The latter, alerted by a servant of their arrival, greeted them in a large but modestly furnished lounge. De Layrle was a thin, rather small man with long sideburns joining with his moustache and who wore a pair of round spectacles. He wore a frock coat and a pair of gray striped pants despite the heavy heat of the Summer. He examined Jeanne a moment, surprised by her height, before bowing politely to her and Pierre.

“Welcome in Basse-Terre, lady and gentleman. I am Governor Henry de Layrle.”

"Sir Pierre Alphonse d'Orléans, at your service, Governor." Said Pierre while bowing himself, while Jeanne made a curtsy. "This is Lady Jeanne Marie Céleste de Brissac, whom I saved from the sea three weeks ago."

"And how old are you, mademoiselle?" Asked the governor.

"Sixteen, Your Excellency! As I already said to Monsieur De Mézières, I am ready to do my best to prove who I am."

"Let's not talk about this yet, Lady Jeanne." Replied de Layrle with a polite smile. "Please take the time to install yourself after your hot and dusty trip. My wife Louise will show you to your room."

A small woman in her forties with a distinguished appearance then stepped from behind the governor and smiled to Jeanne.

"If you could follow me, my dear."

"With pleasure, madame."

With the Governor taking care of Pierre, Jeanne followed Louise de Layrle to a small but clean and comfortable guest room. Louise however closed the door of the room behind Jeanne and spoke to her in a sober tone.

"Mademoiselle, my husband asked me to examine you in private, so that your modesty would not be hurt. I will thus ask you to undress completely."

Having expected that, Jeanne obeyed without fuss and soon stood fully naked in front of the wife of the governor, who asked her to slowly turn around on the spot. Louise seemed genuinely shocked by the sight of the scars left by whip strokes and red hot irons on her torso and buttocks.

"Decidedly, those who did this to you were quite cruel, my poor girl."

"I dared resist the pirates who boarded my ship, killing two of them and injuring a third one. They also punished me a second time after I resisted their captain, who wanted to rape me."

Louise de Layrle then stepped close to her to examine in detail her scars, touching them before feeling the muscles in her legs and arms and also noting her wide shoulders.

"And...did they rape you?"

"Many times, madame."

Louise next made her lie on her back on the bed with her legs opened. A few seconds were enough for her to see that Jeanne was not a virgin anymore.

"You may now wash yourself before dressing back, if you wish so, mademoiselle. There is a wash basin full of water and a sponge near the window, plus a

towel. Once dressed, please return to the lounge, where my husband will speak with you.”

“I will only need ten minutes, madame.”

“Perfect!” Said Louise before leaving the room and closing the door behind her. She then went to the lounge, where her husband was discussing with Pierre d’Orléans, whispering in the ear of the governor.

“She was effectively cruelly tortured, but not by the royal justice, on top of being raped. She is also the most athletic and strong girl I ever saw.”

“Thank you, my dear Louise. We will speak further after supper.”

As promised, Jeanne showed up in the lounge ten minutes later, cleaned up and with her dress dusted off. The governor greeted her with a smile and pointed the sofa in which Pierre was already sitting.

“Ah, here you are, my dear! Please, take place besides Sir Pierre. Would you like a cup of wine to refresh yourself?”

“With pleasure, Your Excellency.”

Once Jeanne was sitting, a servant brought her a cup of wine on top of a silver tray, with Jeanne taking the cup with good grace. De Layrle watched her closely, knowing that De Mézières was listening through the wall from an adjacent room, various reference books in front of him.

“Well, my dear Jeanne, why don’t you tell us about your family and the reasons for them to travel to the Guadeloupe?”

Jeanne obliged him at once and served him the cover story built for her by the Time Patrol. That story actually followed closely reality, as a Jeanne de Brissac had effectively taken a cabin with her parents on the GROS GAILLARD in the port of Bordeaux, with the goal of rebuilding their fortune in the Guadeloupe. The real Jeanne de Brissac was sixteen at the time of her fatal trip, was fairly tall for a girl and had black hair and green eyes. Nancy ‘B’ knew nearly every detail about her short life and her parents, thanks to the research in depth done on the Brissac family by the Time Patrol. Nancy finally had to lie only about the way the GROS GAILLARD had vanished. At the insistence of the governor, she described to him the taking of her ship by the pirates, as well as the tortures and ill treatments she had endured at their hands. She only had to think about her own, too real experience in the basements of the Bastille to paint a convincing look of horror on her face. De Layrle, visibly moved, listened to her closely

before asking less disturbing questions about what she knew about the French government and French customs. Nancy also passed with brio that part of what was really a polite but detailed interrogation.

By the time that supper was announced, the governor had become convinced that Jeanne was telling the truth, reasoning that a girl raised among pirates could not possibly fool him this much. What cemented his favorable impression of her was when, at his invitation in order to test her, Jeanne played the piano and the guitar after supper while singing, on top of conversing in Spanish and in English, two languages that the governor was fluent in. De Layrle exchanged a knowing look with his wife, who nodded her head and whispered in his ear.

"Her education is just too good for her to be anything but an aristocrat, Henry. I believe her."

"I believe her too. Just let me go speak discreetly with De Mézières, to see what he thinks of Jeanne's answers to my questions."

Excusing himself for a moment with Pierre and Jeanne, the governor left the lounge and went to see his assistant-prosecutor, who was hiding in the governor's office adjacent to the lounge.

"So, what do you think, Monsieur De Mézières?"

The graying functionary had a last look at his notes before answering in a slow, deliberate voice.

"Well, Your Excellency, everything she said made sense and fitted with what we know. Her answers about the House of Brissac matched perfectly with my treatise on French genealogy. She even described very precisely the coat of arms of the Brissac, which is only a modest noble house that is not known by many. I still can't be absolutely certain that this girl is who she says she is without sending a letter to Bordeaux to verify that the Brissac family indeed boarded the GROS GAILLARD. However, I am certain that this is no pirate girl, Your Excellency."

"Excellent! I agree with you that she can only be a true aristocrat. I don't believe that sending a letter to Bordeaux will be necessary. Close your inquiry on her and have a certificate in her name prepared for tomorrow morning, indicating her date of arrival in the Guadeloupe. Put her as well in the registries of the colony."

"It will be done, Your Excellency."

The governor then returned to the lounge, both relieved and satisfied, going to Jeanne and gallantly kissing her hand.

“Lady Jeanne, I am truly sorry to have forced you to do the long trip to here. Know that I now believe your story and that the registries of the colony will officially list your arrival in the Guadeloupe as Jeanne Marie Céleste de Brissac.”

“Thank you! Thank you from the bottom of my heart, Your Excellency!” Replied Nancy, not having to simulate her emotion, before kissing de Layrle on both cheeks. The latter then shook hands with Pierre, who was now feeling immense relief filling him.

“Congratulations, Sir Pierre. You now have my blessing to marry your beautiful Lady Jeanne when you wish so. You are of course both invited to stay in my residence until your departure to return to your plantation. In fact, I was planning a ball for tomorrow, to which I have invited all the high society of Basse-Terre. You would make me happy if you could stay and participate to that ball.”

“It will be an honor to do so, Your Excellency.” Said happily Pierre. On her part, Nancy also smiled, satisfied. The first part of her mission in the Guadeloupe was now nearly complete. There was only one small formality left to conclude it.

### **14:23 (Guadeloupe Time)**

**Sunday, July 5, 1846**

### **Church of Saint-François, Guadeloupe**

“And I thus declare both of you united by the sacred links of marriage. You may now kiss each other.”

The small crowd that was present at the ceremony, made up in majority with the black workers of Pierre and their families, shouted with joy as Pierre and Jeanne exchanged a long kiss inside Saint-François’ church. Nancy looked into Pierre’s eyes, real tears on her cheeks.

“Pierre, I could not possibly have found a better man than you here in the Guadeloupe. I promise to love you with all my passion and for as long as we will be both alive.”

Many of the women present sighed deeply on hearing that declaration of love, while Pierre caressed her cheek with one hand.

“Know that you are everything for me, Jeanne. I now count myself as the luckiest man in the World.”

The couple then exchanged a second kiss even more passionate than the first one, making more than one female spectator cry.

The marriage ceremony in the church was followed by a party held in the biggest inn of the town, a party that went on until after supper. The newlywed and their employees then returned to the plantation, either by cart or on foot, to continue the festivities there. Pierre and Jeanne stayed together in bed until late next morning, caressing each other and repeatedly making love. They finally decided regretfully to get up and wash, then dress. With Pierre having declared that day as a holiday for his workers, Jeanne made a point of walking around the workers houses with his guitar, playing and singing to brighten their day. When she returned to the main residence a few hours later, she found Pierre busy writing a series of letters in his lounge. Approaching him and hugging his back, she rested her head on his shoulders.

“To whom are you writing to, Pierre?”

“To my relatives in Louisiana and in France, to announce to them my marriage.”

“Do you still have a lot of relatives in France, Pierre?”

Pierre gave her an amused look before kissing her on the cheek.

“You are now a d’Orléans, Jeanne. You should know that I am actually a distant nephew of King Louis-Philippe. One of these letters is for the King.”

“Oh! Should I be intimidated or flattered by that?”

Pierre answered her by gently patting her bum.

“Nothing of the sort, my sweet Jeanne. Affairs of state and the aristocracy are of no interest to me at all. I was content with living in reasonable comfort here, in the Guadeloupe. Now, I have the most beautiful jewel that I could possibly find.”

“You flatterer!” Purred Jeanne while caressing his hair.

Later, as night had fallen, Jeanne left the residence, telling Pierre that she was going to walk through the workers’ houses. Once out of sight, she changed direction and stealthily went to the back of the barn. Making first sure that nobody was watching her, she concentrated and mentally activated the space-time distorter implanted in her body, disappearing in a brief flash of white light. Nancy Laplante ‘B’ had another mission to continue in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

## **CHAPTER 7 – A NEW GERMANY**

**10:37 (Jerusalem Time)**

**Tuesday, June 9, 1953 'C'**

**Headquarters of the Palestine Interposition Force**

**Ramat David Airbase, Galilee**

**Israel**

“Please sit down, ladies.”

The 49 women called by Ingrid Dows to the briefing room of the operations center in Ramat David took place in the first ranks of folding chairs, both anxious and curious about the reason they had been called in. Ingrid, herself took place in a chair set in front of the others and facing them, a thick pile of documents in her hands. She then looked in turn at each of the women in silence. Over half of them were veterans of the Pacific War and had been serving with her since 1942. More than just being comrades, they were all good friends for her and she sincerely wished the best that life could bring to them in a world still dominated by men.

“My friends, the posting season has arrived, as you know already. Last February in Da Nang, on top of announcing many promotions and distributing medals, Vice-President Warren promised us that the Pentagon would finally open completely to women all positions in the Air Force. Well, I can tell you now that he kept his promise. Now that a peace treaty has been signed between Israel and Jordan and that a replacement fighter squadron has started to arrive in Ramat David, we will soon be free to go join our new postings.”

The assembled women nodded their heads at that, happy. With a peace treaty signed, President Dewey had announced that the American interposition force would be replaced by a military training group that would help the Israelis form their own air force and heavy army units. The United States was also going to provide combat aircraft, armored vehicles and artillery weapons to Israel, so that it could fully defend itself from further Arab attacks. As for the British, they had to watch their strategic plans for the Middle East sink to the bottom, having lost most of their credibility and influence with the Arab nations of the region. Their debacle had been made even more bitter with the loss



of their beloved King George VI, dead from lung cancer and now replaced on the throne by his daughter Margaret.

Briefly getting up from her chair, Ingrid quickly distributed her pile of message copies around the women present.

"I am now giving to each of you a copy of your posting message, coming from the personnel office of the Air Force. You all have in common with me the fact that you asked for a posting in Europe...and that you obtained it. Know first that I was named as the next commander of our Third Air Force, which has its headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany, and that you will all be under my overall command. I will thus be in good position to support and help you in your new jobs."

The young women facing Ingrid nodded their heads soberly at those words: they were still far from certain about what kind of treatment they were going to get in units that had been exclusively male up to now. Ingrid then looked at Colonel Gertrude Meserve, one of her oldest combat comrades and now 33 years old.

"Gertrude, you are going to take command of the 81<sup>st</sup> Fighter Interceptor Wing, based in Neubiberg, just south of Munich. The three squadrons of the 81<sup>st</sup> Wing are presently in the process of being reequipped with Lockheed F-83As and your main job will be to supervise and direct that transition. Don't be afraid of making your male pilots understand that they can indeed learn from the girls of The Witches."

"Don't worry, Ingrid: I will not go easy on their egos." Promised Gertrude, a fighter pilot with a total of 59 registered air victories as a fighter pilot. Her reply made the other women giggle as Ingrid faced two other fighter pilots.

"Lieutenant Colonel Jane Plant, you are to take command of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Interceptor Squadron, while Major Shirley Slade will take command of the 91<sup>st</sup> Fighter Interceptor Squadron. Both of those squadrons are part of the 81<sup>st</sup> Wing of Colonel Meserve and are also based in Neubiberg. Each of you will also be followed by two experienced female pilots and their radar officers, who will become element leaders in your squadrons. Majors Hill and Vail will serve as element leaders in the 92<sup>nd</sup> Squadron, while Captains D'Arcy and DeMoe will serve as element leaders in the 91<sup>st</sup> Squadron. With your usual radar officers accompanying you to Germany, I am confident that such an experienced and hardened team will help make the 81<sup>st</sup> Wing an elite formation. To support you on the ground, Lieutenant Colonel Sally Nolan will be the new maintenance officer of the 81<sup>st</sup> Wing, with 25 women of all ranks following her to Neubiberg.

Lieutenant Colonel Dickinson, you will be the new security officer for the Rhein-Mann Airbase, near Frankfurt, our most active air transport hub in Europe and a base that is vital to the operations of the American forces in Germany. Five of your female MPs will also go with you to Rhein-Mann.”

“YEAH!” Exclaimed Angie Dickinson before exchanging high fives with her five MPs present. Ingrid then turned towards the oldest aviatrix of the group, a thin woman of forty with a wisp of gray in her brown hair.

“Lieutenant Colonel Straughan, you will go take command of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Special Transport Squadron, which is presently being reequipped with AC-10s at the Giebelstadt Airbase, near Wurzburg. You will bring with you Major Sara Chapin, who will be one of your element leaders, along with her whole AC-10 crew. The role of your new unit may appear rather unexciting, but it is actually a vital one. Strategic reconnaissance aircraft from the Strategic Air Command regularly use Giebelstadt as a base for deep reconnaissance flights over hostile territories, and so do visiting heavy bomber units from the United States. If a SAC crew crashes somewhere in Europe, or worse inside the USSR, your job will be to go scoop up that crew, as well as their loads of nuclear bombs or films.”

As the women in the room exchanged excited comments, Ingrid smiled from one ear to the other while rubbing her hands together.

“Ladies, that leaves one last piece of news to give you. If you were expecting to have it easy under my command in Germany, know that my deputy commander for the Third Air Force in Stuttgart will be no other than Brigadier General Teresa James. I am certain that Teresa will know how to tighten your screws.”

After a second of surprised silence, the women shouted their joy at having the veteran fighter pilot with 68 confirmed air victories coming with them to Germany.

## **10:18 (Germany Time)**

**Friday, July 3, 1953 'C'**

**Bavarian sky, Southern Germany**

The formation of eleven jet aircraft, including eight F-83A fighter-bombers, had just overflowed the Austrian Alps and were approaching the area of Munich when Ingrid, piloting her faithful F-83A 'LADY HAWK', spoke on the radio.

"From Lady Hawk to call signs Fifinella Wanderers: here we are, girls! It is time for us to split. Good luck to you and your girls at your new base, Walkyrie."

"Thank you, Lady Hawk!" Replied Gertrude Meserve, her heart pinched with emotion. "Neubiberg group, steer to heading 340 and start your descent."

Gertrude then switched to the air control frequency of the Neubiberg Airbase.

"Neubiberg Control, this is Fifinella Wanderer Three, on approach with seven wingmen, over."

A calm male voice answered her after her second call.

"Fifinella Wanderer Three, from Neubiberg Control. We have you on our radar screens. Continue your descent at your actual rhythm and level up once at 10,000 feet. Keep your present heading, over."

"Fifinella Wanderer Three, acknowledged, out!"

After eight more minutes of flying, the group of eight aircraft arrived in sight of the Neubiberg Airbase, an old Luftwaffe airfield with a single asphalt main runway of a length of 2,300 meters. A multitude of small villages and clumps of houses surrounded the base in the middle of a green, fertile plain, while the southern suburbs of Munich lay nearby, less than two kilometers away. Gertrude felt contentment fill her as she contemplated that picture from the air. While she and her aviatrix liked the Philippines, where the 99<sup>th</sup> Wing had been based since 1944, the hot and humid tropical climate there had started to be wearing on her, while the general living standards in the Philippines could not compare with those in Europe. Gertrude however had the net impression right away that the airfield in Neubiberg was too constricted, with a single main runway whose extremities were close to a number of villages. She could already imagine the pile of complaints about the deafening noise of F-83 engines that would come from German citizens living near the base. Letting the C-152 cargo aircraft of her group land first with its load of female ground support specialists and personal luggage, Gertrude landed last, concentrating to make a perfect landing. If she was to command her new wing, she had to show the example in everything, especially when in front of an audience of men skeptical about female fighter pilots. Following a taxiway after slowing down and leaving the main runway, Gertrude rolled towards one of the two wide parking aprons adjacent to the line of hangars and buildings of the base. Apart from the planes of her group, she could see less than thirty F-83s, plus a handful of transport and liaison aircraft. It was already evident to her that parts of her new unit were still not in

Neubiberg. She however saw that a group of men in uniforms was waiting for her near jeeps parked on the edge of one of the aprons, observing her planes.

“Hey guys, I don’t want to hurt your egos but the girl in that group with the least air victory marks on her aircraft has fifteen planes on her hunting score.” Announced Colonel John Morgan to his senior officers present with him, while still looking through his binoculars. His subalterns looked at each other, with his operations officer, Major Walther Pensky, then asking a question on an hesitant tone.

“And...the one with the highest score, sir?”

“One moment: I am still counting... The plane named ‘WALKYRIE’ has 59 victory marks on the side of its cockpit. However, we should not be surprised by this, in view of the reputation of these girls.”

“Their reputation, yeah!” Said on a skeptical tone Major William Clarkson, the deputy commander of the 91<sup>st</sup> Fighter Interceptor Squadron. “Do they really deserve that reputation, though?”

Morgan gave a dubious glance to Clarkson at those words. Clarkson had been complaining to whoever would listen to him about the fact that the Pentagon had named one of the newly arriving female pilots to command the 91<sup>st</sup> Squadron, rather than himself. He was not alone in this, Morgan’s own deputy, Lieutenant Colonel Roger Tisdale, being equally bitter about not succeeding Morgan in command of the wing.

“Listen to me, gentlemen, and listen well!” Replied Morgan, raising his voice. “The women of the 99<sup>th</sup> Wing have a combat service history that anyone in the Air Force could only envy. They even fought on the ground in Guadalcanal in 1942, in order to defend their airfield against Japanese soldiers. They again fought on the ground in Korea, holding part of the defensive perimeter around Pusan. These girls further fought in the air in Indochina and Palestine and still have fresh blood on their claws. I thus expect you to show the proper respect due to combat veterans and elite pilots, gentlemen. You will cut your nonsense about women having no business being fighter pilots, and this right now! Should I also remind you that the new commander of the Third Air Force, Major General Dows, has herself a total of 165 air victories, while she is only 29 years old?”

Morgan then looked at the driver of his jeep.

“Sergeant, let’s roll to the F-83 marked ‘WALKYRIE’ once it will have stopped.”

“Yes sir!”

As his vehicle started rolling on the tarmac, Morgan signaled to the bus waiting behind his three jeeps to follow, before signaling to his administrative officer, Major David Rubinstein, to go with his jeep and the bus towards the cargo plane that had landed with the seven F-83s. Jumping out of his jeep as soon as it stopped besides the F-83 'WALKYRIE', Morgan walked with a slight limp towards the cockpit as a ground technician deployed the two telescopic ladders integrated into the left side of the cockpit section. He greeted the pilot and radar officer that came down with a vigorous handshake once they set foot on the tarmac.

"Welcome to Neubiberg, ladies! I am Colonel John Morgan, current commander of the 81<sup>st</sup> Fighter Interceptor Wing."

"And I am Colonel Gertrude Meserve." Replied the pilot, a tall, lean brunette in her mid thirties whose curly hair fell to her neck. "This is my radar officer, Captain Betty Smith."

"Pleased to meet you!" Said Morgan while looking briefly at the small blonde. He then presented quickly his own officers to the newcomers, then pointed the jeeps and the bus to Gertrude Meserve.

"If you will now collect your luggage out of your planes, you and your women will be driven to the wing's administrative office, where you will be able to take care of your arrival procedures. We will be able to get to know each other better at the officers' mess during lunch."

"If that would be possible, Colonel Morgan, I would like to inspect this afternoon the accommodations that will be provided to my ground technicians, and this before settling in myself."

Morgan nodded his head at that, favorably impressed. He had too often seen in the past senior officers whose only concern were their own comfort, while giving little regard about how their lower ranking personnel were faring.

"I will be most happy to guide you during that inspection, Colonel Meserve. Know however that the accommodations on this base date back to the 1930s and are rather Spartan. Your technicians will have to lodge in communal dormitories, like the rest of our enlisted personnel."

"We are accustomed to living in rough conditions, Colonel." Replied Gertrude, sounding accommodating. "I am mostly preoccupied about the measures concerning their sex."

"Master Sergeant Vanderbilt already took care of this aspect of their needs, Colonel Meserve. The top floor of one of our barracks, which includes separate showers and washrooms, has been reserved for your enlisted women. This should help avoid possible, uh, incidents between male and female personnel. As for you and your officers, those who will live on base will rate individual rooms. There are also a few civilian accommodations available near the base that could be rented...for those who can afford them."

Gertrude understood at once what Morgan was alluding to. The enlisted members of the American armed forces were actually poorly paid, often getting barely more than the minimum legal salary. Those who were married and had children had an especially hard time making ends meet. American military quarters for enlisted personnel were still typically vast dormitories where twenty or more members had to live in a complete lack of intimacy. In contrast, a colonel like her with ten years of service could earn with flight bonus and other allocations about 1,100 dollars per month, while a ground maintenance technician with the rank of airman first class could hope to earn about 170 dollars per month, or a bit more than half of the average American salary.

"I would indeed like to study that subject once my personnel is lodged. Please excuse me for a moment: I won't be long."

Gertrude, along with her radar officer, returned to her plane and took her hand luggage out of the luggage compartment situated under the cockpit, then returned to Morgan's jeep. The latter, along with his officers, was surprised to see that Gertrude and Betty Smith had brought their M2A2 carbines with them, like apparently all the female newcomers.

"You are accustomed to travel like this with your carbines, Colonel Meserve?"

"Let's say that me and my women have been serving for six months now in active combat zones. We even had to defend our airbase in Palestine against a night commando attack. Major General Dows is a believer about being always ready for combat, be it in the air or on the ground."

"Uh, I see!"

Morgan then let his administrative officer take care of most of the things during the next hour or so, as the newcomers went through base arrival procedures. He was surprised to see how meager the non-accompanied baggage of the women, which had come aboard the C-152, was. Even Gertrude Meserve didn't seem to possess any

piece of furniture or kitchenware, having brought only a single large trunk filled with books, civilian clothes, souvenirs and a few decorative items. However, most of the newcomers had one or more weapons or pieces of military equipment taken as war trophies from enemy soldiers, be they Japanese, North Korean or Chinese. That made more than a few male aviators in Neubiberg raise an eyebrow, on top of starting a round of rumors and stories about this surprising martial side of the new women. Another unusual aspect about those women was their muscular build for their sex. Gertrude Meserve smiled when Major Nick Napolitano raised that point at the officers' mess during lunch.

"That's actually quite easy to explain, Major. Since the creation of the 99<sup>th</sup> Air Group in 1942, General Dows has insisted that all the women under her command train regularly in order to build their muscle mass and strength. An ordnance technician that can't do her part to lift a 500 pound bomb and hook it under a plane would be next to useless to her unit. As for the pilots of our group, we had to have enough strength and stamina to be able to handle our plane control sticks during long aerial combats at high speed. Without being champion weightlifters, me and my women have a strength approaching that of men of our size. That factor is however only a secondary one to our successes."

"And what would be the primary factors that would explain the successes of your aviatrix, Colonel?" Asked Lieutenant Colonel Radner, the commander of the 78<sup>th</sup> Fighter Interceptor Squadron. Gertrude took a sober expression as she answered him, emphasizing each point as she went.

"First, we use tactics devised to exploit the weaknesses of our adversaries and to maximize our own strong points. Second, we use surprise to the utmost and try to be unpredictable. Third, we grab the initiative and do everything to keep it. Fourth, we carefully select our targets in order to maximize the effect on the enemy and to minimize the resources needed for our strikes. As a consequence, we do our best to cut the head of the serpent, rather than its tail."

"Like you did when you bombed Beijing, right?"

"Exact, Colonel! The Communist Chinese leaders had been stupid enough to let their paranoia affect their judgment and had concentrated all their houses and offices in a small, clearly defined zone in downtown Beijing. By killing all the top Chinese leaders, we forced their armies marching on Vietnam to turn around in utter confusion as chaos ensued in Beijing. Fifth, and possibly the most important factor according to General

Dows, we should never lose sight of the political, economic and social factors that are causing a war. A purely military solution to a conflict is invariably condemned to fail in the long term. The cases of Palestine and of Indochina are good examples of that.”

“Talking of Palestine, Colonel,” hurried to say Major Rubinstein, “there are rumors that some kind of miracle happened in Ramat David three months ago, a miracle that involved General Dows. What do you know about that?”

Gertrude became dead serious then as she fixed Rubinstein in the eyes.

“A miracle indeed happened in Ramat David, Major: I was there and witnessed it. There were in fact two miracles. First, General Dows was healed in minutes of her severe wounds by a bright white light. Then, her driver, who had been killed in Haifa by the Jews who had attacked her and Dows, was resurrected in front of our eyes after General Dows prayed for her life. That is all that I am ready to say about this for now. General Dows will decide if she wants or not to add to that. You will probably be able to meet her when she will come for our local change of command parade in a few days.”

The male officers around Gertrude looked at each other for a moment, stunned and disbelieving. Gertrude used that opportunity to change the subject, looking at Morgan.

“Talking about our change of command parade, Colonel Morgan, when do you expect to hold it?”

“Next Tuesday, on the seventh, if that is to your agreement.”

“That will be fine with me.”

“By the way, the wing is celebrating Independence Day tomorrow. I hope that your women will be able to participate to our national holiday.”

“Of course, my dear Colonel Morgan!” Replied Gertrude, smiling. “After all these months of war for us, a party will do us a lot of good indeed.”

After the meal, which was typical of American military kitchens (abundant, but of questionable value in terms of both diet and taste), Gertrude was invited by Morgan to go visit the quarters allotted to her women. She however surprised Morgan by asking to inspect as well the male enlisted quarters.

“Uh, why the male quarters, Colonel Meserve?”

“Because the welfare of all my subalterns is important to me, not only that of my female subalterns.”

Morgan nodded his head at that, favorably impressed by this demonstration of good leadership.



"In that case, we will inspect first the lower floors of the enlisted ranks' barracks. If you will please follow me, ladies and gentlemen."

Followed by his staff officers, his squadron leaders and by Master Sergeant Vanderbilt, Morgan got up and led Gertrude out of the mess, taking place in the jeeps still waiting outside. A short trip of a few hundred meters got them to a long, two-storey building with dormer windows opening in its sloped roof. Morgan pointed the building, which had a strictly utilitarian appearance, to Gertrude.

"The personnel quarters on this base actually date from the 1930s and are quite austere. I did my best to improve them but our maintenance and construction budgets are very limited. Let's go inside!"

Entering behind Morgan and with the other officers following her, Gertrude soon walked into one of the communal dormitories of the barrack, a long room lit by ten large windows. The dormitory was filled with two parallel rows of iron bunk beds, with each bed provided with a narrow steel locker and a barrack box. Gertrude frowned on seeing the complete lack of intimacy offered by that arrangement.

"How many men live in this dormitory?"

The wing's personnel officer, Captain Bradley Ferguson, jumped in to answer her.

"Over sixty men, Colonel. This dormitory has a maximum capacity of eighty occupants."

"And if these men want to write letters, read a book or play cards?"

"Then, they do it sitting on their beds or they use the two folding tables set in the center of the room, Colonel."

"And how is the junior ranks mess? If this barrack block can't offer more than what I see here now, then I hope that our technicians can at the least use a decent mess. We are after all talking about men and women whose training cost thousands of dollars and took a couple of years. What I see here is acceptable for simple recruits, but not for experienced specialists."

"But, this is no different from the conditions found in most of our bases, Colonel." Said Master Sergeant Paul Vanderbilt, a stocky man. Gertrude looked at him with a neutral expression while fixing him in the eyes.

"Maybe, Master Sergeant, but that is not a valid excuse for me to accept such a situation without even trying to improve it. Our pilots depend on our ground technicians to be able to fulfill their missions, missions that this wing is tasked to accomplish. Our junior personnel is already grossly underpaid in comparison to their civilian counterparts

and deserve at the least decent living conditions after work. Don't forget that your role is not limited to maintaining discipline, Master Sergeant Vanderbilt. You are also responsible to counsel, support and assist the non-commissioned personnel."

Vanderbilt tensed up then but didn't reply. Gertrude felt however clearly that he was not thinking much of her opinion. She thus promised to keep an eye on him and his professional performance.

Climbing the stairs to the attic level, which contained the female quarters, Gertrude found there conditions similar to those in the male quarters. At least they were not inferior in quality to those of the men, she thought. Her group then went back down and left the building, going to inspect the quarters for the NCOs and for the junior officers. While the accommodation for the senior enlisted personnel were decent in her opinion, with each NCO having a private room, what Captain Ferguson told her when she inspected a junior officer's room didn't please her one bit.

"You are telling me that you don't have enough rooms on this base for all of our junior officers, Captain?"

"Exact, Colonel." Said Ferguson, feeling in his small shoes. "The wing was previously equipped with F-86 SABRE fighters, a single-seat plane. The accommodations for lieutenants and captains were then in sufficient numbers. However, with the wing now reequipping with two-seat F-83s, we suddenly have to house 78 extra junior officers, essentially the radar officers of our F-83s. At this time, we can absorb about thirty of those extra officers in our present quarters. As a result, I ordered the single beds in the junior officers' quarters to be replaced by double bunk beds, to compensate for the lack of rooms. There is still the option of lodging the extra officers in rented civilian accommodations around the base, Colonel."

"With a second lieutenant earning less than 500 dollars per month, all allowances included? Or less than 400 dollars per month for a lieutenant without a flight bonus? And what about the quarters for married personnel, Captain?"

Ferguson then looked squarely embarrassed as he answered Gertrude.

"I am sorry, Colonel, but this old Luftwaffe base had only one residence for married officer: that of the base commander. As for quarters for married NCOs, they are non-existent. Unfortunately, the rental costs of civilian apartments are higher here than in the United States. Germany is still suffering from a shortage of housing because of

the extensive damage from World War Two. In fact, the German economy has started to stabilize only two or three years ago.”

Gertrude shook her head, disappointed by what she had heard and seen.

“Gentlemen, apart from completing the transition of this wing to the F-83, I will make a priority of improving the living conditions of our personnel. I know that the Airforce budgets are tight presently, but we must show both imagination and initiative. Don’t come to me after next Tuesday to tell me that something can’t be done because of some regulation: there is always a way to go around regulations if need be. Our men and women are counting on us to help and support them and that is what we will do. Sorry for having interrupted like this your guided tour, Colonel Morgan. What is the next installation on your list?”

“The operation center and the staff offices of the wing, Colonel Meserve.”

“Very well! Lead on!”

Gertrude finally took the time after supper to settle herself in one of the suites for senior officers of the officers’ mess. Unpacking and organizing her things took her less than half an hour, the result of a military life spent in majority in theatres of war or on rotation to frontline bases around Korea. In that respect, the women of the 99<sup>th</sup> Wing, which was still based in the Philippines, had done more than their fair share of such combat rotations and missions. Taking out of its protective packaging a large framed picture, Gertrude sat down for a moment on the edge of her bed while she looked at it. It was a group photo of the original group of female pilots that had formed the 170<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron, ‘The Witches’, in 1942, a group she had been part of. Nearly half of the women on the picture were now dead, killed in combat, or had been wounded and had left the service for medical reasons. A few, including her old friend Nancy Batson, had voluntarily left the service in 1945, to return to civilian life. Tears rolled down on her cheeks as she caressed the picture of Evelyn Sharp, killed over Korea in 1948. Evelyn had been a great aviatrix and also one of her best friends, along with Ingrid Dows, Teresa James and Nancy Batson. After a moment spent contemplating the framed picture, Gertrude went to suspend it to a nail already hammered into one wall, doing her best to chase away her sadness and nostalgia. She was now in charge of a whole combat air wing and of over a thousand men and women, who now depended on her to guide and support them in their own careers. Her own personal conduct and public attitude thus had to be exemplary if she wanted to gain the respect and confidence of

her personnel. Before taking a shower and going to bed, she spent an hour to review her first impressions of Neubiberg and of her new command, taking notes about the things she wanted to modify or treat in priority. She also scratched a few notes about her first impressions concerning the staff of her command. While most of her officers had given her a good impression, a couple of them had appeared to her as potential problems, starting with her deputy commander, Lieutenant Colonel Tisdale. Master Sergeant Vanderbilt had also appeared to be a short-sighted man without much imagination. Gertrude was preoccupied when she finally went to bed: the following days promised to be difficult ones for her.

### **13:09 (Germany Time)**

**Saturday, July 4, 1953 'C'**

**Udet Park, Neubiberg Air Force Base**

**Federal Republic of Germany**

Betty Morgan, the wife of Colonel John Morgan, was discussing with her husband and with Gertrude Meserve while sitting at one of the folding tables set in the yard surrounded by the officers' and NCOs' barracks, eating a hamburger. According to an old American tradition, the personnel of the 81<sup>st</sup> Wing was celebrating Independence Day with an open air BBQ, helped in that by a warm and sunny day. Betty suddenly had her attention attracted to a tall, sturdily-built female technical sergeant with red hair that walked past their table. What had caught her eyes had been the impressive collection of medal ribbons pinned to the sergeant's summer dress shirt, including the ribbon of the DSC<sup>15</sup>. Betty discreetly pointed the female NCO to Gertrude, speaking to her in a low voice.

"That technical sergeant is wearing the ribbons of the DSC and of the Silver Star. What did she do to earn such coveted medals?"

Gertrude smiled when she saw who Betty was speaking about.

"Aah, Technical Sergeant Mary Hoggins. She is in charge of one of our ordnance teams. She joined the service at the same time as me in 1942 and worked as a mining prospector in Alaska before that. She won the DSC in Guadalcanal, in the

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<sup>15</sup> DSC : Distinguished Service Cross. Second highest American medal for valor, after only the Medal of Honor.

Pacific, while pushing back Japanese soldiers that had attacked our airfield perimeter at night. She killed dozens of Japanese with her machine gun during the battle for Edson Ridge. When her machine gun jammed, she grabbed a spare machine gun barrel and used it like a club to knock out two Japanese soldiers charging her with rifle-mounted bayonets. As for her Silver Star, she earned it in Korea by destroying two enemy tanks one after the other with anti-tank rockets. She is extremely strong for a woman and is quite a character, believe me.”

“My God! For Airforce people, your women have a lot of experience in ground combat, Colonel.”

“Please, call me simply Gertrude, Madam Morgan. To answer you, yes, nearly all of the women that came with me to Neubiberg have fought on the ground to defend our airfields, either in Guadalcanal, in Pusan or, more recently in Ramat David, when a British commando unit tried to destroy our aircraft on the ground. General Dows made sure from the start that all our women were trained in defensive tactics and small arms shooting, on top of getting some extra weapons and equipment for us.”

John Morgan nodded his head slowly then.

“Decidedly, I am more and more anxious to meet Major General Dows. She is now a quasi legend, especially with those supernatural events surrounding her. I saw newspaper pictures of her taken after she was reportedly healed and rejuvenated in Ramat David. Her youthful looks are just incredible.”

What he didn't say, since his wife was present, was how beautiful he found Dows to be. Betty didn't catch on that and went on the subject, intense curiosity showing in her tone of voice.

“Could you tell me what you saw about that miracle in Ramat David, Gertrude?”

“With pleasure, Betty!”

Gertrude was still discussing with Betty and John Morgan the incident in Ramat David when Lieutenant Colonel Tisdale, followed closely by Major Clarkson, came to their table. Tisdale glanced quickly at Gertrude before addressing John Morgan.

“Uh, Colonel, would it be possible to speak with you in private for a moment?”

“On what subject, Mister Tisdale?”

Morgan understood what he wanted to talk about when Tisdale hesitated, being visibly reluctant to speak in front of Gertrude. Having already rebuffed him and Clarkson in the past days, he got up from his chair, clearly exasperated.

"Misters, if it is about what I think, then I believe that I was amply clear on that subject...many times already! If you have a grievance to present, then you will do it in front of Colonel Meserve, or not at all. So, what do you want to talk about, Lieutenant Colonel Tisdale?"

Tisdale, like Clarkson, paled and hesitated for a moment, but finally found the courage to speak.

"Colonel, I believe that an injustice was done by the Pentagon by not naming Major Clarkson as the new commanding officer of the 91<sup>st</sup> Squadron. He has clear seniority in years of service and in years in the rank of major, while Major Slade just got promoted."

Seeing where this was going and not wanting to humiliate publicly Tisdale and Clarkson, Gertrude got up as well from her chair and spoke to Morgan.

"I believe that we should continue this conversation in your office, Colonel Morgan."

"I believe so as well. Follow us, gentlemen!"

Anxious and apprehensive, Tisdale and Clarkson obeyed him, following Morgan and Gertrude inside the nearby headquarters building. Morgan closed the door to his office once the group was inside, then had everyone sit in opposite sofas before looking severely at Tisdale.

"Mister Tisdale, I understand how the choice of Major Slade to command the 91<sup>st</sup> Squadron could look inappropriate to you and Major Clarkson in view of her recent promotion. However, you both seem to have forgotten that seniority is not, and by far, the only factor for promotion in the Air Force. I also believe that Colonel Meserve could give you precise reasons why Major Slade received command of the 91<sup>st</sup> Squadron."

"Thank you, Colonel Morgan." Said Gertrude before looking calmly at Tisdale and Clarkson. "First, know that your grievance complaint won't affect your annual performance reports, unless you insist on pursuing this after we deal with it here and now. As Colonel Morgan said, years of seniority was not the main factor retained by the Pentagon for naming Major Slade the new commander of the 91<sup>st</sup> Squadron. Merit and experience were the factors that decided the outcome."

"Experience, Colonel?" Said Clarkson, surprised. "But, Major Slade has only ten years in the service, while I count fourteen years."

Gertrude crossed her arms and fixed him in the eyes as she shot back.

“Major Clarkson, you may have more years in than Major Slade, but I can bet that she has at the least twice as much actual combat experience as you do. In what wars did you fight and how many enemy planes have you shot down? And please, don't count those destroyed on the ground, as the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force was too fond of doing in Europe.”

“Uh, I arrived in England in 1943 and flew 126 combat missions over Europe, mostly for close air support and ground interdiction, and shot down two German planes. After that, I served in the United States, both in flying positions and in staff billets. I have accumulated a total of 2,173 hours of flying, including 74 hours on the F-83A.”

“Not bad at all, Major.” Said Gertrude, meaning it. “Know that I wrote the last annual performance report of Major Slade recently, while we were in Palestine. She also served in the same unit as me during her whole career, so I can resume it from memory. Major Shirley Slade enrolled in 1942, when then Major Dows formed her all-female 99<sup>th</sup> Composite Air Group. She already had her commercial pilot's license then and deployed to Guadalcanal, flying on P-38. There, she fought both in the air and on the ground, continuing to fight through the Solomon, Papua-New Guinea and Dutch East Indies campaigns in the Pacific while living in often precarious conditions. After the war, due to female unit segregation rules, she had to stay with the 99<sup>th</sup> Wing in the Philippines, which was our only female air combat unit. From there, she went to fight in Korea in 1948, plus served on three combat rotations on advanced airbases in Japan in 1949, 1950 and 1951. All that time, she was stuck at the rank of captain, not because she was not good enough for promotion, but because of the limited posting openings available to female fighter pilots. After following the tactical command course at the Air Force Staff School in Alabama in 1951, she next deployed to Indochina in 1952, fighting in the air against Chinese and Soviet pilots. From there, she went to Palestine as wingman of General Dows and again fought in the air and on the ground. Right now, Major Slade has a total of 34 confirmed air victories in career, has flown 445 combat missions and a total of 5,600 flying hours, including 323 hours on F-83A. She has up to now received two Silver Stars, four DFCs and seven Air Medals. Now, Major Clarkson, do I have to remind you of the main mission of this wing, which is to gain and keep air superiority over Europe in case of a Soviet aggression? For that, I need hardened squadron commanders with extensive combat experience. So, in your honest opinion, who is best qualified to command the 91<sup>st</sup> Squadron?”

Clarkson lowered his head for a moment, beaten down by her arguments, then looked back at her.

“Major Slade is the best qualified, Colonel.”

“Thank you for your honesty, Major. Be assured that I will not hold your request of today against you. I will only ask you to support Major Slade the best you can as her deputy.”

“You can count on me, Colonel.”

Gertrude then looked at Tisdale, who was eyeing Clarkson as if he had just committed high treason.”

“Lieutenant Colonel Tisdale, I will expect complete loyalty from all my officers, in exchange of which I promise them my full support. If you want a transfer of unit, then tell me before the change of command parade. After that, I will not tolerate any other disparaging remarks in my back. Am I clear, Colonel?”

“Very clear, Colonel!” Answered Tisdale, his jaws tight. By his expression, it was however clear to Gertrude that Tisdale was still not ready to fully accept her as his commander. Dismissing Tisdale and Clarkson and waiting for them to leave the office, John Morgan then looked with concern at Gertrude.

“I honestly believe that Tisdale should go, for the good of the wing. He will probably do everything to sabotage your authority and to make you look bad. His animosity towards female pilots is blinding his judgment.”

“I am afraid that you are right, John. I will let him until Tuesday, to see what his decision will be. However, I suspect that he won't have the balls to request a transfer.” Sadly, the future was going to prove her right about that.

### **08:51 (Germany Time)**

**Tuesday, July 7, 1953 'C'**

**Main tarmac, Neubiberg Air Force Base**

**Munich, Bavaria**

Gertrude Meserve had a hard time not to smile as she was saluting Ingrid Dows and Teresa James, who had just stepped out of an helicopter that had brought them from Stuttgart.

“Welcome to Neubiberg, General!”



Ingrid returned her salute before warmly shaking hands with her, watched by Colonel Morgan and Lieutenant Colonel Tisdale, who were standing a few paces behind Gertrude.

“Thank you, Gertrude. Well, let’s get to it right away, Colonel Morgan: I am sure that your people are anxious to be over with this parade and the various speeches lined up for this morning.”

“You are quite right, General.” Replied Morgan, laughing briefly before leading Ingrid to his jeep, which waited nearby with a second jeep. Ingrid noted the fact that Morgan had a slight limp and asked politely about it, attracting a saddened look on his face.

“An old war wound which has started to act up again six months ago. The doctors say that the damage is irreversible and have thus lowered my medical category. After this passage of command is over, I will return to the United States and retire from the service, with a medical pension.”

“I am sorry to hear that, Colonel Morgan. Do you plan to continue flying as a civilian?”

“I already sent letters to many airlines and I am hoping soon for a positive response. Flying a commercial aircraft requires a lower medical profile than to fly a fighter aircraft. Too bad: the F-83 is truly a dream machine for a pilot.”

Ingrid nodded at that, understanding him too well.

“I sincerely hope that you will be able to continue to fly in the United States, Colonel.”

Sitting in the lead jeep with Morgan and Gertrude, with Teresa James taking place in the second jeep with Tisdale, Ingrid examined the forty or so F-83 fighter-bombers lined up on the tarmac as her vehicle started rolling. She did not like the fact that the fighters of this wing were parked in line like this, something that made them vulnerable to a surprise attack, but she had been able to see from the air how constricted Neubiberg was. Finally stepping out once stopped behind a dais installed in front of a hangar, Ingrid stepped up on the dais and saluted as a military band started playing and as the assembled personnel of the 81<sup>st</sup> Wing, lined up in three ranks, came to attention. The rest of the change of command ceremony followed a classic routine, with the signature of the certificate of passage of command following an inspection of the ranks by Ingrid, Gertrude and Morgan. Keeping her own acceptance speech short,

Gertrude concluded the parade less than one hour after its start, letting all her personnel save her most senior officers go and have the rest of the day off. The group of senior officers then went to the wing's conference room at the request of Ingrid. The latter then looked quickly at the faces around her before speaking in a clear, strong voice.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the 81<sup>st</sup> Fighter Interceptor Wing, I have assembled you here to give you a few news about your future. Colonel Morgan already reported a number of time in the past about the lack of space on this base, its unsatisfactory personnel accommodations and, especially, its too close proximity to the suburbs of Munich. Colonel Meserve further added to those concerns last week. I can now happily announce to you that this problem will be over soon. The base of Ramstein-Landstuhl, situated near Kaiserslautern, will be finished building in a few months. That base will be ultra-modern and superbly equipped and it will become the new home for your wing once completed. You will find in particular there brand new family and single housing for all of your personnel."

Ingrid made a pause as a wave of happy exclamations went around the table.

"Know also that my own headquarters will move as well to Ramstein-Landstuhl, along with the 1003<sup>rd</sup> Transport and Liaison Squadron, one electronic reconnaissance squadron and one air refueling tanker squadron. In exchange, the 406<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing will then be transferred from the United States with its F-86 SABREs and will take your place in Neubiberg. The 36<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing, equipped with F-10A FALCON supersonic fighters, will arrive in about a month at the the newly-built airbase in Bitburg. Yet another fighter interceptor wing, the 50<sup>th</sup> Wing, will be transferred from the States with its F-83 EAGLEs, to go the new base in Sembach, which should be completed at about the same time as Ramstein-Landstuhl. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Air Force will then have three fighter wings equipped with supersonic planes that are superior to anything the Soviets have presently. I am telling you all this because we may well need soon those new planes. The Soviets have just announced a series of large scale military exercises to be held near the borders of Poland and of the Baltic states. This may in fact be a prelude to a large scale Soviet invasion in the months to come, with the seizure of Poland and of the Baltic states as minimum Soviet objectives."

The officers present looked at each other with concern, while Gertrude Meserve raised one hand to ask a question.

"What if the Soviets attack before our transfer to Ramstein-Landstuhl? The storage capacity in bombs and ammunition for our wing is frankly limited in Neubiberg."

"At the first sign of an imminent attack, the 81<sup>st</sup> Wing will disperse its three squadrons between Neubiberg, Erding and Giebelstadt." Answered at once Ingrid. "It will be your responsibility to ensure that both Erding and Giebelstadt are fully ready to receive your F-83s, on top of the heavy bombers of the Strategic Air Command deployed to Europe."

"Understood, General!" Said Gertrude while scribbling down notes. Ingrid then looked with gravity at the officers sitting around the conference table.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the Soviet Union and Communist China are already in a state of effective war against the United States in Southeast Asia and show no signs to want to broker a peace, on top of lying to the rest of the World about their real intentions. As such, our own forces in Europe are still at DEFCON 3 and will have to stay vigilant until further notice. I don't expect anything good from Stalin, whose paranoia is supplanting more and more his common sense. Until the arrival of the 36<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wings, the 81<sup>st</sup> Fighter Interceptor Wing will be the spearhead of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Air Force in case of a Soviet attack and will have the primordial mission of ensuring air superiority for us over Germany. I however don't expect to win air superiority via strictly defensive tactics, ladies and gentlemen. As the conflict around Indochina showed, the best way to gain and keep air superiority is to nail the enemy to the ground, by hitting its airfields and destroying its aircraft while still on the ground. Be assured that I already am working on such offensive plans, which should be ready and disseminated within a month."

"And the British in all this, General?" Asked John Morgan. "They refused to help us in Korea and in Indochina and even opposed us in Palestine. Could we count on them to help us stop any Soviet invasion?"

Ingrid hesitated for a moment, realizing how delicate that question was.

"Keep this to yourselves, ladies and gentlemen, but my opinion is that the British cannot be truly counted on in Europe. We clashed with them in Palestine, shooting down six of their planes and sinking one of their heavy cruisers, while they launched a night commando attack against our base in Ramat David, even though they wore disguises and refused at first to identify themselves. Here in Europe, the British are still refusing to coordinate with us or with the German authorities the flight plans of our respective planes over Germany, even reserving for themselves exclusive air corridors. Thus be very suspicious of any British national who would want to visit your base or even enter it clandestinely. If any such incident happens, I want my headquarters to be informed of it at once."

"Noted, General!" Replied Gertrude, writing down more notes.

"Well, I believe that I have told you enough already to keep you fully occupied for the next few months, ladies and gentlemen. You are now dismissed, except for Colonel Meserve."

Waiting for the others except for Gertrude and Teresa to leave, Ingrid then went to shake hands with the former.

"Congratulations again for your new command, Gertrude. I am sure that you will make your mark here."

"Thank you, Ingrid. I must say that you just gave me lots to do for the next months."

"and how is the integration of our female personnel going in your wing?" Asked Ingrid, letting her worry show Gertrude thought over her answer for a moment before replying.

"There hasn't been any incidents of sexual connotation yet, but many men here are definitely not enthusiastic about the presence of women in their unit. I will save you from hearing the traditional arguments they pitched."

"Thanks!" said Ingrid with a smirk.

"And you, Ingrid? How is your own integration doing in Stuttgart?"

Ingrid made a grimace in response.

"Well...until I learned that my jaguar XK-120, which was being shipped from California to Germany, was stolen while stored at a railway station, awaiting loading on a rail car. I got the news yesterday through the movement section in Stuttgart."

"Oh! I'm truly sorry to hear that. What will you do now?"

"I will get my insurance company to reimburse me, then I will go buy a new car here, in Germany. It just happens that the main Porsche plant is situated in Stuttgart. I plan to visit it soon to see what I can find as a sports car."

That made both Gertrude and Teresa smile, with Gertrude replying to Ingrid.

"Decidedly, the speed demon will never let you go, Ingrid. With the legendary German highways at your disposal, you will probably offer a few memorable trips to your adorable little Hien. Talking of her, what does she think of Germany up to now?"

"She likes it, particularly its farms and milk cows. She is also fascinated by trains, which were a rarity in Vietnam. I think that my first excursion with Hien will be

towards the North, were I am hoping to find back some of my old Luftwaffe comrades that had been held with me as prisoners of war in the Tower of London.”

“Then, I wish you good luck in your quest, Ingrid.”

**07:49 (Germany Time)**

**Saturday, July 18, 1953 ‘C’**

**Officers married quarters**

**Patch Barracks, Stuttgart**

**Federal Republic of Germany**

Hien waved enthusiastically with one hand to Sarah Ur before sitting back on the passenger seat of the red convertible Porsche 550 SPIDER. Ingrid had just left the parking spot of her official residence as Commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Air Force but rolled slowly until Hien had attached her safety belt. The said belt, along with the one she wore, was actually an addition to her brand new sports car, the concept of car safety belts not having been adopted yet around the World. Ingrid had discreetly used the help of Otto Skorzeni, a field agent of the Time Patrol who was a qualified mechanical engineer, to install the belts, with the safety of her precious little Hien in mind. The latter smiled to Ingrid as she inserted her car in the city traffic, heading towards the nearest access to the main highway heading north.

“Is the trip going to be long, Mommy?”

“It will depend on the roads, my sweetie. With luck we should get to Flensburg in the evening. If not, we will stop for the night in an hotel in Hamburg.”

“Is your friend Frida nice?”

“Very nice, Hien. However, I am not certain if she still lives on her family farm. It could take us a few days to find her and another friend of mine who lives in the same region.”

“Will they have children with which I will be able to play, Mommy?”

“I don’t know, Hien. They were not married when I saw them for the last time ten years ago, in England. It is however very possible that they will have children now.”

Hien continued to ask questions from time to time but proved reasonable and didn’t harass her continuously. That allowed Ingrid to watch the countryside as she drove at a very respectable cruising speed of 130 kilometers per hour. Most of the small

towns and villages that they passed by were apparently in good state, having been repaired or rebuilt since the end of the war in 1944. Frankfurt, the first big city along her trip, however showed traces of the past allied aerial bombing, especially in its industrial districts, which appeared nearly abandoned. Ingrid knew that this was mostly a consequence of the old American post-war policy that had promoted the dismantlement of all German industries, to force the country to return to a strictly agricultural economy. That myopic policy, known as the 'Morgentau Plan', had thankfully been abandoned after a few years by Washington.

The vehicle traffic on the highway proved to be sparse, with transport trucks and buses easily outnumbering private cars. Staying on the highway, Ingrid saved a lot of time by avoiding the downtown Frankfurt traffic and she made her first stop at a roadside restaurant near Kassel, to let Hien go to the bathroom, to eat lunch and fill up her fuel tank just before entering the old British occupation zone. Many customers and employees of the restaurant looked at them with surprise and confusion when they heard Ingrid and Hien converse in Vietnamese, but everybody stayed polite and discreet, returning quickly to their meals or work. On her part, Ingrid noted the often worn out clothes of the other customers, which contrasted with her own modern, high quality female suit. The economy of the new German state, whose sovereignty was still strictly limited, was only starting to get over the destruction, war debts and war reparations to the Allied nations resulting from the German defeat in 1944. Over twelve million Germans had been thrown out of their old homes situated in German territories now annexed by Poland and had then found themselves refugees inside Germany. They, like the great majority of German citizens, had barely survived the generalized poverty of the post-war period. The new German administration, in place since 1949, had however gone to work with the proverbial German efficiency and had done near miracles in those last few years. Still, as the limited menu of the restaurant showed to Ingrid, the German economy was going to need more time to return to full prosperity. At least, the majority of the German citizens now seemed to be able to feed themselves properly.

Getting back on the road slightly after noon, Ingrid and Hien soon entered the old British occupation zone. The British troops stationed in the zone still held extensive powers, but nothing like the absolute control they had held in 1944. Ingrid met and

passed a British military convoy on the highway as she was approaching Hanover in the middle of the afternoon, getting smiles and blown kisses from the soldiers as she sped by the lumbering trucks. She thought with some bitterness that they would have probably shot at her instead if they had known that she was the one infamously called 'The Brit killing Yank' in England, thanks to her sinking the nuclear cruiser HMS TIGER off Palestine a mere four months ago. Apart from infamy, that incident had also resulted in her returning her medals of Commander of the Order of the British Empire and of the Distinguished Service Order, which she had received in Australia in 1943 while serving in the Papua-New Guinea theatre. Continuing her trip at high speed, she got to the first suburbs of Hamburg by four in the afternoon. After a quick mental debate, she decided not to stop for the night in Hamburg and crossed one of the bridges over the Elbe River, then took the highway leading north towards the Danish border. She was now less than 150 kilometers from her intended destination but soon had to slow down, the highway turning into a simple two-lane regional road. Consulting quickly her road map, she turned on a secondary road just before Flensburg and went through two small villages, all the while feeling excitement growing in her at the idea of possibly seeing soon Frida Winterer, her best friend during her period of war internment in the Tower of London in 1941.

Asking for directions from a passing farmer driving a cart, Ingrid finally turned on a private dirt road leading to a small group of farms surrounded by fertile fields and green pastures and forests. She glanced at Hien, who understandably was growing anxious to get out of the car.

"We are about to arrive, Hien. With luck, I will be able to present you to my friend Frida, if she is still staying at her parents' farm."

Hien did not reply to her, waving instead at a cow that looked placidly at their passing car. Ingrid's heart jumped in her chest when she arrived at a roadside postal box marked 'R. Winterer'. Turning on a trail cutting across a pasture occupied by dozens of cows, Ingrid was about to stop and park in front of the house of the farm when her eyes caught sight of a blond woman coming out of the nearby barn, a bucket in one hand. Stopping her Porsche in front of the house and shutting down her engine, Ingrid then stepped out of her car and started running towards the blonde, who was looking at her with incredulity.

"FRIDA! FRIDA! IT'S ME, INGRID!"

The blond woman, who was close to thirty, put down her bucket and also ran to meet her with open arms. Both women exchanged emotional hugs and kisses on the cheeks as Hien also got out of the car.

"Ingrid, my God! I finally see you after all these years. And you really were rejuvenated in Palestine: you are exactly like when I saw you last in 1943."

Frida's eyes then caught on Hien.

"And who is this cute little girl?"

"This is Hien, whom I adopted in Indochina. She is now six years old. Let me present her to you." Said proudly Ingrid, while leading her old Luftwaffe comrade towards Hien, presenting her in English, in which the little Vietnamese girl was now fairly proficient.

"Frida, this is my adopted daughter, Pham Ti Hien. Hien, this is Frida Winterer, one of my best friends."

"Welcome to my parents' farm, Hien." Said Frida, bending down to kiss Hien on the cheeks. Hien in turn looked up at her with her big brown eyes.

"Are there other children here, miss?"

"Oh yes!" Replied Frida with a big smile. "My son Karl is five years old and will certainly like to meet you, Hien."

"You are married, Frida?" Asked Ingrid with enthusiasm. However, Frida's own smile faded at that question.

"I am a widow, Ingrid. My husband Kurt was killed by drunk British soldiers three years ago, while trying to protect me from their advances."

"My God! And those soldiers, did they pay for their crime?"

"They were arrested by their officer after Kurt's murder. I however don't know if they were punished: the British never told me about what happened to those soldiers afterwards."

"I'm truly sorry for you, Frida."

He old comrade nodded slowly her head, getting over her painful memories.

"Thank you! But let's come back to the present. Take out your suitcases: you spend the night here, whether you like it or not."

"With pleasure, Frida."

Taking out first her two suitcases and one travel bag, Ingrid then deployed and fixed the convertible top of her Porsche, in case it rained later on. Frida admired the red sports car as Ingrid got busy.



"This is a really nice car that you have here, Ingrid. You just bought it?"

"She is effectively brand new. I went to visit the Porsche workshops in Stuttgart, where I was posted two weeks ago. When Herr Porsche learned who I was, he insisted in offering me this pre-production prototype of his new Porsche 550 SPIDER, which is supposed to be presented to the public in October. It can go up to 175 kilometers per hour and it is very agile in traffic."

"It is truly magnificent! Well, let's go in with Hien, so that I can present you to my parents and to my little Karl."

Hien, entering ahead of Ingrid, giggled with joy on seeing the young Dalmatian puppy that immediately ran to her to lick her hands while jumping with excitement.

"This is Flick, which means 'spot' in German." Said Frida, while the small dog started licking Hien's face, who had bent down to caress the animal. "He is very energetic but he is very gentle with children. He already seems to like your Hien."

"The attraction seems to be mutual." Replied Ingrid, happy for Hien, who was now laughing. Her attention was then attracted by the appearance of a man with graying hair, who Frida presented in German.

"Ingrid, may I present you my father, Rudolph Winterer. Father, this is my old comrade in captivity in London, Ingrid Weiss."

"Pleased to meet you, Herr Winterer. My name is now Dows: I married an American officer in 1941, but he was killed in combat in 1942 in the Philippines. This is my adopted daughter, Hien, who is from Vietnam."

"Pleased to meet you too, miss." Said in a neutral tone Rudolph Winterer, a solid man in his fifties, while shaking hands with her. "My daughter often spoke about you on her return from England. I must say that you often made the front pages of the newspapers since then. And what is your present rank in the American Air Force?"

"Major general. I just took command of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Air Force, in Stuttgart."

"Major general..." Said thoughtfully the old farmer while looking at her teenager's face. "And how old are you, if I may ask?"

"Biologically I am 27 years old. You must have heard about the miracle that happened to me in Palestine."

"Who didn't hear about that? I hope that you are going to stay for the night, at the least?"

"It would be a pleasure, Herr Winterer. I believe that me and Frida have a lot to discuss after ten years."

"And I believe that my grandson Karl will probably love to play with your cute daughter. Let me just present you to my wife, then I will guide you to our visitor's bedroom."

Rudolph Winterer led Ingrid and Hien towards the kitchen, where they found a small woman with long blond hair and a sympathetic face. Greta Winterer kissed both Ingrid and Hien, caressing as well the head of the small Vietnamese girl. Frida then brought with her in the kitchen a handsome little boy with blond hair and blue eyes.

"Ingrid, this is my son, Karl. Karl, say hello to my friend Ingrid and to her daughter Hien."

"Hello!" Said timidly the boy in German before looking up at his mother.

"The girl is Chinese, Mother?"

"No! Ingrid adopted Hien in Vietnam. Would you like to play with her a bit?"

"Oh yes, Mother."

"Then, go see her. However, she doesn't speak German. You will have to use signs with her."

"No problem, Mother."

The young Dalmatian dog that had greeted first Hien then entered the kitchen, giving a common point of attention to the two children. Ingrid smiled as Hien and Karl started running together towards the living room while screaming with joy, pursuing Flick.

"Children with always be the same, everywhere. If we could all keep our childhood's innocence, this world would be so much more nicer."

"Quite true, General." Said Rudolph Winterer. "Let's go up to your room now."

The room allotted to Ingrid on the top floor, even though rustic, was comfortable and included a large bed and a dormer window that provided ample light. Ingrid declared herself very satisfied and unpacked her bags then before going back down to the living room, where she spent a good hour conversing with Frida. Ingrid was happy to learn that Frida was in intermittent contact with six of her old companions of captivity, including Susanna Berghof, which she had hoped to find during this trip. She carefully took note of the addresses and telephone numbers of her comrades and smiled to Frida.

"So, Hanna Reitsch is playing flight instructor for the Argentinian Air Force?"

"She is! She is like you: she can't live without flying. I got her last letter two months ago."

"Well, now that I have her postal address in Argentina, I will certainly write to her very soon to give her some news about me. I could even invite her to fly in the back seat of my F-83 supersonic fighter-bomber the next time she visits Germany."

"Oh my God! I am sure that she would love that." Replied Frida with enthusiasm. Greta Winterer then came in in the lounge, a kitchen apron attached to her front.

"Supper is ready! Everybody, come to the table!"

Ingrid got up at once, going with Frida to find Hien and Karl. They found the two children in the enclosed yard of the farm, with a happy Hien holding a baby pig in her arms.

"Look, Mommy! Karl was showing me the animals of the farm."

"That's nice! Supper is now ready, my little treasure. Let's return this baby pig to its mother and then you will wash your hands and face before going to eat."

Obedying her with obvious regret, Hien put back the little pig inside the pigs' enclosure and took the hand of Ingrid, who then guided her inside the house.

After the supper, Ingrid returned to the lounge to talk with Frida and her parents, while Karl and Hien played with Flick in a corner of the room. The conversation was mostly about post-war Germany and its future, but Ingrid detected that the Winterers were tempted to question her about something but were hesitant about asking her. Ingrid gave the old couple a reassuring smile and spoke softly.

"Something seems to bother you. Please, don't hesitate to ask anything about me: I am quite an open person."

After a further hesitation, Rudolph Winterer finally nodded his head and spoke.

"Very well, Ingrid. It is about the stories of you remembering your past incarnations and about your healing and rejuvenation in Palestine. To what do you owe the fact that God seems to consider you special?"

It was Ingrid's turn to take her time to speak, not wanting to sound like a braggard.

"First, I call the one that helped me as 'The One', and not 'God'. The One didn't create the Universe: it was created as part of it and is made of spiritual energy, from which all the human souls come from. Second, I was not alone to be blessed like this: Nancy Laplante, my adoptive mother who died in 1941, also was graced. As for the why, I believe that me and Nancy were chosen because our souls had the qualities of

kindness, compassion, tolerance and self-sacrifice that The One wanted in people that would then promote his words and goals on Earth. The One simply wants to see a better, more tolerant world emerge from the Humanity of today. Nancy did her best to shorten the war in Europe and to prevent some of the worst atrocities, while I continued to fight to bring back peace after her death. By succeeding in bringing peace to Indochina and helping Vietnam to become independent both made me proud and served the goals of The One. In turn, The One has started to intervene discreetly by himself in Palestine, in order to put an end to the old hatreds there.”

Rudolph exchanged a glance with Greta, who asked the next question.

“And what will your, uh, One, do now? Did he tell you?”

“He does speak to me...when he wants to. What The One is concerned about is the possibility of a nuclear war that could utterly destroy Humanity. As his Chosen, my main task is to prevent such a catastrophe, a task The One will help me accomplish. I am still however an American officer and will continue to serve the United States in the most honorable way possible while promoting the cause of peace and tolerance. If the power of my 3<sup>rd</sup> Air Force can help dissuade the Soviets from starting a new war, then I will have done my duty, both as an American officer and as a Chosen of The One.”

Frida, like her parents, nodded somberly her head at that: Ingrid was certainly not talking like some sort of crazy self-appointed prophet, even if what she was saying about her One was hard to swallow. To see with her own eyes her old friend look like a teenager despite her age of 27 was enough to convince her that something extraordinary had happened to her.

Ingrid continued the conversation on less controversial subjects, like her adventures in Indochina and the state of the German economy, until it was time for the children’s bath. Like in many farms and houses across Europe, the Winterers still didn’t have a bathtub with direct plumbing for cold and hot water, something still considered a luxury by many, especially in rural areas. Having had to use the same methods in her own youth, Ingrid thus helped Frida to fill a large wooden tub with warm water, then undressed Hien to make her join Karl in the tub. Frida smiled while admiring Hien as she stood naked in the tub with Karl.

“Your little Hien is really beautiful. She should be popular with boys once grown up.”

"Your Karl is not bad either, Frida." Replied Ingrid while soaping up Hien. The two children started playing by hugging each other while their respective mothers washed their backs, then turned around to have their fronts soaped up as well. Frida however said no when Karl asked that Flick joined them in the tub. Once washed and dried, Hien looked at Ingrid with a hopeful smile as she was slipping a night shirt over her head.

"Mommy, could I sleep with Karl tonight?"

"Sleep or play, Hien?"

"Sleep!" Replied the little girl with a smile that said the contrary. Ingrid couldn't resist that smile then: Hien had not been able to play with other children for months, having been the sole child at Ramat David Airbase.

"Very well, but Frida will have to also agree to that."

The two kids shouted with joy when Frida gave her agreement for them to sleep together in Karl's bed. Ingrid burst into laughter when, as soon as she was in bed with Karl, Hien invited Flick in. The young dog, who was turning around the bed, obeyed her at once and jumped eagerly on the bed. Frida gave a knowing look at Ingrid as Flick laid down on the bed's blanket right at the feet of the children, who were giggling while caressing him.

"Karl sleeps nearly every night with Flick on his bed. I am afraid that those two will take a couple of hours before really going to sleep."

"Let them! Hien really needed some vacation after staying with me in Palestine for three months, the only child on the base."

"And how do you manage when you must go work?"

"She has a nanny, an old childhood friend that I met again in Vietnam and who I then hired to take care of Hien. I must say that the pay of a major general is a bit more substantial than that of a Luftwaffe auxiliary."

"I can imagine." Said Frida, rolling her eyes.

"And you, Frida? Are you planning to remarry eventually?"

The blonde sighed while lowering her head.

"Not for the time being. Germany has lost so many men during the war that there is a wide surplus of women. It is not easy for us girls to find good prospects. Susanna Berghof, if you just take her example, is still single despite her great beauty."

"Actually, I suspect that Susanna decided to stay single, Frida. She is an extremely intelligent woman, a genius in fact, and is also very proud. She probably doesn't relish the thought of spending her life as a housewife chained to her kitchen."

"Hum, you may be right. Susanna is presently working in Kiel as an assistant to the manager of a maritime freight company and she seems to be doing well. Well, let's leave those two alone to their games."

"As long as they don't play doctor." Insinuated Ingrid, making Frida giggle. Closing the door of the bedroom behind them, Frida then turned around to face Ingrid and stabbed her left breast with an accusing index.

"Talking of doctor, why did you have your breasts enlarged? I took enough showers with you in the Tower of London to remember that you wore 'B' size bras, and not 'D' size."

"But, they are completely natural." Protested Ingrid, undoing quickly her blouse and taking her left breast out of her bra. "Check if you don't believe me." Frida did so, weighing Ingrid's left breast before looking at her with surprise.

"It is indeed natural. But, how...?"

"Keep this to yourself," said Ingrid in a conspiratorial tone, "but The One does have a sense of humor. As you know, I always wanted to have bigger breasts. Well, The One granted my wish in 1942, when he resurrected me in Guadalcanal during the war in the Pacific. The miracle in Ramat David was actually the second time that he helped me directly."

"My God! I will really have heard everything today." Could only say a stunned Frida.

Ingrid and Hien ended up staying until next Tuesday at the Winterers' farm. Ingrid was happy to spend a few days to the rhythm of simple farm life, while Hien played with Karl and the animals of the farm. The little Vietnamese girl had tears in her eyes when time came to leave. Seeing how difficult it was for Hien to let go Flick as she was about to get in the Porsche, Ingrid decided to do something soon about that. After an ultimate exchange of kisses and hugs with Frida, her parents and Karl, along with promises to stay in contact, Ingrid took place behind the wheel of her sports car and drove off slowly, Hien standing on her seat and facing back while waving a last goodbye to Karl and Flick while still crying. Ingrid looked at her with a smile of encouragement as she sat back and buckled her seat belt.

"We will return in a few months to visit the Winterers, Hien, I promise. We will also write to them regularly. You could in fact send by mail to Karl a few drawings of Flick and of the animals of the farm."

That suggestion seemed to diminish a bit Hien's sadness and she nodded her head to that.

"I will do that, Mommy."

The trip to the port of Kiel, on the Baltic coast, took a bit more than one hour along narrow regional and secondary roads. Having called in advance from the farm to the maritime shipping company where Susanna Berghof worked in Kiel, Ingrid knew exactly how to get to her destination. Arriving a bit before noon in Kiel, Ingrid then took the time to book a room in a good hotel and to go eat lunch with Hien in a restaurant. Next, she took a few hours to visit the city and port, before arriving at about five in the afternoon at the company where Susanna was working. Ingrid found Susanna, a tall and very beautiful blonde who was now 31 years old, waiting by the entrance to her office, situated in a side annex of a huge warehouse near the quays in Kiel's port. Having spoken many times with the timeline twin of Susanna at the main base of the Time Patrol, Ingrid knew that the tall blonde was no bimbo, having a certified I.Q. of 158. Stopping her Porsche and quickly getting out of it, Ingrid ran into her friend's arms to hug her with intense emotion.

"Susanna, Susanna." Said Ingrid, near tears, as she was glued to her friend. "To see you after those ten years is like a gift from Heaven. How are you, my friend?" Susanna unglued herself from Ingrid in order to look at her while still holding her shoulders.

"I am not doing badly at all, Ingrid. I actually am in charge of merchandise distribution for my company and also help with customer servicing. Thankfully, my boss is a decent man who never tried to abuse his authority with me. My God, you look so young! What they were saying about a miracle happening to you in Palestine was thus true."

"Very true, Susanna. But let's go to a nice restaurant for supper, where we will be able to talk about our respective past years."

Accompanying her friend to her car, Ingrid then showed Hien to her, speaking in English for the benefit of the little girl.

"Susanna, this is Hien, my adopted daughter, whom I met in Vietnam."

"She is truly adorable, Ingrid. Pleased to meet you, Hien. I am Susanna."

"Hello, Susanna." Said timidly Hien while exchanging kisses on the cheek with the blonde. At the invitation of Ingrid, Susanna then took place in the passenger seat, sitting Hien in her lap before buckling her seat belt, a procedure Ingrid had to explain to her first. They then drove to a fine French restaurant in the port area that Susanna knew well, where they ate an enjoyable meal while drinking wine with moderation and talking about their past years since 1943, the last time they had seen each other in London.

From the restaurant, the trio went to Susanna's apartment, a relatively small place on the second floor of a brick building near downtown Kiel. It was however furnished comfortably and featured a few art objects which Susanna had been able to afford to buy. Ingrid smiled to herself then: she now knew what kind of gifts to bring to Susanna in the future. Her contacts with the Time Patrol would in fact be able to help her get some fine pieces of antiques for that purpose. Sitting down on a sofa with Hien, she spent another hour conversing with her friend, leaving with regret when Hien showed signs of falling asleep. She however promised to keep in contact with Susanna, exchanging telephone numbers with her before leaving the apartment after a last hug.

The next morning, after a long, good sleep at their hotel, Ingrid and Hien took back to the road, leaving Kiel and heading towards the Southeast and Berlin. Ingrid felt growing emotions and sadness as she approached the area of Berlin. She had been born there and had lived a mostly happy life there until the age of fourteen, when her house was bombed by the British during an air raid on Berlin, with her whole family being killed, leaving her an orphan. The shock and grief at seeing the burning ruins of her house had left her utterly despondent for hours. She then had decided on the spur of her emotions to join the Luftwaffe as a female auxiliary, so that she could make a contribution, even if only a small one, to defending her homeland against further enemy air bombardment. With all the civilian archives concerning her and her family having been destroyed in that same bombardment in August of 1940 and with her well developed body for her age, Ingrid had managed to fool her way through the Luftwaffe's recruitment process, being quickly accepted and then sent for training. That had been the last time she had seen Berlin.



Arriving at about eleven in the morning at a road junction where one road was cut by big concrete blocks crowned with a large sign, Ingrid stopped her Porsche in front of the concrete barrier and stepped out, imitated by a curious Hien, to go read from up close the sign, which was obviously not recent. It was actually quite large and featured bold, large letters in red on a yellow background. Its message was in German, English, French and Russian.

**WARNING! RADIATION HAZARD**  
**BERLIN CONTAMINATED ZONE**  
**NO TRESPASSING BEYOND THIS POINT ON DANGER OF DEATH**  
**ON ORDERS OF ALLIED OCCUPATION FORCES**

Ingrid felt renewed grief as she contemplated the sign. She had been in Karlsruhe in 1944, heading the heliborne force that had taken the city by air assault in advance of rushing American mechanized columns, when the British had destroyed Berlin with a two megaton thermonuclear weapon. Even from as far as Karlsruhe, she had been able to clearly see the blinding flash, then the rising fireball from the explosion on the horizon. While the destruction of Berlin and the death of most of the top Nazi leaders had put a stop to the war in Europe, something in Ingrid had died with the city that day. Now, she stood less than fifty kilometers from her place of birth but could go no further.

"Mommy, what does the sign say?" Asked Hien in her small voice after taking her hand and gluing herself to her right leg.

"It is a warning sign, Hien. The ground and air beyond this point is contaminated by a deadly poison called 'radiation'. The city of Berlin, where I was born, lies in ruins in that direction but we won't be able to go there: it is still too dangerous."

"Was it destroyed in a war, Mommy?"

"Yes, it was." Said Ingrid softly. Hien was silent for a moment before speaking again.

"Mommy, I want to help others avoid wars when I will be a grown up."  
Ingrid smiled down to her, truly touched by that wish.

"Hien, that could be the most beautiful thing that you could do in life. I am sure that Sarah will be happy to hear that from you. By the way, to discuss with others in order to avoid wars is the work of diplomats."

"Then, I will become a diplomat, Mommy." Said Hien resolutely, attracting a hug and a kiss from Ingrid.

## **CHAPTER 8 – RETURN TO PARIS**

**19:47 (Paris Time)**

**Friday, July 28, 1651**

**Inn of ‘Le Lion Noir’**

**Paris, France**

Isaac Bartet, seeing d’Artagnan again glance towards the entrance door of their Inn as an old man entered the main hall, grinned to his friend Hughes De Terlon, another agent of Cardinal Mazarin in Paris, who was drinking wine with him and D’Artagnan at their table.

“I am starting to wonder why Charles is looking constantly towards the door. Is he worried about parliamentary militiamen showing up or is he expecting his ‘Belle’?”

“From what I saw of his Nancy, I would say that he can’t live without her.” Said De Terlon with amusement in his voice.”

“Well, she is quite an exceptional girl.” Conceded Charles Ogier de Batz de Castelmore, a.k.a. d’Artagnan, before taking another sip of his wine. That only made his two companions more curious, with De Terlon lowering his voice as he looked at Charles.

“So, what do you really know about that girl?”

Charles answered at once, having full confidence in the young aristocrat.

“Well, apart from being one beautiful girl, which you noticed already, she is very well educated and speaks, reads and writes an amazing number of languages, including English, Latin, Greek and German. She also rides like an expert and can fight at least as well as me. You will also find her surprisingly strong for a girl.”

“She sounds like one of the fabled Amazons, whom the Duchess of Orléans always dream of emulating.”

Hugues’ reply made Charles snicker in derision.

“The Grande Mademoiselle, an Amazon? Let me laugh! At least she had enough heart to refuse to watch as Nancy was being tortured in the Bastille. She then went to warn the King about it. Nancy told me that she even tried to convince the

Duchess of Longueville not to have her questioned. Despite all the trouble she is giving to the Queen, I suppose that I owe her a thank you in a way for that. That is..."

Charles then stopped speaking in mid-sentence, his eyes fixed on the entrance door and a happy smile appearing on his face. Hughes and Isaac turned their heads at once towards the door as the rest of the customers in the main hall also fell silent and stared at the tall teenage girl that had just entered. She was dressed most unusually for a girl, wearing tight-fitting black tights with knee-high black leather boots and a white silk shirt partially covered by a short-sleeved brown leather jacket. The jacket was closed around her lower torso by laces that pushed up her already impressive chest, which was partly visible thanks to the opened top of the shirt. Her generous hips, long legs and long silky black hair falling down to her waist only added to her sexiness. She did not wear a hat but had a sort of leather headband decorated with colored stitchings. A wide leather belt around her waist supported a belt purse, a dagger, a powder horn and a pair of pistols, while a pair of large saddle bags and a long leather carbine scabbard were slung over her left shoulder. Ignoring the stares from the customers, she went to the service counter and addressed the innkeeper, who was all but devouring her with his eyes from behind the counter.

"Could I have a room for one, please?" She said in perfect French.

"Uh, of course, mademoiselle." Said the innkeeper, having caught the wink she had given him. He certainly remembered her, as she had spent months already in his inn, departing only a few weeks ago. He also knew that she was helping d'Artagnan, being himself part of Cardinal Mazarin's network of agents in Paris. Opening his registry book and grabbing a feather and a bottle of ink, he then looked back at the girl.

"May I have your name, mademoiselle?"

"Lady Nancy Sommers." Answered calmly the teenager. "I am planning to stay for a week. Could I have a bath prepared as well in my room?"

D'Artagnan grinned widely on hearing that: one full week of tasting Nancy's charms. He waited until she started going up the stairs behind the innkeeper, then got up from his bench and excused himself with his two friends before going upstairs as well.

Nancy waited until the innkeeper had opened the door of her room and given her the key to it, then going back down, before discreetly inviting Charles in. Closing and locking the door behind him, she let drop her saddlebags and exchanged a long, hungry kiss with him. They finally parted and looked into each other's eyes.

“Damn, I really missed you, Nancy!”

“And I could only dream of you, Charles. As soon as we can take a bath I will show you how I missed you.”

“You really believe in this cleanliness thing, do you?” Said Charles, amused, making her smile with malice.

“Don’t you find that being clean makes certain things more agreeable, Charles?”

“True!” Replied Charles, thinking back at some of their past love sessions. “So, what are you doing in Paris this time?”

“I came to bring some funds to Queen Henriette and her retinue. And you, are you still going to and from Germany as a messenger?”

“Less often now. I mainly keep to Paris these days...which means that we will be able to enjoy each other freely this week.”

“I find nothing wrong with that, Charles.” Replied Nancy with a big grin. A knock on the door was then followed by the voice of the innkeeper.

“Lady Sommers, your bath is here.”

Nancy unlocked the door at once, letting in the innkeeper and a maid, who were carrying a wooden bath tub. Isaac Bartet and Hughes De Terlon were right behind, each carrying two buckets of warm water and grinning like idiots. Charles waived a finger at them at once.

“Even if you brought the water doesn’t mean that you can stay and watch.”

“But, what about our motto: all for one and one for all?”

“That doesn’t include Nancy.”

Nancy giggled at that exchange and, with the innkeeper and the maid already gone, pushed the door closed behind Bartet and De Terlon.

“Come on, Charles! You know that you are the one that counts for me. At least let them see what they missed on, so that you can put it on their noses afterwards.”

“Well, if you put it that way, I suppose that I wouldn’t mind turning the knife in their guts from time to time.”

“Spoken like a real friend, Charles.” Said sarcastically Isaac while pouring the water of his two buckets in the tub. Nancy took off her large belt while the bathtub was being filled, then unlaced her jacket and took it off as well. Isaac and Hughes swallowed hard when she started dancing slowly on the spot while humming a tune and taking off her shirt, ending topless. Hughes however felt sorrow as well as lust as he was then able to see the faint traces from burns and whip lashes around her torso. Nancy slowly

stripped completely, making all three men become horny as hell. She then danced her way to them before brushing lightly her breasts against each man. By then Hughes was nearly mad with desire, at which time Nancy stopped abruptly her dance and smiled to him and Isaac.

“Sorry guys: that’s all for you two tonight.”

“Arrgh! You would make any man crazy, Nancy.” Said Hughes.

“And it is one effective way to gain information if need be. Now, out!”

Charles laughed at the faces made by his two companions as they reluctantly left the room. Once the door was locked, he also undressed and joined Nancy in the small bath tub, smiling to her as they ended up sitting face to face with knees bent.

“I hope that you don’t do that to all the men you meet, Nancy.”

“Only to the ones I like.” She replied before giggling at the face he did then.

### **09:36 (Paris Time)**

**Saturday, July 29, 1651**

**Palace of Le Louvre**

**Paris**

Nancy, wearing a riding outfit quite similar to the one she had on yesterday, felt satisfaction at the end of her short visit to Queen Henriette-Marie of England and her small retinue. The gold that she had brought for the widow of King Charles the First actually represented little to the Time Patrol, which had easy access to countless so-called ‘lost treasures’ and to gold bullion reserves lost after the nuclear holocaust of 2052 ‘A’. The 10,000 Sterling Pounds worth of gold coins and gems she had just brought to Henriette-Marie would however go a long way to sustain the Queen’s retinue and prevent them from starving during their exile in Paris. Such largely anonymous charitable works like this one and the social foundation she was planning to found in Paris as Jeanne D’Orléans in the mid-nineteenth century were one of the things she liked most about her job as a field agent of the Time Patrol. While representing very little risk to the integrity of history if well planned, acts of charity through time did a lot to render life livable to some unfortunate souls worthy of help.

Nancy exited the mostly empty palace of Le Louvre from its western side and started walking slowly through the large royal gardens called ‘Jardin des Tuileries’,

apparently admiring the gardens. In reality, as she was trained to do as a field agent, she was making sure that nobody was following her. Being a wide expanse with few people going through it and with most of the vegetation being cut low, the gardens were ideal for counter-surveillance. By the time that she was about to exit the gardens Nancy was certain that a tall man in a gray cape and large black hat was following her. The man was obviously a professional and was doing all that he could to stay discreet. That and his style of clothes made Nancy dismiss the idea that he could be a spy sent by the Duchesse de Longueville. The men of the Duchesse had been a lot more amateurish than this man and also wore a distinct set of clothes. Another, more probable possibility was that the present man was an agent of the enemies of King Charles II of England, meaning Oliver Cromwell and his parliamentarians. His drab clothes would indeed fit with the puritan fashion favored by Cromwell's followers. Now ready for anything, Nancy left the gardens through a north side gate and soon turned right on Rue Saint Honoré, heading in the general direction of her inn. The man in the gray cape and black hat was now following her from closer, using the dense pedestrian and cart traffic to the most to hide from her. Choosing her time carefully, Nancy waited until she turned a corner that momentarily put her out of sight of her follower, then stepped inside the first deserted passageway she walked by and went into phase shift, using her implanted time distorter. Now surrounded by her own bubble of time that was a thousand times faster than the time others around her lived into, she disappeared from sight and was able to backtrack out of the passageway and take a hidden observation position behind a parked heavy chariot. Before going out of phase shift, Nancy also took off and reversed her own travel cape, changing its outer color from burgundy red to a common beige.

As she had expected, her follower hesitated when he turned the street corner and didn't see her on the street. Searching cautiously at first, then more frantically, the man finally gave up with a gesture of frustration after racing to the next street corner and still not seeing her. He then did as Nancy had hoped for and retraced his steps at a normal walking pace, either to resume his surveillance of the palace of Le Louvre or to go report to someone else. Nancy followed him in turn by performing short phase shifts that allowed her to watch him from positions ahead of him, a method called 'forward trailing' that was very hard to detect by the intended target. Nancy's luck kept true, with the tall man leading her to a house block occupied by three-story buildings subdivided into rented apartments and small shops. Following the man inside one of the buildings

was trickier, though. She had to use a short series of phase shifts to evade the attention of the man, who was proving a dangerous professional indeed. By now she knew that the man had at least a sword under his cape and possibly a pistol as well. Nancy saw him eventually knock on a door of the second floor according to an obvious signal code, then enter and close the door. Intent on planting a discreet spying probe against the bottom sill of the door, she walked quietly to the door and was about to bend to place the probe when the door opened unexpectedly. The man who had opened the door wasn't the one who had followed her but he still froze in alarm as he found himself face to face with Nancy. She also saw in a flash her follower sitting near a window before her combat instincts took over. The man at the door was grabbing for a pistol in his belt when Nancy flashed her hand up and touched his forehead, sending a stun jolt via the stun mechanism implanted in her hand. The man jerked once and then collapsed in a heap in front of her. The noise of his fall made the man at the window turn around as Nancy hurriedly closed the door behind her.

"YOU?" Said the man in English, both stunned and furious. He then went for his sword as Nancy charged him. A sweeping sidekick from Nancy made the sword fly through the room before he could use it. Showing the moves and expertise of a trained fighter, the man managed to block Nancy's first punch and swung back at her but she in turn was able to duck under his swing and countered by sweeping sideways with one leg, tripping the man and making him fall hard on his back. He rolled out of the way at once and jumped back on his feet before Nancy had the chance to jump on him. With both of them now facing each other in a combat stance, the man eyed her with interest.

"You are good, girl, I will give you that. Who trained you?" He said in English with a distinct London accent.

"My big sister." Answered Nancy, grinning. That made a hateful look appear in his eyes.

"Witches! How typical of heretics to use a pair of them."

The man then advanced on her in a boxing stance and delivered a powerful right jab towards her jaw. Nancy, already an advanced black belt in Juko, a mixed martial art developed by Nancy 'A', again ducked under his swing at the same time as she hit him with all her strength on the plexus with the flat of her hand. His breath taken away, the man bent forward with his mouth open, trying to get some air back in his lungs. Nancy then finished him with a chop of the right hand to the jugular, sending him crashing down on the floor. With her two opponents now knocked out, Nancy used the sheets of the



two beds in the room to tie up and gag them. She then wondered for a moment what to do with them. From what her last opponent had said, she was now quite certain that they were English agents sent by Oliver Cromwell or one of his lieutenants. Their mission was too obvious: to spy on the family and followers of King Charles II and, possibly, assassinate them if feasible. From the window of their room they had a good view of the Louvre Palace and of its main entrance and could thus watch who came to visit Queen Henriette-Marie. Searching thoroughly the two men and then the room, Nancy could find no compromising paper, which didn't surprise her: professional spies would not go around with documents that could have them hanged...or worse. The men were however well armed and had plenty of money, denoting possibly a long mission in France, which would jive with a surveillance operation. That, however, still left her with the problem of what to do with the two men. Transporting them to the future or the past was out of the question: they couldn't be allowed to learn about time travel. Killing them would be a possible option but one that she found most unsavory.

She was still weighing her options when the taller man surprised her by waking up much earlier than expected. That man was decidedly in a class apart as a dangerous opponent. Dragging quickly the man lying by the door, who would certainly not wake up for another forty minutes at the least because of the jolt of stun energy he had received, Nancy dumped him over the tied legs of her follower, then sat across his chest, her weight pressing painfully on his tied arms and hands behind his back. Once fully conscious, the man threw her a hateful look like only a religious fanatic could throw. Nancy lowered his gag then and looked down coldly into the man's eyes.

"What is your name?"

"Go to hell, witch!"

"Why were you following me?" Asked Nancy, already knowing the answer to that but wanting to gauge the mindset of that man. His spiteful response said enough to her.

"Screw you! I won't tell you anything!"

"Alright, you want to die an anonymous death? That could be arranged easily. Who would miss two anonymous Englishmen who would be found dead in a Paris rented room? I doubt that Cromwell would create a diplomatic incident over the disappearance of the two of you."

"He has..." started to say the man before catching himself up. That was however enough to make Nancy smile.

“So, you do work for that ignorant bigot. How typical of him to try to assassinate a widowed woman and her small daughter. You Puritans claim to possess the only true Christian faith, yet massacre whole populations simply because they are of another denomination. Jesus Christ would have been disgusted by your hypocrisy and cruelty.” Her religious jab seemed to touch home, as the man wiggled vigorously for a few seconds, apparently enraged.

“You and your likes will all burn in Hell, where you belong.”

Nancy then couldn't hide anymore her revulsion towards him and stared hard into his eyes while speaking in a frigid voice.

“For me, someone who is ready to kill indiscriminately men, women and children on the simple pretext that he or she holds the only valid belief is the one worthy of Hell. You want to die as an anonymous spy? Then that is what you will end up like.” Covering with her left hand the man's mouth, Nancy then drew her dagger and drove its blade deep in the man's neck in one merciless move. Barely nineteen years ago from this present year her fourth previous incarnation, that of a German mercenary chieftain called Karl Beck, had died of the Black Plague near Hamburg after helping to spread terror and death during the infamous Thirty Years War. Karl Beck, while being an outstanding soldier in terms of professional skills, had also been one of her darker incarnations. For a moment, Nancy felt like being Karl Beck as she killed in cold blood both men in the room. The worst part was that, even once up and about to leave, she simply could not feel any remorse about killing those men. Nancy 'A' had felt the same way as she had killed the sadistic guards of the Nazi concentration camps and of the Japanese prisoners of war camps in 1942. Thinking about it, Nancy found the analogy valid: the Nazis had killed in the name of their supposed racial superiority, while the Japanese had abused and killed their prisoners in the name of their military code of honor. As for Cromwell's Puritans, they were murdering thousands of Irish Catholics simply because they believed that they possessed the only true faith. Such religious intolerance and bigotry would even cross the Atlantic Ocean and end up in North America, resulting among other things into the infamous Salem witch trials. Having first carefully wiped clean her blade, Nancy then threw the hood of her cape over her head and left the room, closing the door and calmly walking away.

**22:51 (Paris Time)**

**Inn of 'Le Lion Noir'**

“Nancy?”

“Yes, Charles?” Replied softly Nancy to d’Artagnan, who was lying in bed with her, his front pressing against her back and with one hand cupping her right breast.

“I truly want to marry you. You are too unique a girl to let go.”

Turning around in the bed to face him, Nancy caressed his chest with one hand while staring into his eyes. She could see that he was dead serious and meant what he said.

“Charles, I...the truth is that, while I do love you deeply, I do not have full control of my destiny. I have friends and comrades that I have sworn to help and assist and also have obligations that I cannot neglect. I am a lot like you, who is in the service of the Cardinal and of the Queen and have to pass your duty in front of your personal life. Thank you for asking again: it honors me greatly.”

Charles sighed, a bit disappointed but not surprised by her answer. He did try one last argument, though.

“You could transfer your allegiance to France and serve the Queen and King, like I do. I am sure that King Charles II of England would let you go.”

His attempts at convincing her broke Nancy’s heart: if she would have been a girl from this time period, she would have said yes to him in an instant. With tears in her eyes and with her voice shaking with emotion, she spoke in a near whisper.

“Charles, you have a destiny to follow, a destiny where I couldn’t fit as your official wife. As for King Charles, he is not the one holding my destiny.”

“Can you tell me more about you, Nancy? What is so important that it would force you to refuse to marry me?”

“Duty and a vow of secrecy.” Nancy answered with difficulty before starting to sob, her head against his chest. Her words actually meant something to d’Artagnan, who had lived all his life according to three words: duty, loyalty and honor.

“I am sorry to have pushed you about this. I promise not to ask again.”

He exchanged a long kiss with her, then looked back into her eyes.

“Are you sure that you want to stay only a week in Paris, Nancy?”

His soft tone and pleading eyes were enough to convince Nancy, who had to swallow the lump in her throat.

“I will stay with you for a month and then leave. I promise you that I will come back to France as soon as possible.”

They kissed again, with Charles sighing afterwards while still holding Nancy.

“Nancy De Batz de Castelmore...it would have made a fine name for you.”

“Charles d’Artagnan will also make a fine name if we have a son together, my love. Let’s try for it tonight.”

“Charles d’Artagnan, I like the sound of it.” Replied Charles before coupling again with Nancy.

**10:25 (Paris Time)**

**Thursday, August 10, 1651**

**Palace of Le Louvre, Paris**

Young Princess Henriette-Anne clapped her hands enthusiastically as Nancy finished telling with much gestures a colorful hunting story that had taken place in New France. Sitting around her were her mother, Queen Henriette-Marie, and her small retinue of loyal followers, including young Countess Ann Morton. Nancy enjoyed visiting the English royal family, especially to cheer up and entertain the little princess, with whom she had developed a mutual attachment. Nancy was dressed in a riding outfit and had her pistols and dagger at her belt, as fitted her image of adventuress and teller of wild stories, and was truly having fun at the time. The midget man serving Queen Henriette-Marie suddenly entered, throwing open the double doors of the lounge they were in and announcing a group of new visitors in a loud voice.

“THE QUEEN REGENT AND KING OF FRANCE!”

As everybody in the lounge turned and looked towards the door, Queen Anne of Austria and young King Louis the Fourteenth appeared in the doorway, walking side by side. More French nobles followed behind them, the more important ones immediately announced as well by the midget.

“THE DUKE OF ORLÉANS AND HIS DAUGHTER, THE DUCHESS OF MONTPENSIER!”

Nancy tensed up at once then, seeing that a number of soldiers of the Duke of Orléans were escorting closely the visitors. On her part, the young Anne Marie Louise D’Orléans, Duchess of Montpensier, recognized her instantly and whispered in the ear of her father.

“Father, that woman in black tights and shirt: she’s the girl that was tortured in the Bastille by the men of the Duchess of Longueville three months ago.”

"Is she?" Said Gaston D'Orléans, who was already eyeing Nancy with an interest mixed with instant lust. "I have to say that she looks the part. And she knocked out seven of my men all by herself?"

"Nine, Father!" Corrected the Great Mademoiselle while watching Nancy. Queen Henriette-Marie then spoke after rising from her chair, addressing her visitors.

"Queen Anne, King Louis, it is truly an honor to have you coming here. To what do I owe you this visit?"

Anne of Austria replied to her in a warm voice, bowing politely her head to Henriette-Marie.

"Your brother, the Duke of Orléans, told us that he was planning to visit you and, since we are getting bored of playing lawn bowling at the Palais-Royal, decided to accompany him and pay you a visit as well."

"A fine thought, Queen Anne. We were ourselves getting quite bored until young Lady Sommers here started telling us wild and fascinating stories about her native New France."

"Oh, I would love to hear them too!" Exclaimed young Louis. Gaston D'Orléans smiled at that and came forward to kiss his royal sister, smiling to her and to her retinue and Nancy.

"Well, my dear sister, now that we are in such good company and since King Louis is so eager to hear those stories about New France, why don't we all sit down and listen to Lady Sommers?"

Everyone agreed with him and extra chairs were fetched at once, so all could sit together, with Nancy facing them.

Starting with the story of how her father had met her mother in the woods of New France, Nancy spoke with theatrical gestures for a good forty minutes, with her audience listening with intense interest. Very little was known of New France or of the Americas by most people in France, so she had no need to embellish her stories. Nancy also used from time to time sentences in Huron or Iroquois language, spicing further her performance. She was rewarded at the end by loud applause from all, including from the Great Mademoiselle, who was looking at her with admiration. Queen Henriette-Marie then invited her to sit with the group and had a cup of wine brought to her. Her throat dry from her storytelling, she accepted gladly the wine and took a sip. Young King Louis soon came to sit beside her and looked with hope at her.

“Do you think that you could visit the Palais-Royal tonight and tell me more stories, Lady Sommers?”

Nancy smiled down to the teenage boy: Louis XIV was a handsome boy indeed and had a strong personality as well as a sharp intelligence. She also remembered well how he had risked himself to save her from the Bastille.

“That would please me most but it would depend on the approval of your mother, Your Majesty.”

Louis turned his head at once towards Anne of Austria, who smiled sarcastically while eyeing her young, precocious son.

“Louis, are you sure that you are interested in her stories or simply in her?”

“Mother!” Protested the boy while giggles went around the audience. Louis XIV was known to be already very interested by the representatives of the female persuasion despite his age of thirteen.

“I will have the legal right to reign in less than a month, Mother. New France will be part of my responsibilities and I know so little about it. Lady Sommers’ stories would constitute a most useful teaching to me.”

“Hmm, put that way, I could see the usefulness of this.” Said the Queen Regent thoughtfully. “Our contacts with our colony are effectively quite infrequent. You did say that you visited the English colonies in the New World, Lady Sommers?”

“I effectively visited many times the New England States as well as the Dutch possessions of New Holland, plus of course New France itself, Your Majesty.”

“Then consider yourself my guest tonight, Lady Sommers.”

Nancy bowed to her in response.

“You honor me most, Your Majesty. Shall I wear a court dress or my present outfit?”

“I suppose that Louis will find your stories more exciting if you are dressed the part, Lady Sommers. Come as you are. I will expect you at the Palais-Royal around nightfall.”

As she said that, the Queen Regent eyed Gaston D’Orléans, who waved his hands in a jovial gesture while smiling to her.

“Do not worry about the security of Lady Sommers, Your Majesty. I will personally guarantee the safety of any guest of you or of my dear sister, whom Lady Sommers happens to both be. I have only one word.”

“Thank you, Monsieur.” Replied Queen Anne, while Nancy felt a bit less worried now. “Now, I believe that in our eagerness to listen to the stories of Lady Sommers we forgot the main reason of this visit, which was to pay a courtesy call to your good sister.”

“That is too true, Your Majesty.” Replied Gaston D’Orléans before looking at Queen Henriette-Marie. “I must apologize for not visiting you earlier, my dear sister. I was unfortunately kept quite busy in the last few months. And how are things going in England?”

“Badly, I’m afraid.” Replied gloomily the widow. “The followers of my son Charles have been suffering heavily at the hands of Cromwell and of his butchers.”

“I am sorry to hear that, sister.” Said Gaston, sincere, as he had no love for Cromwell and his fanatical Puritans, even though they could become politically important to him. “And how is your sojourn in Paris?”

“A lot less harsh since Lady Sommers and her mistress brought us some funds from my loyal subjects in Scotland, my dear Gaston. We would be starving if not for their help.”

“Indeed?” Said Gaston while glancing at Nancy. His look, while appearing friendly, felt wrong to Nancy. “I was thus truly negligent in not visiting you earlier and correcting such a sad state of affair. I promise you that you won’t have to worry about your material needs from now on, sister.”

By now Nancy was becoming truly suspicious of the Duke. Gaston D’Orléans was famous in history for devising political plots to further his interests, then letting others take the fall for his machinations. Her telepathic powers also helped her judge the real intentions of people around her and what she was feeling now from the Duke was not friendly one bit.

The conversation then switched to a more mundane vein, with the two queens and Gaston D’Orléans doing most of the talking. Nancy, sitting besides Princess Henriette-Anne, was a bit surprised to see Anne Marie Louise D’Orléans change seats to come sit to her right with an apologetic look on her face.

“I am truly sorry for what happened to you in the Bastille, Lady Sommers. I never imagined that such cruel things would be done to you.”

Nancy looked at her dispassionately: the Duchess may have indirectly caused her capture then but she was not a mean person, just a naïve one.

“What is done is done, Duchess. My quarrel is with the Duchess of Longueville. While you helped in my capture, you did try to intercede in my favor once in the Bastille and I thank you for that.”

“It still wasn’t enough to save you from all that pain.” Said the Great Mademoiselle in a disgruntled tone. “Even if you worked for Cardinal Mazarin, you didn’t deserve that.”

“Duchess, I never worked for Cardinal Mazarin. I was simply doing my duty and protecting my mistress, Lady Lisbeth.”

The Duchess nearly said something then but thought better of it and excused herself before returning to her original chair. Something said by Queen Henriette-Marie then attracted her full attention. The Queen of England was presently talking with her brother Gaston.

“...they were found dead in a furnished rented room in a house in direct view of this palace. They still had a large amount of gold and silver with them, which made the Provost of Paris discount theft as a murder motive.”

“And you believe that these two men were agents of Cromwell, my dear Henriette-Marie? Why?”

“Why?” Replied the Queen, getting agitated. “You have two anonymous Englishmen armed to the teeth, who have been staying for over three months in a room near here and doing nothing but stay in that room or wander around the palace. The Provost’s men questioned their neighbors, who all said that both men were distant and secretive. Nobody saw them conduct business of any kind and no one ever visited them, not even women. What else but spies of Cromwell could they be? The Provost of Paris was fortunately intelligent enough to figure that out and kind enough to come warn me about these men a few days later.”

“But, who could have killed them?” Asked young King Louis, his imagination fired up by this apparent plot. Henriette-Marie shrugged to show her ignorance, following which the Great Mademoiselle had one idea pop out of her mind.

“Hey, what about your English supporters, Aunt Henriette? They could be protecting you secretly.”

All eyes turned at once towards Nancy, all except those of Anne Marie Louise, who had spoken without thinking, as was her habit. Nancy was for them the only known supporter of the Queen that came from England and who was in evidence in Paris. The awed look King Louis then gave Nancy, along with the questioning looks from the others,



suddenly made her most uncomfortable. Playing the innocent, she gave a confused look around her.

“What? Why are you all looking at me like that?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be a bodyguard for that Lady Lisbeth, who professed to be a supporter of my sister in England, Lady Nancy?” Asked on a neutral tone Gaston D’Orléans. Those words finally made his daughter catch on as she stared at Nancy.

“Of course! If you can beat by yourself nine soldiers, killing two men should be like child’s play. Oooh, this is exciting: a female secret agent of the King of England, here in Paris!”

Right then, Nancy could nearly strangle that young twit as she desperately thought about a way to defuse this situation and kill any wild ideas about who she was.

“I am sorry to disappoint you, Duchess, but I came to Paris only to deliver funds to Queen Henriette-Marie and to bring her news from England.”

The Queen thankfully came to her help then, sensing her embarrassment.

“That is the truth, my dear niece. Lady Sommers is here only temporarily. Besides, don’t you think that those neighbors of the dead Englishmen would have noticed a teenage girl as tall as her if she had been around that house?”

That did a lot to take the pressure off Nancy, apart from deflecting the conversation to other subjects. To Nancy’s relief, King Louis, Queen Anne of Austria and the D’Orléans finally left after another half hour, but not before young Louis made Nancy promise again that she would visit him in the evening. As Nancy was about to leave herself five minutes later, Queen Henriette-Marie made her stop with a gesture and eyed her gravely.

“Lady Sommers, as one of my subjects I would like you to enlighten me on one point. Did you have anything to do with the death of those Englishmen? Please be truthful.”

After a short hesitation, Nancy knelt before the Queen and bowed her head.

“Yes, I did, Your Majesty: I killed both of them myself after one of them tried to follow me after my visit here. Please excuse me if I had to lie in front of you and of your guests.”

“You are decidedly a wild girl, Lady Sommers,” said the Queen before breaking into a smile, “but also a most loyal and brave subject. I will commend you to my son, the King.”

“Please don’t, Your Majesty!” Replied urgently but politely Nancy, snapping her head up to look at her directly. “I do not wish to run the risk of some spy learning of my acts here. My relatives in England could then pay for them in my place. The same goes for my mistress, Lady Lisbeth. The more anonymous we stay, the more effective we can be...and the safer we all stay.”

“I certainly can see the logic in your demand, Lady Sommers.” Said softly Henriette-Marie. “May God keep you safe.”

“The same to you and your family, Your Majesty.” Replied Nancy, curtsying in front of the Queen. She then walked out, breathing a sigh of relief once out of the room.

## **16:08 (Paris Time)**

### **Inn of Le Lion Noir**

#### **Paris**

“Have you lost your mind, Nancy? To go alone at night to the Palais-Royal, which is guarded by parliamentarian soldiers, when the Duke of Orléans knows that you are coming? That weasel will have assassins waiting for you.”

“When the Queen and the King are waiting for me? He will never be so blatant.” D’Artagnan swore to himself, then eyed her critically.

“I suppose that you won’t let me escort you.”

“Like hell I would, Charles! You are a much more sought prize than me for those Fronde soldiers. Besides, you are also much more precious than me to France.”

Charles, restraining himself from blowing a fuse, shook a finger at her.

“Nancy, don’t try flattery on me. Since I obviously can’t make you change your mind about this, can I at least urge you to bring a sword with you? Your pistols are fine weapons but they will be good for a total of only two shots in the case of a street ambush.”

“That I will do, Charles.” Replied Nancy, calming somewhat her lover. “In fact, I happen to have a good sword here.”

“That’s a start.” Said d’Artagnan, who then softened considerably his tone. “For God’s sake, Nancy, be careful tonight.”

“I will, Charles, I promise. Uh, talking of being cautious, what should I do if young King Louis tries a pass at me tonight? He is said to be quite precocious.”

That notion seemed to amuse greatly d'Artagnan, who played with one tip of his thin moustache.

“Well, you are certainly right about King Louis being fond of girls. I don't know if I should be honored or offended by the idea of the King playing around with my mistress. On the other hand, I can't say that I didn't do my part in making a few men cuckold during my life.”

“I'll take that as a definite maybe, Charles.” Replied Nancy with a grin. “At least you will know that the baby that is on its way is from you.”

She then kissed him on the lips, prompting him into hugging her tight, then to lead her to the nearby bed.

## **20:10 (Paris Time)**

### **Stable of the inn of Le Lion Noir**

#### **Paris**

“Hello, Pegasus! Time for you to get some exercise.”

Her horse, a big brown beast, gave her a funny look and, with nobody else present in the stable of the inn at this time, spoke in a near whisper.

“Spacetime trip or old-fashioned ride?”

“Old-fashioned promenade in Paris.” Answered Nancy while putting in place the saddle on top of her robotic horse cum time travel machine. She liked that robotic horse, the first to have entered service with the Time Patrol and one that had made numerous missions in time with Nancy 'A'. Apart from being able to fool even an experienced stable boy about its true nature, the engineers and programmers who had designed it had given it a true personality and even a sense of humor. It could fly, jump spacetime with its rider and gallop for days without stopping if need be. Its skin was actually a thick multi-layered fabric that mimicked horse skin and that was proof against blade weapons and low velocity projectiles. If absolutely necessary, Pegasus could even help Nancy in a fight by firing either stun beams or laser beams through its opened mouth. That last capability had however never been needed before. After finishing to equip her horse, Nancy bent and whispered in its ear.

“Be sharp tonight: assassins may be waiting in ambush for us along the way. Act like a normal horse but warn me via radio if your sensors pick up something suspicious. Use 72.6 megahertz as a frequency.”

“Got that, babe!”

Nancy giggled as she pictured in her head the face d'Artagnan would make if he ever saw Pegasus speak to her. Checking her two pistols, she then inspected her short, large caliber blunderbuss scatter gun held in a right side leather holder hanging from the front of her saddle. Also called a 'tromblon' in French, the blunderbuss was the ancestor of the shotgun and had a bore caliber of two inches but a length of only around thirty inches. While having next to no accuracy, the blunderbuss was a fearsome weapon at close range, being able to be loaded with a large load of lead balls, nails, scrap iron or anything else that was handy at the time. Nancy finally mounted up and rode out of the stable and through the courtyard of the inn before following the Rue du Temple towards the Palais-Royal.

Turning a number of times at street corners, Nancy followed the narrow streets of Paris at a trot, fully on guard against a possible ambush. As one could expect at this hour, few Parisians dared venture out in the dark streets, unless they were in groups or well armed. There was after all a civil war going on, a war that made it easy for thieves, cutthroats and other bandits to ply on the weak and the unprotected. As she got closer from the Palais-Royal, which occupied a whole city block, Nancy took out her blunderbuss and held on to it, resting its barrel across the front of her saddle so that she could use it in a hurry if need be. As she was about two blocks away from the north side of the palace, Pegasus contacted her via radio, its voice echoing inside her inner right ear.

“Alert: seven men are hiding behind the two parked chariots to our front left, sixty meters away. I can see their thermal signatures.”

“Keep going as if nothing is wrong.” Replied Nancy, thinking her answer, which was picked up by her implanted radio. “Do a full scan sweep, full spectrum.”

Pegasus came back on after three seconds.

“Seven men confirmed behind the chariots, plus at least two more men hiding behind the building corner to our right that we are about to pass. I also have the thermal signature of two men looking at us from second floor windows of the next building to our front right. They are holding muskets. That's all for the moment.”

“Hell, that's enough for me already! I think that only speed and surprise will get us out of this. The moment that we pass that building to our right, go to full gallop and charge through this ambush.”

“Understood, Nancy.”

Nancy then braced herself after discreetly cocking the hammer of her blunderbuss: when Pegasus accelerated to full gallop it felt like trying to hold on to a rocket booster. When Pegasus did start its sprint towards the palace, Nancy was able to see with a quick glance that there were in fact about ten men hiding past the building corner to her right. Those men, like the seven others hiding behind the chariots and the two shooters posted in the windows, were taken by surprise at first by Pegasus' dash and were slow to react. A furious order in French was then shouted from behind her.

“SHOOT HER! STOP HER!”

Crouching forward on her horse, Nancy heard one bullet whistle by her head as the two shooters fired their muskets at her. She then fired herself, pointing her blunderbuss at the group of seven men running towards her from her front left and trying to block her path. The recoil from her gun was severe and the muzzle flash intimidating but she was an acknowledged expert with heavy weapons, even for a Time Patrol assault specialist, and her discharge struck the men as they were still grouped together. Five of those men went down at once, riddled by the 24 lead balls loaded in her blunderbuss. Firing one of her pistols from the left hand, she shot in the head a sixth man, prompting the last survivor of that group to flee in utter panic. She was still galloping hard and about to arrive at the street crossing leading to the main entrance of the Palais-Royal, with ten men running hard behind her to try to get her, when a further five men emerged from a dark corner twenty meters to her right front. Having already slid back her empty blunderbuss and pistol in their holsters, she grabbed her second pistol and shot the first man of that group in the chest as he was pointing a musket at her. One of her assailants was next to fire, discharging his pistol in her direction but missing clean because of the speed of her horse. Pegasus bowled over one man that had been gutsy enough to stand in its path, while another man was slashed down by Nancy with her sword. The two remaining cutthroats then fled, having had enough already. That left Nancy with an open way to the main entrance of the palace 120 meters to her front, where she could see four parliamentary soldiers looking nervously at her while readying their muskets. Not being sure that they would be less hostile to her than the men she had just broken through, Nancy looked quickly at the façade of the palace she was riding along. Seeing an opened window with light inside on the first floor, she made Pegasus divert its course towards it while slowing down. Stopping her horse under that window only long enough to stand quickly on her saddle and grab the window sill with both hands, Nancy

effortlessly climbed inside, using a stone ledge to secure her footing first. She smiled reassuringly to the woman in her forties dressed in an evening gown and sitting at a dresser while powdering her face. Nancy bowed to her once up on her feet in the bedroom she had climbed in.

“Please excuse me for this intrusion, madam. I will not bother you any longer.”

While walking quickly out of the woman’s bedroom and in an antechamber, Nancy sent silently a radio message via mental command.

“Pegasus, run away and return to the inn without me. I will come back by my own means.”

“Understood, Nancy.”

Crossing the antechamber, where a maid was folding clean clothes, Nancy then went out in a large hallway. Not knowing the detailed layout of the palace or where the King’s suite was, she had to stop and ask politely a valet for that information. The valet answered her readily enough and she was soon hurrying towards the royal apartments. No guards challenged her before she got to the King’s apartments but she did find two soldiers of the Duke of Orléans standing guard on each side of the King’s door. Since she could not bypass them without using her special abilities as a field agent of the Time Patrol, Nancy decided to bluff it out and openly approached the two men. The soldiers, on seeing her, took hold of their swords while facing her, with one of them shouting an order at her.

“STOP! WHO GOES THERE?”

“Lady Nancy Sommers, here on the request of the King.” Answered calmly Nancy, stopping for a moment in the middle of the hallway. “The Duke of Orléans guaranteed my safety in this palace.”

The senior guard eyed her for a moment, then turned his head towards his comrade.

“Marcel, tell the King that he has a visitor.”

Nancy was starting to relax a bit as the second guard went inside the royal apartments when five other guards appeared at the end of the hallway, running towards her with swords and muskets at the ready. One of those guards shouted to the man still guarding the King’s door.

“STOP HER, SHE’S AN INTRUDER!”

The man facing Nancy drew his sword at once and pointed it at her throat, with the tip a mere meter away from her.

“Don’t move, mademoiselle!”

Nancy, keeping her own sword in her scabbard, stared hard at him and spoke in a strong voice, so that she could be heard by as many people as possible around.

“That’s what the guarantee from the Duke is worth? To have over twenty men waiting in ambush for me outside and then have me arrested at the door of the King, who invited me?”

The five guards running towards her then stopped in an extended line across the hallway, less than ten meters away from her and with their muskets pointed at her.

“Put down your weapons on the floor!”

“No! I am a guest of the King and you will treat me as such.”

Nancy was expecting to get killed at any moment then when a boy’s voice froze everybody.

“NOBODY IS TO TOUCH HER!”

Young King Louis stormed out of his apartments and went to stand besides Nancy while looking angrily at the guards.

“LOWER YOUR MUSKETS! SHE IS UNDER MY PROTECTION.”

The guards hesitated at first, unwilling to openly disobey their young King. The arrival of Queen Anne of Austria, coming out of the royal apartments, finally convinced them to stand down and turn back. The Queen looked hard at the soldier still pointing his sword at Nancy.

“Well? Are you deaf, monsieur? Sheet back your sword and let our guest pass.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” Replied the guard, bowing deeply to her and sheeting back his blade. The King then gallantly showed Nancy into his apartments, the Queen at their back. Once the door was closed, Anne of Austria blew air out in relief.

“That was close. I wasn’t sure that those soldiers would obey us.”

“Which only shows how wrong things are in Paris now, Your Majesty.” Said Nancy while curtsying. The Queen bit her lip at that, looking concerned.

“Too true, Lady Sommers. Soon, it may be too dangerous for even the King to stay in Paris. We heard many shots fired a few minutes ago. Were you the one being fired at?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Replied politely Nancy, who then told the King and Queen about the attempted ambush against her. Her story angered to no small degree the Queen, who shook her right fist.

“That treacherous Gaston D’Orléans! His so-called word is decidedly worth nothing. I will call him to task for this tomorrow.”

She then calmed down and smiled to Nancy, unaware that the micro-cameras hidden in Nancy's embroidered Amerindian headband were filming her.

"You are a truly tough girl, Lady Sommers, and a dangerous one too for your enemies. Your stories should captivate my young Louis tonight. Uh, how old are you already?"

"I am now fourteen, Your Majesty."

"You sound and act like someone much older and wiser than the teenage girls around this palace, Lady Sommers."

"One has to have good wits to survive the winters in New France, Your Majesty."

"Indeed! Well, I have a few letters to write, so I will leave you with Louis. You are of course welcomed to stay in the royal apartments tonight, as I suspect that returning you to the streets tonight could be your death. I will have a maid come and show you where your room is."

The Queen then lowered her voice to a near whisper.

"How are Monsieur d'Artagnan and his friends these days, Lady Sommers?"

"They are all well, Your Majesty. If you need, I can pass letters to them tomorrow."

"Excellent! I will have something for you then." Replied the Queen before facing her son. "Don't go to bed too late, Louis, even though I know that Lady Sommers' stories can be captivating."

"Yes, Mother!" Said Louis politely while promising himself to get the most out of Nancy in the hours to come. Once the Queen had left, Louis XIV invited Nancy to sit with him in a sofa of his lounge, then gave her a hopeful smile.

"Well, I must thank you for coming tonight to entertain me with your stories, milady. You must have seen so many wondrous things in New France."

"New France, while still a wild country, is indeed full of beautiful sights, Your Majesty. Where would you like me to start?"

"With stories about you, milady." Replied wistfully Louis, who then got very close to her on the sofa. Nancy smiled down to the handsome boy, who was in reality only two years younger than herself. She then put her right hand on his left upper leg, making anticipation appear on his face.

"Then, Your Majesty, I will be pleased to reveal to you everything about myself tonight."



**05:42 (Paris Time)**

**Friday, August 11, 1651**

**King Louis XIV's apartments**

**Palais-Royal, Paris**

Louis, about to return to his own bedroom, which communicated directly with the small servant's bedroom used by Nancy, was able to see in detail Nancy's body in the early morning light coming from a window, as she got up naked from the bed to dress. Himself wearing only his night shirt, he gently caressed the faint scars left on her torso by whips, pliers and hot irons, then looked up at her with sorrow.

"They were indeed cruel with you in the Bastille, milady. My heart bleeds at seeing such marks on you."

Nancy paused as she mentally reflected on that harsh episode of her young life. It probably wouldn't be the last time either that she would have to endure pain and hardship in the course of her career as a field agent. Looking down at Louis, who stood a half head shorter than her, she gently brushed his long hair while speaking softly.

"It was something I wouldn't care to relive but it was also the price to pay to fulfill my duties, Your Majesty."

An idea then came to her mind and she crouched in front of the boy king, who was still sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Your Majesty, maybe you could do something about this. As you know, many criminals in France, including women, are flogged as a punishment for their crimes. I would only ask for something from you or your mother the Queen that would help me prove to whoever doubted my moral character that I wasn't flogged or branded because of some crime I committed."

"I will be too happy to do this for you, milady, as it would only be simple justice."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

"It is I who must thank you, Lady Sommers." Said softly Louis, who then patted her right arm. "You gave me much to think about, milady. You better dress while I go to my bedroom, before my mother shows up."

Louis took the time to plant a malicious kiss on Nancy's left nipple before walking to his bedroom. Nancy sighed as she went for her clothes: in modern times, Louis would have been an interesting boy indeed to date. She dressed quickly, then went to the window of her bedroom to look at Paris outside. The French capital may have been smelly and

dirty in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century but Nancy had always loved Paris, in whatever time period. She had been born in Montreal in 1982 'B' but had spent only a single day there, taken away with her parents before an assassination team could murder her. From there she had been moved to the secret main base of the Time Patrol in New Zealand in 3,000 B.C.E., where she had grown up while visiting occasionally either the 20<sup>th</sup> Century of timeline 'B' or the 34<sup>th</sup> Century of timeline 'A'. In truth, Nancy didn't belong to any specific time period, being one of a very few people that were in that situation. She could thus adapt easily to various time periods, something quite useful for a field agent of the Time Patrol.

The Queen's personal maid, Madame de Motteville, came maybe twenty minutes later to tell her that she was invited to go have breakfast with the King and Queen. The woman then took out of her dress a sealed envelope that she presented to Nancy while speaking in a near whisper.

"Please pass this letter from the Queen to Monsieur d'Artagnan, for forwarding to the Cardinal."

"Tell Her Majesty that Monsieur d'Artagnan will get this letter no later than this morning." Said Nancy while slipping the precious letter in an inside pocket of her leather jacket. "Please show me the way to the dining room."

Being ready by then, with her weapons at her belt, Nancy followed the maid to a huge dining room where a good thirty nobles sat with the King and Queen around a long table. Nancy paused briefly on entering the room: present at the table were the Duchess of Montpensier and the Duchess of Longueville. While the former greeted her with a smile that seemed genuine, the latter visibly stiffened on her chair and her face reflected a mix of hatred and fear. Ignoring the Duchess of Longueville, Nancy approached the table and curtsied in front of the Queen.

"May I join you and King Louis for breakfast, Your Majesty?"

"You certainly may, Lady Sommers." Said Anne of Austria while designating an empty chair only four places away from hers. "Please have a seat."

"Thank you, Your Majesty." Said Nancy respectfully before taking the chair shown to her by the Queen. That placed her facing squarely the Duchess of Longueville from across the table. Somehow, she believed that to be intentional, as Queen Anne knew how afraid of Nancy the Duchess of Longueville was. Since the others had already started eating, Nancy served herself from the number of baskets and platters on the table that contained a wide variety of bread, cheese, fruits and hard-boiled eggs. As

per her habit, she ate moderately, always conscious about keeping trim and fit. A male courtier sitting besides her noticed that and made a remark to her.

“I thought that a girl as tall as you would eat more, milady.”

“I don’t really need more, monsieur, except after exercising vigorously or when in the wilderness of New France in Winter.”

That simple answer earned her a series of questions about New France from a number of curious members of the royal court, including from the Duchess of Montpensier. One fat baroness then said something that displeased Nancy to no small degree.

“How come that our settlers, armed with muskets, haven’t killed yet all those savages in the woods of New France?”

Anne Marie Louise D’Orléans nearly choked on her croissant then, expecting the wild Lady Sommers to blow a fuse at that. She looked on with intense interest as Nancy answered the baroness in a calm but cold voice.

“Madame, you should know that the Amerindians also have muskets, which they bought from either us, the English or the Dutch. Also, the Amerindians are at home in those forests and are very skilled at making silent, covert approaches. You probably wouldn’t know that one has approached you before he would jump on you to scalp you. Lastly, many of those so-called savages are our allies and have been fighting hard with our people against the Iroquois. My father himself was born from a French settler and a Huron woman.”

That last sentence made more than a few jaws drop open, to Nancy’s secret satisfaction. The best part about that was that her real father’s mother indeed had Amerindian blood. More questions about New France followed after that, to which Nancy answered as much as she could within the bounds of what was known of it in this time period.

The Queen was about to get up and thus indicate that the breakfast was over when a tall, thin and richly dressed aristocrat who was about thirty years old entered the dining room, four Fronde soldiers at his back. He had the deportment of a man certain of his high rank and walked at a brisk pace towards the Queen, his left hand on the pommel of his sword. On her part the Queen stiffened at his appearance and Nancy could feel at once the antipathy between her and the newcomer. As for who the aristocrat was, Nancy knew that already: everybody in Paris knew by sight Louis II of Bourbon, Prince of Condé, also known as ‘The Great Condé’, military leader of the Fronde. Condé was justly famous as a successful general but he was also a man of

considerable arrogance who had a talent to grate on the nerves of most of the people he met. Right now he certainly played the part, as his bow to the Queen and King was cursory at best.

“Good morning, Your Majesty. I am sorry to disturb your breakfast like this but I had to come and take care of a little problem.”

Nancy, fully on her guard now and keeping close tabs on the position of the four Fronde soldiers, knew at once that she was about to get in trouble...again. Her hunch proved correct, as Condé then faced her from across the dining table, all pretence of politeness gone.

“If you think that you can keep beating and killing my soldiers with impunity, then you better change your mind, young girl.”

“She is here on my invitation, Condé!” Protested the Queen, jumping to her feet. “Your soldiers wouldn’t get beaten or killed if they would in turn stop trying to kill that girl.”

“That girl is cavorting with agents of Mazarin.” Replied brusquely Condé, who had a nearly visceral hatred of the Cardinal. Not wanting to put at risk the Queen and King, or in fact anyone else here, Nancy got up slowly from her chair, careful not to trigger an attack yet. She then stared back at the aristocrat, who was nearly as tall as her.

“My affairs of the heart are my sole concern, monsieur. As for men who need to be in groups of up to twenty to attack one woman, I would hardly call them soldiers, especially when they are disguised as simple thugs. Since I do not wish to put anyone here at risk, I will leave, with the Queen’s permission.”

“The only place you are going is to the Bastille, young girl.” Replied the prince while drawing his sword. The four soldiers waiting by the door started walking then towards Nancy. Jumping at once on her chair, then on the table, Nancy drew her own sword at the same time as she ran across the table. Parrying with her sword Condé’s blade as she jumped from the table, she then delivered a flying knee strike to Condé’s jaw, projecting him backward. The aristocrat fell heavily on his back and stayed down, knocked for the count, as Nancy landed with the smoothness of a cat on the wooden floor behind him, then ran towards the nearest window giving on the street one floor below.

Frozen for a moment like the others in the room by Nancy’s display of skills, the four soldiers finally reacted and ran as one to her. Nancy however had time to open one

window and jump down before they got to her. Everybody, including King Louis, then rushed to the windows to see how hard Nancy had landed, only to watch her as she sprinted away with her sword still in her right hand. While the Duchess of Longueville was nearly choked with rage at that sight, the young King Louis grinned with glee.

“What an incredible girl! She is like a real Amazon.”

“She is a spy, and nothing else!” Replied harshly the duchess before giving a black look at the soldiers. “Well, what are you waiting for? Get some horses and run after her!”

The soldiers left at once at a run, as much to flee her anger as to carry out her order. The Duchess of Longueville then went to her brother and knelt besides him to examine him. Seeing that her brother was going to be out for quite a while, she ordered four valets to pick up and carry him, leaving the dining room with them after a hateful look at Queen Anne. The Queen was then left with her son and the other gentlemen and ladies of her court to exchange befuddled looks.

“Did you see that jump of hers?” Wondered Anne Marie Louise D’Orléans, admiration in her voice. “Who could train that girl to do things like that?”

“Circus acrobats probably, Duchess.” Replied at once a courtier. “The Duchess of Longueville was probably right about her being a spy: no normal person could do this but a highly trained professional.”

“She’s not a normal person!” Shot back the fat baroness who had irritated Nancy. “She’s a savage from New France!”

That prompted an immediate and angry rebuke from young Louis.

“SHE’S NOT A SAVAGE, MADAME! SHE’S A LADY OF THE FINEST KIND AND YOU ARE NOTHING COMPARED TO HER.”

Louis then stormed out of the dining room, still upset. Excusing herself with her courtiers, Queen Anne went after her son, finding him sulking in his bedroom. Sitting besides him on the edge of the bed, Anne of Austria put a protective arm around her son.

“You do like Lady Sommers a lot, do you, Louis?”

“Yes, Mother. She is brave, strong and intelligent.”

“And beautiful...”

Louis nodded at those two words.

“And beautiful, Mother.” Conceded Louis. “She also told me that she loved a man that she couldn’t marry.”

“Did she say why she couldn’t marry that man?” Asked Queen Anne, confused a bit by this. Louis then looked up into her eyes.

“She said that it was an impossible love but that both loved each other very much. I am not sure that I understood her.”

“I think I do, Louis.” Said Anne softly. “You have to credit her as well for being realistic. She probably loves a nobleman and, not being a true noble herself, knows that any marriage is impractical.”

“Then I will make her a noblewoman.” Replied at once Louis. “I will be entering my fourteenth year and will be considered an adult in less than a month. Then I will be able to give orders and make things happen.”

“While we are here as virtual prisoners, with no royal soldiers around us?”

“Then, we will leave Paris and join up with our soldiers.” Shot back Louis, sounding confident. The Queen sighed then, knowing that this was not going to be as easy as it sounded.

### **13:51 (Paris Time)**

**Tuesday, September 5, 1651**

**Grand ballroom, Palais-Royal**

**Paris**

Despite being surrounded by hundreds of nobles and important bourgeois present to celebrate his thirteenth birthday and official majority, young Louis was secretly fuming under his grave and dignified attitude: alone in all of the high nobility with the exception of his sister, the Duchess of Longueville, the Prince of Condé had chosen to deliberately snub him by not attending this ceremony. Louis promised himself to make that arrogant prince pay for this one day: he was now after all the official ruler of France, even though he had just publicly declared that his mother the Queen would continue to administer the country in his name for a while yet, to the obvious frustration of many of the high nobles present. Louis chased his ideas of revenge for a moment as yet another group of high nobles came to congratulate him and bring him gifts. A long table set to the side of his throne was already nearly full of such gifts, which varied from jewels to weapons and artworks. More tables along the walls of the vast ballroom supported a rich and abundant buffet and four big barrels of wine attended by valets helped quench

the thirst of the guests. Musicians were also in attendance, playing soft music and dance tunes.

After accepting the congratulations and gifts from a dozen more persons, Louis rose from his throne and called for a dance. He was not surprised one bit to see the Duchess of Montpensier nearly run to him to get the first dance with him: her advances towards him had been many and less than subtle for many months. Louis however knew well her role in the Fronde and, while keeping polite with her, was less than thrilled by her presence. He however showed magnanimity, as befitted a sovereign, and accepted to dance with her. Dancing was one thing that Louis both excelled in and liked and he managed to make Anne Marie Louise D'Orléans enjoy her dance with him. Bowing to her as she curtsied to him at the end of the dance, Louis turned around to choose another partner for the next dance. He froze at once with both surprise and joy: Nancy Sommers stood less than four paces away, dressed in a rich court gown and wearing a set of jewels worthy of a countess. She wore makeup and a tiara studded with gems framed her long black hair. She curtsied to Louis, whose heart now beat furiously.

"May I have this next dance, Your Majesty?"

"It would be a pleasure, Lady Sommers." Replied Louis while offering his right hand. Nancy took it and, watched by a stunned Duchess of Montpensier, started dancing a chaste waltz with the King. Louis still felt desire grow in him as he danced, his eyes targetting her fabulous chest, which was further enhanced by the corsage and deep cleavage of Nancy's gown. He spoke to her in a low voice as they waltzed together, watched by a growing number of shocked nobles realizing who Nancy was.

"How did you manage to get in, milady?"

Nancy smiled to him, malice in her eyes.

"Very few places are safe from my intrusion skills, Your Majesty. However, I am here only to wish you a happy birthday."

"And your presence indeed makes me happy, milady. I was scared for you since your latest escape from this palace."

"Thank you for your concern, Your Majesty: you attention flatters me."

"But you deserve it, milady. I wish that I knew more people as talented as you. In fact, I have been wishing for weeks to reward you for the services you provided for my mother the Queen."

“That won’t be necessary, Your Majesty.” Replied Nancy, her smile fading somewhat: she didn’t want her role or presence in this time period to become too conspicuous, as she was after all here solely on her personal time and could not anyway allow herself to become historically famous. She was already stretching pretty thin the limits she was allowed to play within. Louis was not ready to give up so easily, though.

“Yes it is, milady. Besides, I had already promised to provide you with a royal certificate of good character. It is already made, signed and sealed by me and I wish to give it to you today.”

“That I will accept with pleasure and gratitude, Your Majesty.”

“Then, see me at the buffet table after this first round of dance is over, milady.”

“I will be there, Your Majesty. Be advised that I have a letter for the Queen on me.”

“You are indeed a precious friend of the royalty, milady. I wish that I could keep you in my service.”

“That is unfortunately impossible, Your Majesty: while I can assure you that I will never be an enemy of France, my loyalty is already taken.”

“And whose loyalty could that be, milady? That of King Charles II of England?”

Nancy hesitated a bit, then spoke quickly as they got closer to each other.

“I will discuss that with you once in private, Your Majesty.”

They finished the dance, then parted, with Nancy quickly disappearing in the crowd of guests. Louis took two more dances with eager ladies before calling a pause to the dancing. Going to the buffet tables, Louis served himself a generous plate and loitered around while looking for Nancy. He nearly spilled his plate when her voice came from behind, surprising him and making him turn abruptly to face her.

“I’m here, Your Majesty.”

“By God, you do have a talent to sneak around, milady.”

“Call it a professional quirk, Your Majesty.” She said with a grin, a plate of food in her hands. “Where shall we go to speak in private?”

“To my apartments. Follow me from a distance.”

Louis, munching on his food, made slowly his way out of the ballroom, leaving behind his plate before using a discreet door connecting the ballroom to the royal apartments. On his way out he whispered a quick message to his mother, who nodded and followed him a minute later. Louis, the Queen and Nancy soon found themselves alone in the private



study of Anne of Austria. The latter graciously took the letter from Cardinal Mazarin that had been relayed through the good services of d'Artagnan, then went to her work desk and opened the letter to read it. While she read the letter, Nancy spoke in a low voice to Louis, who was anxious to know more about her.

"Your Majesty, as I said earlier, I swear that I will never be an enemy of France. While I am half-English, I am also half-French and was born in New France. I support the cause of King Charles of England but I also support your cause and that of your mother. As well I have my own personal goals, which are to fight tyranny and injustice. I cannot offer you directly my services at this time, but I am more than ready to help you and the Queen whenever our interests merge."

"Milady, I truly appreciate your honesty and plain language, especially after all the hypocrisy and disloyalty the princes of France have shown to me and my mother in the last years. I have no qualms in your support of King Charles of England, on the contrary. I believe Oliver Cromwell to be a vile man, apart from being a regicide. If I can help you in your fight against him I will do it. However, I must first put my own house in order, as you must imagine."

"A sensible line of thinking, Your Majesty. Concerning King Charles, I have some bad news: the royalist army has just been defeated at Worcester and King Charles is now in hiding. He plans to soon find refuge in France, where his family is already living in exile as you know."

Queen Anne's head snapped up at hearing those words, worry showing up at once on her face.

"King Charles' army was beaten? Is King Charles safe?"

"He is, Your majesty. He was able to flee the battlefield under disguise and is hiding in Southern England. He will pass in France once he finds a safe place to take a boat. The best way to help him now is to be ready to shelter him with his family."

"We will certainly do that, Lady Sommers."

"And I thank you for that, Your Majesty."

"Talking of thanks..." Said the Queen while fishing a small key from inside her dress. She then unlocked a drawer of her work desk and took out two documents, each encased in protective leather folios. Opening them and checking them, she then passed one of them to Louis, who presented it with a somber expression to Nancy.

"I have only one word, milady. Here is the certificate I promised you. As you may see, I added to it, on the counsel of my mother."

Nancy started reading the document, complete with royal seal, with some anxiety, hoping that it wouldn't be so sweeping in scope as to attract undue historical attention on her. While indeed encompassing, it however proved to be worded in a way that insured discretion from all royal officers who would read it. Apart from declaring her to be a person who enjoyed the full confidence and esteem of the King, the declaration also ordered all royal officers and servants to provide her their full but discreet support on demand. In essence, Nancy now had what amounted to a blanket certificate of authority from the King himself, something one would expect to see in the hands of a top flight secret agent of the King. Farah Tolkonen, apart from being floored once she saw this document, would also be most pleased, as it would facilitate greatly any mission by Nancy in 17<sup>th</sup> Century France. She looked back at Louis with genuine gratitude.

“Your Majesty, I was not hoping for so much. Your confidence in me warms my heart.”

“You deserve that confidence, milady, and I am sure that you will never betray it.”

“You have my solemn word on that, Your Majesty.” Said Nancy while bowing deeply to Louis. She meant those words and knew that Farah Tolkonen would never force her to break them: if a conflict of interest arose, Farah would simply send another field agent in her place. Louis nodded, satisfied, then took the second document from his mother.

“Even if you may find that certificate plenty, milady, I do not believe it to be enough to reward properly your services. On the other hand, knowing your wild nature and your need for frequent travel, I decided not to grant you a land title, as you probably wouldn't be on it often enough to be able to administer it properly. My mother suggested to me instead a more flexible solution.”

Louis then read aloud from the second document.

“I, King Louis the Fourteenth of France, declare by this Letter Patent the said Nancy Laplante, also known as Nancy Sommers, daughter of Pierre Laplante and of Lady Suzan Sommers and born on the shores of the Saint-Lawrence River in New France on June 13<sup>th</sup> of the year 1635, to be the recipient of a title of pure honor and to be thus known from now on as Marquess Nancy de Saint-Laurent, by virtue of her courageous services to the crown of France. An annual pension of 9,000 Livres is to be disbursed from the royal treasury to the said Marquess de Saint-Laurent, in order to allow her to properly maintain her status and rank. Both the title and the pension are for life and are to end with her death. In case the Marquess de Saint-Laurent leaves behind

a legal heir, that said heir will be entitled to one year's worth of her pension at her death. Made and signed by me at the Palais-Royal in Paris on August 12<sup>th</sup> of the year 1651." Nancy didn't know what to say at first, stunned by the King's grant. Louis saw her shock and grinned to her while handing her the precious document and its leather folio.

"You can now present yourself at my court with your head high, Marquess: anyone who touches you indirectly touches me and will be pursued by the King's justice. You may also find yourself now worthy of marrying Monsieur d'Artagnan." Louis, like his mother, was a bit surprised to see tears come out of her eyes at those last words. She however preempted their questions, speaking in a soft voice.

"You honor me too much, Your Majesty. I suppose that you learned the name of my lover through your mother?"

"That is correct, Marquess. The friends of Monsieur d'Artagnan have not missed the romance between the two of you. You should be happy now, so why the crying?" Nancy searched for a chair, then sat slowly on it, trying to find words she could use while containing her tears.

"Your Majesty, while I am bearing the child of Monsieur D'Artagnan and loves him as much as he loves me, our respective duties and responsibilities would condemn us to live separately from each other for most of the time. As I said earlier, I still owe loyalty to England, as long as it isn't to the detriment of France. On his side, Monsieur d'Artagnan is a man of honor whose primary duties will always be to France and its King. I shall not endanger that loyalty by possibly tempting him to split it if relations ever sour between France and England."

Queen Anne, who had gotten up from her work desk and had approached her, patted her shoulder gently.

"Your honesty and sense of honor is a credit to you, Marquess. Too many people around this palace sorely lack both. Do you intend to continue to see Monsieur d'Artagnan?"

Nancy nodded once, then looked up at the Queen and King.

"I do, as long as he will still want me. I realize that he will have one day to get into a marriage of convenience but, even then, I will continue to love him and will raise his child to be proud of his name. I would however appreciate if my romance with Monsieur d'Artagnan be kept secret, Your Majesty."

"I will keep mum about this, my friend." Said softly Louis, making her nod her head in satisfaction. Nancy then carefully folded back her two precious documents in their leather folios and slid them inside her dress before getting up.

"If you wish to prepare a letter in response to the one I just brought to you, I will be most happy to wait until it is ready, Your Majesty."

"Then," said young Louis, "give me the pleasure to have a few more dances with you in the meantime, Marquess."

"With pleasure, Your Majesty." Said softly Nancy, a weak smile coming back to her face.

### **19:46 (Paris Time)**

#### **Inn of Le Lion Noir**

##### **Paris**

D'Artagnan, having nearly eaten away his fingernails during the last few hours while Nancy was gone to the Palais-Royal, ran to her when she entered the main hall of their inn.

"Are you alright, Nancy? You look a bit pale."

"Let's go to my room, Charles: we will be able to speak more at ease there." She replied in a low voice. D'Artagnan nodded to that, then told Isaac Bartet, who had been sitting and drinking wine with him, to wait for him. He next escorted Nancy upstairs to her room, closing and locking the door behind them. As Nancy sat on her bed, Charles pulled up a stool to near the bed and sat facing Nancy, holding hands with her.

"So, what happened at the palace?"

Nancy first pulled out of her dress the letter from the Queen and gave it to him.

"All went well at the Palais-Royal, Charles. Here is a letter the Queen made in response to the one I delivered to her on your behalf. The Queen would like you to bring it to the Cardinal."

"I will leave tomorrow for Germany. What else?"

Nancy then took out her certificate and her Letter Patent of nobility, handing both to Charles.

"The King fulfilled a promise he made me earlier and made a certificate of good character in my name, to help me in case I raise suspicions with officials because of my whip scars. He also ennobled me."

“WHAT?” Nearly shouted Charles, both stunned and overjoyed. Nancy smiled meekly at his reaction.

“Just read, then we will discuss a few things.”

Charles did so, then looked back at Nancy with a happy grin.

“But, this is great! You, a marquess? And that certificate is really a permanent royal safe-conduct: it will be of tremendous help to you, Nancy.”

Kneeling in front of her, he then held her hands to his heart and spoke resolutely.

“Nancy, nothing stands between us now. Marry me if you really love me.”

Having somehow expected his reaction and having agonized during her trip back to the inn about her possible answer, Nancy looked silently at him for a few seconds, trying to contain her tears. She however broke down under the emotional stress and started crying, answering Charles between sobs.

“I do love you, Charles...However, I still can't marry you. History stands between us.”

“History?” Said blankly D'Artagnan, confused by her answer. Nancy, taking hold of his hands, then committed herself, knowing full well the possible consequences of what she was going to say.

“Charles, I am not what I pretend to be. I do not come from England, or from New France. I come from the future.”

Before Charles could recoil away from her or push her back, she hugged him tightly and spoke softly a mere few centimeters from his face.

“Charles, I am a time traveler on a mission to explore the past and document in detail the history of this time period. I can't marry you because I can't stay permanently in this time. I however do truly love you, from the bottom of my heart. You once got angry at me for doubting the value of your word. I now am ready to rely on it. Promise me that you will keep to yourself what I tell you and show you and I will prove to you that I am from the future and not some sort of witch.”

Charles, overwhelmed, didn't know at first how to react. The intensity of her emotions and the plea in her eyes convinced him after a few seconds to let his passion and love for her rule over his common sense.

“Alright, I promise, Nancy, but please be convincing.”

“Thank you, Charles.”

Retrieving first her two documents and slipping them back in her dress, she then got up, inviting Charles to get up as well. Next, she hugged him tightly and spoke softly.

“Charles, what you will see may appear like magic, but it will actually be the result of a very advanced science far removed from all that you could know. I am now going to transport you with me through time, to the Paris of the year 1954.”

Mentally setting her spacetime jump, she pressed tightly Charles against her before ordering the computer controlling her implanted time distorter to jump. Both then disappeared from her room in a silent flash of light.

**13:00 (Paris Time)**

**Friday, March 5, 1954 ‘B’**

**Time Patrol liaison outpost**

**Le Bourget Airport, Paris**

**France**

They reappeared a few centimeters above one of the transit pads of the Paris liaison office of the Time Patrol, one of the precise locations which were kept in the memory of Nancy’s implanted time distorter. The anti-gravity field of the transit pad then allowed her and Charles to land smoothly on the metallic surface while still glued together. Nancy immediately spoke firmly to her lover, who was starting to look around him with wild eyes and seemed close to panicking.

“Whatever happens, please don’t draw your weapons, Charles. You are in no danger here... Charles?... CHARLES!”

D’Artagnan finally seemed to calm down a bit, his panic making place to utter confusion. Nancy next spoke up loudly to apparently nobody in particular.

“AGENT NANCY LAPLANTE ‘B’, BRINGING A SAFE VISITOR. CONSIDER AS LEVEL THREE PROTOCOL.”

Taking gently Charles hand, Nancy led him off the pad and towards a door of the scooter hall they were in. She could sense his bewilderment, him being a man from a time period when there were still active witch hunts, so she spoke softly to him as she led him.

“We are now in the arrival hall of the Paris liaison outpost of my organization, which is called the Time Patrol. The goal of the Time Patrol is to protect the integrity of history and to study it. That is why I can’t marry you, Charles: because you are not supposed to marry me according to preordained history. Just by bringing you here and telling you about this I am risking my career, so please be indulgent and bear with me.”

They were about to get to the metallic door when it silently slid open, letting through Ingrid Weiss 'B', the present duty field liaison agent in Paris. Ingrid, who was at a near run, braked hard and stopped six paces in front of the couple before speaking in French to Nancy.

"Nancy, are you crazy? You can't bring d'Artagnan here or tell him about time travel. Farah will have your badge for this."

"It may very well be the case, Ingrid, but I am ready to suffer the consequences of my acts. I need to speak with Farah."

"I bet you do!" Said Ingrid while eyeing cautiously d'Artagnan, who had his sword, dagger and two pistols at his belt. "Would you mind telling your friend to temporarily hand over his weapons to me? You know that he could react badly to a few of the things he will see here."

"And why should I react badly, milady?" Replied Charles, his suspicions coming back to him. "Do you have evil things to hide?"

"None of such things, Monsieur." Answered Ingrid calmly, raising her hands away from her pistol belt to show that she didn't mean to threaten him. "It is just that much of what is here will appear magical to you. I just want to make sure that nobody gets hurt by accident."

"Ingrid is a very good friend of mine, Charles." Said Nancy. "You can hand her your weapons: she will safeguard them for you."

After a short hesitation, Charles unbuckled his weapons belt and handed it to Ingrid, who smiled to him.

"Thank you, Monsieur. I have to say that you are as handsome as Nancy kept telling us."

"Really?" Said Charles, both amused and flattered. Ingrid nodded.

"Really. If you will now follow me to my office, we will go call my superior."

"Her name is Farah Tolkonen." Explained Nancy to Charles as they followed behind Ingrid and walked along a long hallway. "She is a woman from the far future who co-created the Time Patrol with my big sister."

"Your big sister? Will I get to meet her?"

"Unfortunately she is dead, Charles. She was killed in the year 2019, during a war. By the way, she was also called Nancy Laplante and was a virtual twin of me. Don't be afraid when you see Farah: she is bald and is truly a giant, like all the people from the far future. She also has six fingers per hand but don't think of her as some kind

of monster. She is in fact about the most decent and kind woman I ever met. Oh, hello, Greg!”

D’Artagnan stopped on the spot on seeing the giant of a bald man who had just stepped into the hallway from one of the side doors: the man stood well above 220 centimeters and wore the same kind of gray, body-fitting garment worn by Ingrid Weiss. The giant in turn smiled to Nancy before looking at d’Artagnan with curiosity.

“Hello, Nancy. Who is your friend?”

“Charles Ogier de Batz de Castelmore, better known as d’Artagnan. Charles, this is Greg Thorgal, one of our support specialists. He is from the 34<sup>th</sup> Century.”

As Charles kept staring at the giant, the latter gave a cautious look at Nancy.

“Isn’t he forbidden from learning about time travel, Nancy?”

Nancy sighed before answering.

“He is Greg. I am about to discuss this with Farah.”

“Then, good luck to you, Nancy.” Answered Greg after a pause. He then walked past them, letting Nancy pull Charles by the hand.

“Come on, Charles. Let’s follow Ingrid.”

“This business of not telling about time travel, it does look like serious business.” Said Charles, apprehensive, while resuming his walking. “What could they do to you for telling me?”

“I could have my abilities to travel through time taken away and be kicked out of the Time Patrol. By rule, they would be amply justified to do this, Charles.”

“But, wouldn’t that mean that you couldn’t see me again then?”

Charles saw a tear roll on her cheek as she answered him.

“Yes, it does. I however couldn’t keep lying to you. Whatever happens, I will at least have your baby left to me.”

Charles was deeply shaken by this proof of love from her. Stopping her, he then exchanged a long kiss with her. Ingrid saw that and stopped too to watch them. Nancy had broken the rules of the Time Patrol, big time, but Ingrid could understand why she had done it. Still, this could very well represent the end of the career of one girl with incredible potential and talent. Ingrid waited patiently for them to part, then continued walking to her office, situated on the second floor of the outpost. She offered Nancy and Charles seats, then sat behind her desk and activated her computer. Charles was too stunned by the view of Le Bourget Airport given by the office’s windows to even ask what Ingrid was doing. Nancy put a hand on Charles’ shoulder to reassure him.



“Relax, Charles. What you see now is simply normal life in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. All those people are still that, normal people.”

Charles didn't reply, staring instead with wide eyes at a passenger jet aircraft in the process of landing on the main runway. Next was a scoutship of the Time Patrol landing silently and vertically on its landing pad next to the office, as different from the jetliner that had landed before as the jetliner was from a sailing ship of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

After a minute of typing on her computer, Ingrid sat back in her chair and looked critically at her two visitors.

“I sent a quick report to Farah via the time wave transmitter. I nearly can hear her scream back from main base when she gets that report. We can probably expect her here very soon.”

“Make it right now!” Said in French a female voice from behind Nancy and Charles, making them look back at a giant woman now entering the office. Svelte and beautiful, she also had alert, inquisitive eyes, which Charles noticed to be yellow. Farah, dressed in a simple, flowing long robe, shook hands with Charles first.

“I am pleased to meet you in person at last, Monsieur d'Artagnan. Nancy told me a lot of nice things about you. I am Farah Tolkonen, Chief Administrator of the Time Patrol.”

“How much in trouble is Nancy because of me, madame?” Asked at once Charles, now worried sick for Nancy. Farah took the time to look at Nancy, whose eyes were still red from crying, then sighed quietly before looking back at Charles.

“To be frank, Monsieur D'Artagnan, Nancy committed what is possibly the biggest cardinal sin in the Time Patrol book: to reveal the existence of time travel to a pre-1940 person. Normally, this would mean her summary dismissal from the Time Patrol after having her special equipment removed. For you, that would mean losing her for good.”

“Please!” Said at once Charles, shooting out of his chair with grief on his face. “I pushed her repeatedly to marry me, especially after learning that King Louis had ennobled her. This is all my fault.”

Nancy covered her face with one hand as Farah looked with shock at her.

“The King ennobled you? Was that done publicly?”

“No, Farah. King Louis gave me a letter patent plus a royal safe-conduct in the royal apartments in the Palais-Royal. That ennoblement thing came as a total surprise

to me. It happened during the ceremonies to celebrate Louis' coming of age. It seems that running a few letters between the Queen and d'Artagnan was enough to entice him into wanting to reward my services. I am now the Marquess de Saint-Laurent, with a yearly pension of 9,000 Livres for life."

Farah couldn't help throwing her hands up in exasperation then.

"Hell, Nancy, why did you have to tell Monsieur D'Artagnan about time travel? I allowed you to go see periodically Monsieur d'Artagnan, which was already stretching things. You were about the most promising new agent we have and you had to blow everything away like this?"

"Farah," said Nancy in a weak voice, "I did it because I know that Charles' word can be trusted and because I love him too much to keep lying to him and give him false hopes. I know that I broke all the regulations on this and am ready to pay the price for it."

Nancy's confession, instead of making Farah's task easier, only made it that much harder. She was not one of those bureaucratic types who could put aside the human factors in a problem and coldly recite regulations. If anything, this case was all about human factors. D'Artagnan, for starters, had stricken her at once as a charismatic and decent man quite removed from the image of the hot-headed duelist one could have of him just from his historical reputation. On the other hand, introducing agents into a time period and expecting them to feel nothing for the persons around them was totally unrealistic, especially since a minimum of interplay was demanded in order to elicit the historical information that their mission was after. Going to a vacant chair made for humans of the 34<sup>th</sup> Century, she sat down and eyed silently Nancy and Charles for a moment, then spoke softly to her young field agent.

"Tell me how it all came to this, Nancy. Take your time to do it."

Nancy did so, speaking for a good twenty minutes, with Farah interrupting a few times to clear a point with her. At the end of it, Farah looked at Charles, who appeared quite distressed by Nancy's plight.

"Monsieur d'Artagnan, are such ennoblements a common occurrence in your time?"

"They are quite common, madame. The buying of letters of nobility is even more common."

"And how is Nancy regarded by the people at the King's court?"

Charles hesitated for a moment, glancing at Nancy before answering.

“Some want her dead. Others find her fascinating because of her talents, while quite a few can only think about her body. Personally, I find her an extraordinary girl. I just couldn’t live without her.”

“Monsieur d’Artagnan, you should know that history has no place for Nancy at your side. I do not want to demean your love but, unfortunately, history can be pretty inflexible. Even if we throw her out of the Time Patrol she still wouldn’t be allowed to stay with you in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. You are unfortunately a man of quite high standing in history, someone whose official history is fairly well known by many people today.”

“Then, she will end up losing everything while I will lose her for good, all because of me?” Said Charles, his voice breaking and with tears coming out. Nancy, also in tears, bent sideways to pass an arm around him. With a big lump in her throat, Farah got up and went to face the windows of the office, trying to regain her composure while appearing to look outside.

“Monsieur d’Artagnan, you should know as well that Nancy will lose you anyway, as she will probably outlive you by a wide margin. We in the Time Patrol actually enjoy a lifespan much longer than normal, thanks to advanced medical techniques. Nancy should be able to live well past 200 years.”

D’Artagnan’s reply actually surprised her.

“I would rather die first than have to watch her die, madame. If I have to stop seeing her forever, then at least give her a chance to go on and do what she is good at.” Farah bowed her head while still facing the windows, crushed by the weight of the decision she had to take. She finally turned around to face both Nancy and Charles, her expression grave.

“Monsieur d’Artagnan, your reputation for honor and loyalty is legendary in history. Can you give me your solemn word that you will never tell anyone in your time period about what you saw or heard here? Are you ready to see Nancy only at intervals, discreetly?”

Charles got up from his chair at once and stared back firmly at her.

“On my honor, I swear that no one will know about all this, madame, ever! As for seeing her at intervals, it is still much better than to lose her for good. I will do whatever is needed to avoid punishment to Nancy.”

“We are not barbarians, monsieur: we do not intend to flog her or something else of the sort. Rather, I will use to the fullest what she has just gained from King Louis XIV and make her our specialist agent for the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. In return, I expect her to learn

from this experience and to mature from it. Nancy, you can now bring back Monsieur d'Artagnan to his time."

Nancy and Charles stood motionless for a second, not able to believe their ears, then threw themselves into each others arms while shouting their joy. They were still hugging each other when Natai appeared out of thin air in the office, dressed in her customary white robe. All eyes went to her at once, with Charles noting her eerie resemblance with Nancy. Before anyone else could speak, Natai spoke telepathically, her voice echoing inside their heads.

"Love is indeed the greatest thing in Humanity. You decided well in this case, Farah."

"Thank you, Natai. It was however no easy decision."

"Which only brings more credit to you."

Natai then changed her aspect, turning from the shape of Nancy 'A' to that of a luminescent humanoid being of no defined sex that floated silently to Charles, who quickly knelt before her, in a near trance at the sight of the supernatural being.

"You are a good spirit, Charles Ogier de Batz de Castelmore. Be assured that The One will look kindly on you at your death."

Natai then faded away, making d'Artagnan look with confusion and awe at Nancy.

"Was that your big sister? What is she?"

"What you saw is an angel, Charles, and the soul of my late twin sister is in her."

"And who is this One she spoke about?"

"You would probably call The One 'God'. She serves him on this Earth."

Charles quickly signed himself at those words, nearly overwhelmed by that revelation. Farah, also quite shaken by the whole episode, looked down at Nancy and Charles and spoke softly to them.

"You now have the blessing of no less than The One, on top of mine. You may now return to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. On my part, I will return to our main base to pass the news of this."

As Farah hurried out of her office, Ingrid grabbed d'Artagnan's weapons belt and brought it to Charles.

"Don't forget your weapons, monsieur. Do you guys need a lift back to the year 1651?"

"No, I will manage by myself. Thanks anyway." Replied Nancy, who then hugged again Charles and disappeared with him in a flash of light.

Their return into Nancy's room at the inn was much less smooth than their arrival at Le Bourget, with the two of them falling a few centimeters down to the floor with a loud thud. Nancy caught Charles before he could lose his balance, then hugged him for a long kiss. After a good ten seconds, she looked fondly into Charles' eyes.

"Will you forgive me for lying to you like this for all those weeks, Charles?"

"You have nothing to be forgiven for, Nancy. You only followed your mission directives, as I did follow the directives of the Cardinal during my missions. Just promise me to stay for another month before leaving on your next trip."

"I promise, Charles. I will then come back to show you our baby."

Charles then hugged Nancy tenderly, as happy as he ever had been.

## **CHAPTER 9 – LADY JEANNE D'ORLÉANS**

**20:14 (New Zealand Time)**

**Tuesday, October 5, 2986 B.C.E. (Before the Common Era)**

**Family quarters, Time Patrol main base**

**Future site of the city of Auckland**

**New Zealand**

Nancy Laplante 'B' was still wearing her 17<sup>th</sup> Century outfit when she showed up at the door of her parents' suite, anxious to see again her baby son. Her mother Susan answered the buzzer and greeted her with opened arms as soon as she opened the door, hugging her joyfully.

"Nancy! You didn't suffer other misadventures, I hope?"

"Don't worry about me, Mom: I am well. How is Charles?"

"He is presently sleeping in his crib. How much time have you just spent in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century during the last three days we had here since your departure?"

"About three months." Recognized Nancy with a bit of an embarrassed smile. "I am going to spend three weeks here, to train and update myself and take care of Charles, then I will go back to the Guadeloupe in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Is Dad here?"

"Sure! We were watching a movie together. Come in!"

Entering the suite behind her mother, Nancy went first to share a hug with her father, Pierre Laplante, a big, solid man with black hair tinged with a bit of gray. She next went to the bedroom she used when living at the base, tiptoeing to the crib installed in one corner of the room to go contemplate in silence her sleeping son. Charles was now two and a half month-old and growing quickly. It would soon be time for him to be presented to D'Artagnan, before he grew too much: Nancy had to be careful in coordinating her timings between the three separate centuries she was now spending regular time into, so that she kept a plausible continuity in her three lives. Presenting a two year-old boy to D'Artagnan after only one and a half apparent years in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century after her date of conception would be enough to attract many embarrassing questions and doubts.

Resisting with difficulty the urge to pick up her baby and cuddle him, something that would wake him up, Nancy admired her son for long seconds, listening to his calm, regular breathing, then regretfully left the bedroom to go see her parents, who had resumed their movie-watching. Seeing that Nancy seemed to want to talk about something, Pierre Laplante grabbed the remote control and put the movie on 'pause', then looked up at his daughter.

"You want to talk about something, Nancy?"

Nancy nodded once, hesitating a bit before answering him.

"Yes, Dad! It is about my mission in the Guadeloupe."

Pierre frowned before showing her the easy chair placed at an angle with the sofa he and Susan sat in: he, like Susan, had not appreciated the fact that their daughter had to marry a man more than twice her age in order to fill her mission's goals in the Guadeloupe. He had however accepted, albeit with reticence, the arguments presented by Farah Tolkonen and Mike Crawford that made such a marriage necessary in order to preserve history. The fact that Pierre Alphonse d'Orléans had turned out to be an exceptional, kind and honorable man had helped them swallow that arranged marriage, but Pierre and Susan still had misgivings about that. After all, their daughter was still only fifteen biologically, even if she had 9,000 years worth of souvenirs from past incarnations. Yet, she was now married to a 36 year-old French aristocrat of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and was also the mother of an illegitimate baby son from a 39 year-old French musketeer of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, on top of being the occasional mistress of King Louis XIV. In a less tolerant, more conservative society than the one of the Global Council of the 34<sup>th</sup> Century, such a situation would have attracted a torrent of nasty comments and disapproval. Back in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Pierre and Susan had grown in, screams of 'abuse of a minor' would most probably have risen about Nancy's situation. Pierre and Susan prided themselves in being open-minded, tolerant people, but the way their daughter's career as a field agent of the Time Patrol was turning was not much to their liking. Nancy, knowing their feelings about that, spoke softly to them once sitting down.

"Dad, Mom, the truth is that I really am in love with Pierre d'Orléans. He is easily one of the better men I ever met...through all of my incarnations. He in turn loves me passionately and is making me most happy. However, his most ardent wish is to be able to have a child from me."

Pierre and Susan stiffened at those words, with Susan looking straight into her daughter's eyes.

"I hope that you are still using your contraceptive spray, Nancy."

"I do! Don't worry: I am not pregnant. I am however at a point where it breaks my heart to be unable to give to Pierre d'Orléans what he has a legitimate right to ask for."

"But," objected Pierre, "the Time Patrol said that Pierre d'Orléans did not have any heir from Jeanne de Brissac, according to recorded history, and that she would as a consequence inherit his title and possessions. To discontinue using your contraceptive spray could change history, Nancy."

That attracted a frustrated sigh from his daughter.

"You know, Dad, I am in truth getting tired of being used like a puppet in order to uphold history and of having to live according to a scenario that is decided in advance for the decades to come. Have any other field agents been obliged to date or marry persons of the past, to be then stuck in a life already planned in detail for them? I did not become a field agent only to be turned into a robot! Yes, I accepted to seduce and then marry a man from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in order to create a cover for a person who will have a long term impact beneficial to the Time Patrol. The problem is that I now genuinely love that man and want to give him what will make him truly happy, and this before he dies soon. Is that too much to ask?"

"No!" Replied Pierre, lowering his head. "I suppose that any child from that man could be accommodated somehow into history with the help of a few manipulations, in order not to put at risk the future social foundation that you are supposed to create in 1848. If you truly love Pierre d'Orléans, then you have my benediction to have a child from him."

"Thank you, Dad!" Said Nancy, feeling much better. "And you, Mom?"

"You also have my blessing, Nancy. We however still have to convince Mike Crawford and Farah Tolkonen to accept this. It may not be easy to do so."

Susan proved to be right about that last point, their meeting the next morning with Farah and Mike going on for more than one hour and becoming quite intense at times. Nancy's vehemence, along with the flagrantly unjust prearranged life being forced on her, finally convinced Farah and Mike to review in depth their action plan for Nancy's mission in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. When the latter left three weeks later to return to the Guadeloupe of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, she was feeling much more comfortable with her mission.



**22:45 (Guadeloupe Time)**

**Sunday, December 20, 1846**

**The 'Sweet Dreams' plantation**

**Southeast tip of the island of Grande-Terre**

**The Guadeloupe**

Feeling the preoccupation in Pierre as they were about to go to sleep after making love together, Nancy tenderly caressed his cheek in the darkness of their bedroom.

"Something is wrong, Pierre?"

Pierre hesitated for a long moment before answering.

"I don't know, Jeanne. You still have no sign that you could be pregnant?"

It was Nancy's turn to be silent for a moment. Her anticipated joy at being allowed to give him a child had gradually turned to confusion, then to uncertainty when more than five months of marriage laced with near daily bouts of sex gave no apparent results. Riddled with worry and remorse, Nancy had used her last training period at the main base of the Time Patrol to pass a complete medical examination. That examination had shown that she was still fertile and fully able to have children. She then had discreetly collected sperm samples from Pierre to have them analyzed. She had cried when the results of those analysis had shown that Pierre d'Orléans was sterile at the age of 36. His spermatozoid count was too low, possibly the result of a past disease he had suffered from while in New Orleans.

"No, nothing! Pierre, did you ever make love to one of your black ex-slaves? Don't be afraid to answer me truthfully: it won't bother me."

"Why would you want to know that, Jeanne?" Asked Pierre, surprised.

"Well, if you ever made a baby with a slave girl, this could help point where our problem lay in getting a child, Pierre."

Pierre looked at her tenderly, moved by her comprehension. That question in fact had just awakened a painful doubt in his mind.

"Yes, I did bed a few of my slave girls in the last years. None of them became pregnant from me, as far as I know, and they knew that I would have recognized any child I would have conceived with them."

“And the girls of the Brissac family always proved to be fertile.” Added Nancy, a lump in her throat. “Pierre, I am afraid that we won’t be able to have a child together.” That brought tears to Pierre’s eyes, who then hugged Nancy tight in his arms.

“If that’s the case, then it is probably not because of you, Jeanne. God knows that you honored my bed with assiduity and enthusiasm.”

“What will we do then, Pierre?”

“The only thing we can do now, apart from continuing to try: pray God.”

Pierre concluded that declaration with a tender kiss on Nancy’s lips, who kissed him back with profound love.

### **15:11 (Guadeloupe Time)**

**Wednesday, February 10, 1847**

**The ‘Sweet Dreams’ plantation, the Guadeloupe**

Doctor Lebaron had a downcast expression on his face when he came out of the bedroom where he had just examined Pierre d’Orléans. He found the young and beautiful wife of Pierre in the living room, where Father Marchand was doing his best to reassure her. The couple was well known in Saint-François for their deep, mutual love, on top of their generosity and their kindness towards their black employees. Jeanne d’Orléans got up from her chair the moment Lebaron appeared in the living room, speaking to him in an anxious tone.

“What is your diagnostic, Doctor? Pierre will recover, right?”

“Lady Jeanne, I am afraid that the news are bad. Your husband has contracted a type of tropical fever that cannot be treated and is too often fatal. I unfortunately can’t do anything to cure him. I am sorry.”

Jeanne’s eyes filled at once with tears and she had to sit back down, her shoulders raked by sobs.

“My god, no!”

“Be strong, my child.” Said softly Father Marchand while holding her hands.

“God will watch over his soul.”

Lebaron stayed silent for a moment, leaving a moment for Jeanne to go over her grief before speaking again.

“Lady Jeanne, your husband realizes that he doesn’t have long to live and asked for a notary, in order to update his will.”

"I...I can send our foreman to Saint-François, to go get Mister Tellier there. Could I see Pierre in the meantime?"

"Yes, but don't make him talk too much: he is burning with fever and is weak."

"I understand. I will advise our foreman right away, so that he can leave for town, then I will go watch over Pierre. You are of course welcome to stay here as long as needed, Doctor."

Jeanne then got up slowly and left the house for a few minutes, returning to the lounge afterwards.

"Fernand is now on his way to go get Monsieur Tellier with our cart. I will now go see Pierre. If you need anything in the meantime, just ask our maid, Marthe."

Lebaron watched the tall and athletic teenager go to Pierre's bedroom before looking at the priest sitting with him in the lounge.

"What a tragedy! This couple was the image of love and happiness."

"Indeed! I married Jeanne to Pierre d'Orléans and I must say that it was the best thing that happened to Sir Pierre. If all my flock could have a conjugal life like that of this couple, my parish would be a happy one indeed. I am afraid that the poor Jeanne could end up being broken by her oncoming loss."

The notary, George Tellier, arrived at the plantation two hours later, to then immediately go see Pierre in his room, his paper, pen and seals with him and with Father Marchand acting as a witness. The notary and the priest stayed in Pierre's bedroom for what felt like an eternity to Jeanne, who tried to forget her distress by going to prepare supper for her three visitors. Supper was a somber affair indeed, with Jeanne leaving the table early in order to go help her husband eat a soup in bed. Lebaron used that opportunity to ask a question in a low voice to Tellier as they kept eating.

"I suppose that Pierre d'Orléans is leaving everything to his wife?"

"Normally, this would be covered by professional confidentiality, but I must say that the last will of Sir Pierre is most simple, especially since he has no children, or business associates for his plantation. He also had no known debts and was in fact quite wealthy, despite living rather modestly in comparison to his revenues. The money that he kept in a locked chest in the strong room of the bank in Saint-François will go to his wife, along with the plantation. Does he really have no possibility of recovering, Doctor?"

"I strongly doubt so, Mister Tellier. I too often had to deal with this type of fever and it has proved to be nearly always fatal. Fortunately, it is not contagious and is transmitted only through the sting of a certain type of insect."

"So, Lady Jeanne will soon find herself alone in charge of this plantation. I wonder if she will want to stay or to sell the property. The plantation, with its sugar refinery and its rum distillery, is worth quite a sum, on top of being very profitable. Prospective buyers won't be lacking if Lady Jeanne ever decides to sell it."

Father Marchand then joined the conversation, speaking in a low, conspiratorial tone.

"There are rumors that Sir Pierre found a few months ago an old pirate treasure with the help of his young wife."

That made Lebaron raise an eyebrow.

"Oh? Where did you hear that rumor, Father?"

"Let's say that I have my sources in town." Replied the priest, smiling. "Pierre d'Orléans and his wife were once seen at the bank in Saint-François, depositing a collection of old, rusty chests. They then went the same day to sell to an antiquary an old rusted sword that Lady Jeanne had found in a submerged cave during one of her frequent swims. You must say that this is enough to make people speculate."

"There are also stories that say that Lady Jeanne swims nearly naked when she goes to fish on the coast." Insinuated Tellier with a knowing smile, making Father Marchand sign himself.

"Monsieur Tellier, to eye the wife of another man is a sin. You should go confess yourself."

"I am only repeating what many are already saying, Father. You must admit that this young girl has made people talk a lot since her arrival nearly a year ago, starting with the torture scars on her torso."

"She is certainly an uncommon girl." Recognized the priest. "She however has a heart of gold and is most generous, something that I can only approve."

The trio continued to exchange stories and news during the rest of the meal, until Jeanne returned to the lounge. After further comforting Jeanne, Father Marchand left for Saint-François with Tellier in the cart driven by the plantation's foreman. Doctor Lebaron, on his part, made another examination of Pierre d'Orléans before going to bed in the guests' bedroom, leaving Jeanne alone with her husband.

As Lebaron had expected, Pierre d'Orléans' condition deteriorated gradually, to the point of making Father Marchand return two days later to be ready to give him the last rites. Just before noon on Friday, February 12 of 1847, Pierre d'Orléans passed away in the arms of a Jeanne nearly mad with grief.

### **09:38 (Guadeloupe Time)**

**Tuesday, May 11, 1847**

**The 'Sweet Dreams' plantation**

**The Guadeloupe**

Alerted by one of her black workers, Nancy was standing on the porch of the residence when a small carriage stopped in front of her and let out a thin man dressed in a distinguished suit. The man, who held a leather briefcase in his left hand, saluted her with his top hat.

"Lady Jeanne d'Orléans? My name is Victor Schoelcher, deputy for the Guadeloupe at the National Assembly. I was told that your plantation is for sale."

"You were told right, Mister Schoelcher." Said Nancy while climbing down the steps of the porch to go greet her visitor. "I heard good things about your work at the National Assembly. You have already done a lot for the cause of the abolition of slavery in the colonies."

"And I am hoping soon to convince the National Assembly in Paris to pass an act abolishing for good this abomination, Lady Jeanne."

Nancy smiled to him, favorably impressed by the man, and showed him the main entrance of the residence.

"You would then make me quite happy, Mister Schoelcher. I was starting to despair of finding a good, honest man worthy of buying my plantation. But let's go inside, so you can refresh yourself."

"Thank you, Lady Jeanne."

Schoelcher followed Nancy inside, taking place in the sofa offered by her in the lounge. Nancy then served him a cup of fruity white wine before sitting beside him.

"So, you are interested in buying this plantation, Mister Schoelcher?"

"Along with its sugar refinery and its rum distillery, if they are also for sale."

"They effectively are, monsieur."

“Could I ask you first the reasons why you want to sell, Lady Jeanne? Your property seems to have resisted very well to last month’s earthquake, contrary to many other plantations.”

“Please, call me simply Jeanne, Mister Schoelcher. My reasons for selling are simple. With the death of my husband last February, I do not wish to live in the Guadeloupe anymore and want to go rebuild my life in Paris. I however want to find a buyer that will treat well my workers before leaving the Guadeloupe. As for the good state of my plantation, I owe it to the fact that I spent money to maintain it adequately, while too many of my neighbors look only for short term profits, exploiting their workers and using their installations to full capacity while skimping on maintenance.”

“I was able to see that by myself while visiting other plantations, Jeanne. Would it be possible to visit in detail your plantation before speaking business further?”

“But of course, Mister Schoelcher! Once you are finished with your cup, I will give you the grand tour. We will then start by the rum distillery.”

## **12:09 (Guadeloupe Time)**

### **The ‘Sweet Dreams’ plantation**

Victor Schoelcher used his handkerchief to wipe out the sweat from his forehead as he sat back with a sigh of relief in the lounge’s sofa. The Sun was blazing hard on the Guadeloupe today and he had just walked for over two hours. In contrast, Jeanne seemed to be still fresh and full of energy, while her suntanned skin only added to the impression of health radiating from her.

“I must say that you seem to be administering a model plantation, Jeanne. Your workers also seemed to be both happy and motivated. You certainly would be in your right to ask the maximum possible from your property.”

The teenager, who had deeply impressed Schoelcher with her maturity and with her technical knowledge during the tour of the plantation, smiled to him while sitting at the other end of the sofa.

“Mister Schoelcher, while I could be as hard about business than any man, I only want to get an honest price for my plantation. My husband let me a small fortune and luxury doesn’t attract me. In truth, once installed in Paris, I intend to create a charitable society, using the money I got from my husband to help the downtrodden and poor or abused children.”

"A most commendable goal, Jeanne. As a National Assembly deputy, I would certainly be happy to help you in that project. So, how much would you be asking for your property, including its stocks of rum and refined sugar?"

Nancy, who had studied with care the estate and commodities markets of the time, answered him at once.

"One hundred thousand francs<sup>16</sup> for the installations, the land and the stocks of rum and sugar. My workers are free men, so are not for sale. You will have to hire them on wages."

Schoelcher calculated furiously in his head the value of what he had seen. Jeanne's offer seemed more than fair to him. As for the funds needed to buy and operate the plantation, he had plenty of liquidities available to him right now.

"Your price is a very honest one, Jeanne. You have a deal. I will come back tomorrow with a notary, in order to conclude the deal and to organize the payment."

"Excellent! You will be staying for lunch, I hope?"

"With pleasure, Jeanne!"

Victor Schoelcher then spent an agreeable hour eating and conversing with Jeanne, discussing mostly about the operations of the plantation and the current market for rum and sugar. That conversation convinced the deputy that he was dealing with an extremely intelligent girl who was well educated and had an uncommon strength of character. Frankly impressed by Jeanne, Schoelcher left the plantation at the end of the afternoon, going back to Saint-François in his carriage with a promise to come back the next day.

Schoelcher effectively came back next morning, accompanied by notary Tellier and carrying a bank draft for 100,000 francs. Once the selling act was signed, Jeanne presented him to her foreman and to her black workers and their families, watching discreetly his reactions at the contact of the ex-slaves. Schoelcher however proved to be as tolerant and kind as his reputation said, to her relief. On their part, the black workers, being understandably nervous at losing such a good employer as Jeanne, relaxed noticeably once they met their new boss. The sad truth was that too many

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<sup>16</sup> The French franc of the time was worth about twenty American cents (1800s), while an English pound sterling was worth 25 francs. One French Napoleon gold coin was worth twenty francs.

French settlers in the Guadeloupe were abusive, even brutal, towards their black workers. The workers genuinely loved Jeanne, while she was sad to have to leave them. The plantation-wide party that she organized that night to raise the morale of her workers quickly turned into a tearful reunion. Later, before going to sleep that night, Nancy went to visit Pierre d'Orléans' grave in the small cemetery of the plantation. Her tears then were genuine and plentiful.

The day Nancy left the plantation, on Friday, May 28, was another occasion for tearful hugs and kisses between Nancy and her workers. She finally had to climb on the cart driven by her foreman, with Victor Schoelcher bidding her goodbye with Gérard Bussièrre, the man chosen by him to manage the plantation. Nancy's throat was tight as she waved at the crowd of ex-slaves one last time.

Once in the port of Saint-François, Nancy went to the local bank to retrieve there the two solid, locked chests that contained the savings accumulated by Pierre d'Orléans as well as the pirate treasure that had sparked so many rumors in the last months. The fortune in gold and gems of that treasure, which had a monetary value at the time of over four million francs, really came from a pirate wreck dating from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. However, that treasure had been retrieved from the bottom of the Caribbean Sea by the Time Patrol, to be relocated discreetly in a coastal grotto, where Jeanne had 'found' it and signaled it to Pierre. Such treasures recuperated from hundreds of old ship wrecks around the World were often used by the Time Patrol to fund the operations of its field agents in the past. In fact, more gold and jewels retrieved from the sea were already set aside to further fatten the startup funds to be used by Jeanne d'Orléans once in Paris to create her future d'Orléans Social Foundation, the ultimate goal of Nancy's mission.

The night of May 28, Jeanne d'Orléans officially climbed aboard the three-mast ship CAMARGUE with her luggage and her heavy chests. Early next morning, the CAMARGUE left its quay with the high tide and slowly went out of the small port of Saint-François, heading for the port of Le Havre and France.

**13:52 (Paris Time)**

**Thursday, July 1, 1847**

**Port of Le Havre, France**



Nancy, like the 46 other passengers of the CAMARGUE, was up on the weather deck of the ship, leaning against the siding and observing the port of Le Havre during the docking maneuvers. Dozens of other cargo ships, many with mixt sail and steam propulsion, were anchored in the port's basin or were docked, loading or unloading cargo and passengers. The quays were backed by a long façade of warehouses and five-storey brick or stone residential buildings, while a small railway station that had been recently built was situated at the limit of the port area. The port of Le Havre was itself situated in the estuary of the Seine River, which flowed down from Paris and further on.

A ramp was finally put in place between the quay and the deck of the CAMARGUE but, before any of the passengers could go down to firm ground, a group of French customs officers and policemen climbed aboard to inspect the passengers and the ship's cargo. Nancy waited patiently her turn to be inspected with her luggage, smiling politely to the custom officer that finally came to her to ask for her papers. The official stiffened and looked at her with new deference when he read her name in her passport.

"Lady Jeanne d'Orléans? You are from the royal family, miss?"

"My husband was a cousin of King Louis Philippe, monsieur. Unfortunately, he died recently from a fever in the Guadeloupe."

The custom officer then bowed low to her while giving her back her passport.

"My sincere condolences, Lady Jeanne. I am sorry to have importuned you like this. You may disembark with your luggage."

"Thank you, my good man."

Enlisting the help of four solid sailors to carry her luggage and chests down to the quay, Nancy waved at one of the carts and carriages waiting nearby for customers. Once her things were loaded up on the cart that came forward, Nancy gave a generous tip to the four sailors before climbing in the cart and sitting besides the driver, smiling to him.

"To the train station, please."

"Right away, miss." Replied politely the graying man before urging his horse forward. The trip to the railway station took less than ten minutes but it gave a chance to Nancy to get a good estimate of the traffic passing through Le Havre. It also gave her a chance to take some films through the micro-camera hidden in her hat as she watched the activity around her. She could not help smile on seeing the train that was waiting at

the station. Both the engine and its wagons were of primitive manufacture, the French railroad industry being still in its infancy. The engine could not have rated more than a few dozen horsepower and the passenger wagons were open to the winds and to the ample black smoke from the coal-fired engine. The cart stopped temporarily in front of the railway station's office to allow Nancy to go buy a ticket for Paris and to requisition the help of two of the station's baggage handlers. A bit more than an hour later, Nancy's train left the station in a thick cloud of black smoke and steam, its steel wheels screeching under the effort.

For a modern traveler, the 228 kilometer trip would have been slow and uncomfortable, with the passengers often having to breathe the black smoke from the engine while sitting on hard wooden benches. For Nancy, that was a precious opportunity to document a trip on the dawn of rail transport. She had however lived through much worse and endured with patience the trip, conversing with a distinguished English couple that had arrived from London and was going like her to Paris. Too happy to be able to pass time with someone who could speak English, the couple even invited Nancy to share the content of their picnic basket with them.

The train finally arrive in Paris as the night was falling. On a common accord, Nancy and the English couple rented the services of a carriage to go to a good hotel that had been recommended to the couple by a relative in England. Nancy sighed with relief when she was finally able to soak in a hot bath in her room of the Westminster Hotel, her precious chests secure in the strong room of the hotel.

**09:27 (Paris Time)**

**Monday, July 5, 1847**

**Hôtel de Brinvilliers, 12 Rue Charles-V**

**Le Marais district, Paris**

**France**

The man waiting in front of the carriage entrance of the large town house bowed politely to Nancy when she showed up, saluting her with his top hat. While the man wore a good quality suit, Nancy wore a fine gown and an expensive set of jewels.

"Lady Jeanne d'Orléans, I presume?"

“Correct, mister! I came here Saturday and told your keeper that I was interested in buying this town house. Would it be possible to visit the property, Mister...?”

“Jean Barrot, real estate agent with the Bank of France, which is the present owner of this residence.”

Nancy gave Barrot a surprised look then.

“This town house was repossessed by your bank, Mister Barrot?”

“Yes, Lady Jeanne. Unfortunately, the economy is not doing well these days and the last occupant of this residence went bankrupt a few months ago. The Bank of France then repossessed the building as partial payment of that occupant’s debts, but prospective buyers have been quite rare since then.”

Nancy nodded her head in comprehension. In fact, she knew in detail the history of this residence, called in French an ‘hôtel particulier’, and had already chosen it as her future residence in Paris. The last three days spent roaming Paris and visiting other residences on sale had only been to support her cover story.

“I see! Please show the way.”

Barrot knocked on the pedestrian door inserted in the right-hand door of the large carriage gate, making the keeper of the property open it after a few seconds. The keeper was a big, solid man with a knife in his belt and his main task was probably to prevent squatters from occupying the residence. After a few words with Barrot, the keeper stepped aside and let him and Nancy enter, closing back and locking the door behind them.

Walking twelve paces down the tunnel formed by the carriage entrance through the town house’s façade, Nancy emerged into a large paved inner courtyard bordered on both sides by wings of the residence. The right side wing had three large garage doors for carriages and horses at ground level, while the left side wing was lined by many windows and three entrance doors. The town house proper formed a ‘U’ surrounding the courtyard of three sides, with the back of the courtyard occupied by a garden and closed off by a high stone wall marking the limit of the property, which was sandwiched between other residences and buildings. The stone building had two floors, plus an attic level with dormer windows. The upper floor clearly had a higher than normal ceiling, judging from the height of the windows, and probably lodged the master bedrooms and the various reception rooms. It was also immediately apparent to Nancy

that the building and its courtyard had been neglected for decades now and would need some serious renovation work. Jean Barrot noticed her expression as she was detailing the state of the town house and gave her a reassuring smile.

“Don’t worry, Lady Jeanne: this residence is still very solid.”

“Maybe, but it will need at the least a serious cleanup, plus new coats of paint to the door and window frames. I hope that the roof doesn’t leak.”

“You will be able to judge by yourself, Lady Jeanne. This way, please.”

Entering the building with Barrot via a door of the façade section opening on the courtyard, Nancy found herself in a large vestibule occupied by a grand, curved marble staircase with forged iron railings leading to the upper floor. She also saw near the foot of the staircase a door that had to lead to the basement, judging by the angle of the passage visible past the open door. The main staircase would have been magnificent if not for the fact that it was covered with dust and dirt and with rust on the railing, while plaster was falling off the walls and ceiling. Nancy looked at all that with true sadness.

“What a waste! To neglect like this a building with so much history in it.”

“You know the history of the Hôtel de Brinvilliers, miss?”

“Of course, my dear Mister Barrot! Who doesn’t know the story of the infamous, sinister Marquess of Brinvilliers, to whom this residence belonged. She was executed in 1676 for having poisoned members of her family as well as many other nobles and big bourgeois. The building does date from the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century, no?”

“Correct! It was completed in 1630, when many big nobles started residing in the district of Le Marais. Let’s start the visit with the ground floor.”

Passing through a door located near the door to the basement, Barrot led Nancy into a large kitchen that was nearly empty, save for a large fireplace, an iron stove and a baking oven. Like the vestibule, the room was full of dust and spider webs and looked utterly abandoned. Barrot took a few steps while pointing features around him as he spoke.

“This is the kitchen. The fireplace, oven and stove, while old, are still functional. The rest of the west wing on this level contains a pantry, a laundry room, six guest rooms or suites and a bathroom.”

Nancy, guided by Barrot, took a good ten minutes to visit and inspect carefully the ground floor of the west wing. While dirty and dusty, the wing seem to be structurally

sound, except for the decaying wall plaster. The rooms were however utterly empty of furniture, it having probably been sold to help pay back part of the debt owed by the previous owner. Then going back out in the courtyard, they crossed the fifteen meter-wide paved expanse, which widened to twenty meters in its back half, and entered the eastern wing. Nancy found in the stables a collection of hay balls, some old buckets and a pile of horse blankets. The two adjacent garage stalls, meant for carriages, were however empty. Using the communicating doors of the stalls, Barrot led her next to the south-east section of the façade facing the Charles-V street. She saw there three rooms of various sizes, one of them measuring a good eight by six meters and containing a large fireplace and an iron stove. Like the other rooms she had already visited, the place was utterly devoid of furniture. Barrot made a gesture with both hands while describing the larger room.

“This is where the maids and servants took their breaks and ate their meals. The adjacent room giving on the street was the watchman’s room, while there is a bathroom for the domestic staff at the back. If you don’t have questions about the ground floor, we could now go visit the upper floor.”

“Go ahead, Mister Barrot.” Replied Nancy after a quick look around the three rooms in this section. They then went out by a door of the watchman’s room that gave access to the tunnel formed by the carriage entrance, crossing to the west wing side entrance and ending back in the main vestibule of the grand staircase. While climbing the marble steps of the staircase, Nancy inspected visually the walls of the staircase well, which was lit by a large window giving a view of the courtyard and by a single window giving on the street. Like in the rest of the building, the plaster was falling off the walls and would have to be completely redone.

Setting foot on the upper level of the staircase, which twisted yet twice more to go to the attic level, Nancy followed Barrot through a set of double doors giving access to the west wing upper floor. The ceiling on this level was over four meters high, adding a lot to the volume of the upper floor. Barrot then showed her a fairly large room that contained a fireplace.

“This was the reception lounge proper. To your left, you will see two doors. The nearest door leads to the private boudoir and the library, which themselves communicate with the two master bedrooms. The other door gives on a staircase that goes down directly to the kitchen.”

"Let me look first at the boudoir, library and master bedrooms of the façade section before visiting the west wing, Mister Barrot." Said Nancy after looking around the lounge."

"As you wish, Lady Jeanne."

Going through the nearest door, she ended up in a relatively small room with a window that gave a view down on the Charles-V street. An old iron stove sat in one corner but there were again no furniture present. Despite its small size, Nancy liked at once the boudoir: It was strategically situated at the corner angle of the west and south wings, while it was isolated enough to give someone a place to work in peace. The adjacent library, which walls were still lined with old, dusty bookshelves, albeit empty, was a wide, six by five meters room, with double doors giving on the grand staircase well and a single door linking it to a large bedroom with fireplace. They then crossed into the bedroom.

"The main master bedroom." Announced Barrot while sweeping one hand around. Behind that corner, you will find two large closets, while this door near the corner leads into the master bathroom."

"Not bad at all!" Said Nancy with appreciation as she scanned the big, L-shaped bedroom, which had to cover about 35 square meters and was lit by two windows. After going around the corner to examine the two storage closets, she went into the master bathroom, where she found a large tile-covered bathtub and a marble counter with a sink. There was also a toilet chair, with a bucket sitting under it, but no actual plumbing except for lead water drainage pipes for the bathtub and the sink. Barrot shrugged his shoulders on seeing the face she made at the primitive sanitary facilities.

"Please understand that this residence was built in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, when toilets were limited to simple chamber pots. However, the more recent owners installed a few toilet pits that go down to the sewers. You still have to bring up water with buckets, though."

"I see!" Said simply Nancy, who was making a mental note about the need to completely renovate the sanitary and heating installations, in order to bring some modern comforts to the residence. Fortunately, she knew about an English sanitary engineer that had started to market sanitary appliances, including flush toilets, in this time period. She followed Barrot through the second door of the master bathroom, ending in the second master bedroom. While smaller in surface than the main master bedroom, that room was still big, with its own fireplace and wide storage closets. From

there, they went into the long hallway connecting the west and east wings and ran along the aft façade of the south wing.

“If you wish, Lady Jeanne, we could have a quick look at the two guest lounges in the east wing before visiting in detail the west wing.”

“Please go ahead, Mister Barrot.”

Barrot, taking a few steps to a double door leading into the east wing, then showed her a side door.

“This is the access door to the servants’ staircase, which connects the servant’s lounge on the ground floor with the servants’ rooms in the attic. It thus allows them to go around to do their chores without infringing on the guests and masters’ privacy.”

Nancy nodded while hiding her resentment at this sign of how lowly the domestic staff had been treated by its masters through the centuries. Social and sexual equality as known in the later 20<sup>th</sup> Century still was mostly empty words in this time period, despite the rapid technological advances being done in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century, which knew steam power and was on the verge of developing the widespread use of electricity. Still following Barrot, she quickly visited two mid-sized lounges, each with a fireplace, before returning in the communications hallway and going back to the reception lounge in the west wing. From there, they stepped into a ten meter-wide room well lit by tall windows and sporting a large fireplace. The floor was made of polished wood, which was however in bad need of maintenance.

“The main dining room.” Announced Barrot. “It is big enough to comfortably seat at least eighteen persons for dinner. The hidden staircase to our left leads down to the ground floor and to the kitchen level, while stairs also lead up to the servants’ quarters. Next door, we have the ballroom, the largest room of the residence.”

The ballroom indeed proved to be huge, measuring about eleven by ten meters and being lit by a total of five tall windows, while a big fireplace was meant to heat the wide volume during Winter. Nancy nodded her head slowly, suitably impressed by the ballroom.

“I do like playing music and singing. This will be perfect to entertain my future guests.”

“I am happy to see that you like this, Lady Jeanne. At the back of the ballroom, we have another guest suite, a large one with private bathroom. We could then visit the attic level, even though it contains only the servants’ quarters.”

"I would still want to visit that level, Mister Barrot. The welfare of my future domestic staff is important to me."

"As you wish, Lady Jeanne."

Using a hidden staircase at the back of the ballroom, they climbed wooden stairs to the attic level, which proved a lot more cramped than the upper floor and which finishing touches had visibly been neglected, with many roof structures left uncovered. The 22 servants' bedrooms she saw on that level, while lit each by a dormer window, were cramped, nearly claustrophobic. Nancy firmly resolved then to do something about this, and soon. As Barrot announced to her that the visit was completed, she smiled to him while shaking her index.

"You forgot the basement, Mister Barrot."

"Uh, you will find only dust and humidity there, Lady Jeanne."

"Maybe, but it will also allow me to inspect the state of the residence's foundations."

The young real estate agent made a face at that.

"True! I will however have first to go borrow an oil lamp from the watchman before we go down there."

Going down to the ground floor with Nancy, he went to see briefly the watchman, returning with a lit oil lamp and smiling to her.

"We will use the stairs of the vestibule, near the kitchen."

That stone staircase proved to be both dark and sinister, smelling of molds. The light from the oil lamp soon revealed to Nancy a long cave extending in two directions in the shape of an 'L'. Stone pillars were lined up at about every four meters as far as she could see, which wasn't much really. Piled around the stone pillars was an eclectic assortment of old, rotting furniture, crates and wooden chests, the lot covered by a thick coat of dust, rat droppings and spiders' webs. The air was also fetid, making Barrot grimace.

"As you can see, Lady Jeanne, this is not the most attractive part of this residence."

"Oh, I was not expecting a reception lounge, Mister Barrot." Said Nancy in an amused tone before going to the nearest stone wall to inspect it. Closely followed by Barrot and his oil lamp, she methodically inspected the stone walls and pillars of the



foundations, which ran for about 25 meters under the south façade and for 35 meters under the west wing. The west wing foundations however proved much wider than the ones of the south wing, with double rows of stone pillars compared to a single row under the south wing. The total volume of space was actually very significant and, while the place lacked proper ventilation at this time, Nancy could see some useful future use for this basement level.

“Well, the foundations seems to be in a very good state, considering their age, Mister Barrot. Let’s go back to the ground level.”

Jean Barrot let out a sigh of relief once their were back in the ground level vestibule and quickly slapped away the dust and spiders’ webs that had fallen on his suit. He then gave Nancy a typical salesman’s smile.

“So, Lady Jeanne, are you interested by this property?”

“Definitely! It will be perfect for my needs...if the price is right.”

“Excellent! The published sales price is 180,000 francs for both the building and the lot, a truly good deal.”

Nancy at once threw him a skeptical look.

“A good deal, 180,000 francs? That is three times what this residence cost when brand new, if I can go by the price of 58,000 livres paid by Robert de Frémont in 1672. Even when taking into account the inflation since the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, which basically doubled the price, your offer is about 50% too high, and this without even taking into account the age of the building and the need for extensive renovations.”

Jean Barrot looked at her with surprise, taken off balance by her knowledge about this property. He however still attempted to defend his position.

“But, the prices of property lots in Paris has risen a lot since, Lady Jeanne. I however concede that the property is in need of some renovations. I thus am ready to lower my price to 160,000 francs.”

“I offer 120,000 francs, and I am being generous.”

“Uh, 140,000 francs. I really can’t get lower than that.”

Nancy made of show of thinking about his offer for a moment before smiling to him and presenting her right hand for a shake. In reality, she would have paid about any price to get this specific property, which would become crucial to her future projects.

“Deal!”

"You won't regret your decision, Lady Jeanne. We now only have to discuss the financing of this sale."

"What financing, Mister Barrot? I am ready to pay cash for this property. Prepare the sales act for tomorrow and I will go to your bank then, to both pay for this property and to make an important deposit in gold and gems."

"We will be ready for you, Lady Jeanne. Our watchman will stay at his post until you are able to take effective possession of the property, and this to prevent squatters from occupying your new house. The times are hard these days and there is unfortunately a lot of vagrants in Paris right now."

Barrot took a minute to speak with the watchman, giving him additional instructions before leaving the town house and letting Nancy alone in front of the carriage entrance. The latter looked with pride at the façade of her new residence, happy with her acquisition. Her mind was already on the various renovation and improvement works that she wanted to make in order to restore the town house to its past splendor. Her heart particularly warmed up at the thought of all the good that her future charitable foundation was going to do from this building in the near future.

"Great things will be done here indeed." She whispered to herself.

The next morning, a bit after the opening of the main branch and head office of the Bank of France, the two gendarmes on guard at the entrance of the bank stiffened instinctively when four big men, near giants, climbed down from a chariot that had just stopped in front of the bank. A tall and pretty teenage girl wearing a high quality city gown and who had just arrived in a small carriage then joined the four men as they took out two apparently heavy chests from the back of their chariots. The driver of the chariot, a young man of medium size, stayed with his vehicle as the teenager and the four mountains of muscles carrying the two chests climbed the stairs to the entrance of the bank. One of the gendarmes then interposed himself in front of the teenage girl, who was holding a fair-sized wooden box in her hands, but kept his tone polite.

"Excuse me, mademoiselle, but I must ensure that you and your four helpers are not armed. Could I see the content of your box and of your chests?"

"But of course, my good man! I was in fact coming here to deposit my fortune in this bank. To see it so well guarded reassures me."

The girl then opened the cover of her box to let the gendarme look inside it. The latter felt a rush of blood go to his head on seeing the dozens of big polished emeralds contained in the box. He however managed not to exclaim himself and nodded his head before going to inspect the two chests. He started sweating suddenly at the sight of the gold bars filling the chests.

“Uh, everything is okay. You may enter the bank, miss.”

“Thank you!”

The gendarme watched the small group enter the bank with its chests before exchanging a bemused glance with his comrade.

“Good god! I have never seen such a fortune at once. This girl is easily a multi-millionaire. She did well to hire those big men.”

“Yeah! Did you see the one with the long scar on one cheek?”

“You bet! He could scare away the worst criminals.”

Followed closely by Jack Crawford, Otto Skorzeni, Fernand Brunet and Ken Dows with their two chests full of gold bars, Nancy went to a service wicket that was presently free of customers and politely saluted with her head the cashier.

“Good morning, monsieur. I am here to make an important deposit and to pay for a property I bought from your bank yesterday. I believe that your director will want to see me.”

“Uh, just a moment, miss.”

After excusing himself, the cashier left his wicket and went to a private office located behind the service counter. He soon came back out with an obese man wearing a large graying moustache. The latter crossed on the customers' side of the counter to come to Nancy, bowing in front of her.

“Miss, I am Charles de Pointcarré, director of this bank. What could I do for you this morning?”

“Let me present myself first, monsieur: Lady Jeanne d'Orléans. I came to open an account and make in it a large deposit, on top of paying for the buying of the Hôtel de Brinvilliers, which I visited with Mister Barrot yesterday. These men are escorting my gold.”

The director gave a cautious look at the four powerful men before looking back at Nancy.

“In that case, please follow me with your men and your chests, Lady Jeanne.”

The group then crossed behind the service counter and went to the director's office, where Pointcarré offered a chair to Nancy.

"Please sit down, Lady Jeanne. I will go have Mister Barrot come in."

"Thank you, monsieur."

The director then left for a minute, to return and sit behind his desk.

"Could I see some identity papers, miss?"

"Certainly, Monsieur de Pointcarré! Here is my passport as well as my marriage certificate. Unfortunately, my husband died last February from a tropical fever in the Guadeloupe and I then decided to return to France. Here is his death certificate as well."

The director examined carefully the three documents presented by Nancy, to then return them to her, apparently satisfied.

"So, you came here to deposit your fortune in our bank, Lady Jeanne. You chose well."

"I believe so as well, monsieur. I would like first to have the value of my two chests and of my jewel box evaluated with precision. Then, I will deposit the majority of that sum in a savings account, with the rest put in a regular account. I have with me gold bars and polished emeralds."

"And could I ask you the origin of that gold and those emeralds, Lady Jeanne?"

"You can, monsieur! Part of my gold comes from the sale of the plantation in the Guadeloupe that I inherited from my husband, while the rest comes from a pirate treasure found in a coastal cave on our property."

The director's eyebrows rose in interest at the words 'pirate treasure'.

"Hum, quite an interesting story indeed, Lady Jeanne. Let me go get someone for the evaluation."

Leaving again his office, the director came back with a small, thin man wearing round spectacles.

"If your men could follow Monsieur Lafleur with their chests, he will weigh and calculate the value of your gold, so that it could be credited to your account. As well, our associate jeweler should be here soon."

Nancy nodded her head and made a sign to Otto Skorzeni, who grabbed with Fernand Brunet the handles of one of the chests and picked it up to follow the accountant out of the office, accompanied by Ken Dows and Jack Crawford, who carried the second chest. The director then started filling the paperwork needed for Nancy to open a savings

account, as well as a regular account, the lot in the name of Jeanne d'Orléans. Those procedures were nearly completed when Jean Barrot showed up with the sales contract for the Hôtel de Brinvilliers. Nancy had just signed the contract when the accountant in charge of evaluating her gold bars knocked on the door of the office, passing his head inside once invited in.

"Monsieur de Pointcarré, the weighing of the gold of Lady Jeanne is now completed. It is worth 3,206,800 francs."

De Pointcarré opened his mouth, stunned by that number, then noted the sum quoted by Lafleur before smiling to Nancy.

"Well, I believe that your credit will be solid indeed, Lady Jeanne. How much of this sum do you want to put in your new savings account?"

"Three million francs. What will be left after paying for my new residence will go in my regular account. The value of my emeralds will also go in my regular account, once evaluated of course."

"Our expert jeweler should be here soon, Lady Jeanne. In the meantime, let's seal this sales act, so that I could give you the keys to your new property."

The said jeweler showed up a few minutes after Nancy was handed the keys to the Hôtel de Brinvilliers by the director. The expert opened wide eyes at the sight of the big polished emeralds contained in Nancy's box.

"Colombian emeralds, and of top quality. At first sight, I would say that you have here about two million francs worth of emeralds in this box."

Setting up a precision weight scale, a magnifying lens and measuring calipers, the jeweler took about one hour to examine with care the emeralds while Nancy patiently sipped a coffee and conversed with the director. He finally raised his nose from the last emerald he had examined and smiled to Nancy.

"Lady Jeanne, you have here 266 Colombian emeralds. I am offering 2,677,000 francs for the lot. Your biggest emerald was worth by itself 43,000 francs and would be worthy of a queen. Do you want to sell them all and credit them to your accounts, or would you like to keep a few in order to have some jewels made for you?"

"I will credit them to my regular account, monsieur. I still have more gems and gold in my possession anyway. I will however take 50,000 francs out of that sum in cash: I will be needing to pay for extensive renovations to my new residence, plus have to buy furniture for it."

The director swallowed hard on hearing the value of the emeralds: Jeanne d'Orléans had just become one of his richest customers. Making a few quick calculations, he adjusted the value of the two accounts in Jeanne's name, then went to get 50,000 francs in gold and silver coins for her. French paper money was still a few years in the future. When everything was done, he got up from his chair and shook hands with Nancy.

"It was a true pleasure to welcome you as a customer, Lady Jeanne. Welcome to Paris!"

"Thank you, Monsieur de Pointcarré."

Nancy, accompanied by the director to the main entrance, then left the bank with her four escorts and her heavy bag of gold and silver. Pointcarré shook slowly his head while watching her leave.

"So young, yet so rich. She would make a hell of a marriage prospect. All the gigolos in Paris will be after her."

After her visit to the bank, Nancy then returned to the Marais District, where she roamed the streets while passing the word that she was looking for workers and maids in order to renovate and clean her new residence. With the widespread unemployment that was devastating the French economy of the time, she quickly found herself with more hands than she really needed. However, in line with the charitable vocation of her mission, she hired nearly everyone that showed up at the Hôtel de Brinvilliers in the afternoon, offering them wages that were quite inflated for this period.

The 63 men and women that she ended hiring and who showed up on Wednesday morning were promptly split into small work groups and then dispersed around the large town house by Nancy, who also distributed tools and equipment bought the previous day. Nancy then directed and supervised them, but always showed them politeness and consideration during the three days that the renovation work went on. She used those days as well to talk individually with her workers, evaluating their competences and their character and learning to know them, while helping them from time to time. On Saturday afternoon, after thanking and paying her workers before sending them home, Nancy kept with her six women and four men, assembling them as a group in the courtyard. She scanned in turn their faces before speaking in a friendly tone.

"My friends, it is obvious that I will need a domestic staff to keep such a large residence running. During the last three days, I was able to see the quality of your work and your degree of initiative, which made you stand out from the other workers. I am ready to offer you permanent positions as my employees, at the same daily salary that I gave during the renovation work, three francs per day, plus food, lodging, work clothes and medical care. What do you say to that?"

"Lady Jeanne," said Leila Benchetrit, a young Algerian woman, "working for you would make me very happy. What position are you offering me?"

"That of assistant cook, under Charlotte Truffaut. Charlotte, would you in turn accept to work for me as my cook?"

"With great pleasure, Lady Jeanne." Answered the portly woman.

"Well, this brings me to a particular point. If you are to become my employees, then I will expect you all to simply call me Jeanne. I may be rich, but you are my equals in the eyes of God, like all other humans. Understood?"

"Yes, Jeanne!" Replied in concert her seven employees, making her nod her head in approbation.

"Excellent! Go home now and rest well, as we will be quite busy on Monday: we will have a lot to do to furnish and decorate this residence."

## **20:39 (Paris Time)**

**Friday, July 16, 1847**

**Quai des Célestins, Right Shore of the Seine River**

**Paris**

Nancy, returning to her residence after a visit to the Left Shore, suddenly saw in the growing darkness a small group of men surrounding a lone silhouette crouched against a stone wall near the shore of the Seine. Turning her left ear towards the group, she listened up via the directional microphone implanted in her ear, hearing men's voices that seemed to mock the one crouched down. Not sure of what was happening, Nancy nonetheless decided to go see what was going on: this part of the Right Shore had a rather bad reputation. As she was approaching at a quick walk, she started to hear the voice of a girl or young woman. She thus accelerated further her pace as the girl's voice took a begging tone. Nancy arrived at the top of the stone stairs leading down to the shoreline's sidewalk as one of the men brutally forced the girl to get up.

"Are you going to finally obey me, or will I have to teach you a lesson?"

"LEAVE HER ALONE, NOW!"

Nancy's shout surprised the three men, who turned around to face her. The man who had grabbed the girl, a stocky man wearing a beard and dressed in rough clothes, laughed on seeing Nancy, who was now quickly climbing down the stairs towards him.

"Look at that, guys: a second girl to entertain us tonight."

"And a well to do girl on top of that." Added one of the two other men, who wore a sailor's outfit. "Her purse must be quite fat."

Nancy did not reply to that, having just decided what she would do. As the man in the sailor's outfit stepped forward to grab her by one arm, she quickly pivoted on one heel, delivering a swept high kick. Hit on the left temple, the sailor was projected sideways and fell on the pavement, knocked out cold. His nearest companion, frozen by the surprise, then got a fist in the plexus that made him crumble to his knees, his breath taken out. Seeing that, the man that had brutalized the girl took a knife out of his belt and gave a murderous look to Nancy.

"You are going to regret not having minded your own business, bitch!"

Nancy waited for him to step forward to strike her, then grabbed his right wrist with her left hand, twisting and crushing it and making the man scream with pain as her grip broke his wrist bones.

"This is the last time that you will abuse a girl, you bastard!" Spat Nancy. Grabbing the man by the throat with her right hand, she crushed his air pipe with a mighty grip, then pushed him with all of her supernatural strength. The man was sent flying in the air, to then splash in the dirty waters of the Seine, disappearing head first under the surface. His inert body came back to the surface after a minute, to float down the current. In the meantime, Nancy turned around to face the girl, who had watched the fight with incredulity.

"Follow me, quickly!"

The girl, an oriental teenager wearing a dirty, tattered dress, followed her without discussion, probably too happy to be out of trouble. She spoke only after she and Nancy had climbed back the stairs and had walked quickly past one city block. Her French was good but had a distinct Chinese accent.

"Thank you! Thank you so much, whoever you are."

Nancy then surprised the girl for a second time by answering her in perfect Cantonese.

"Think nothing of it. My name is Jeanne d'Orléans. What is your name?"



"My name is Mai, Li Mai. You speak Cantonese?"

"As well as Mandarin Chinese and many other languages. You are not wounded, I hope?"

"No! He didn't have time to become truly violent."

"And what were you doing at such a place and time, Mai?"

The young Chinese lowered her head, apparently feeling shameful.

"I live along the Seine, miss: I am homeless and penniless since the death of my husband and survive on charity."

Nancy eyed quickly the thin body of the girl, who effectively looked malnourished.

"You will be able to tell me your story once in my home, in front of a good meal, Mai. My house is not too far now."

The two teenagers arrived a few minutes later at the Hôtel de Brinvilliers, whose windows were lit from the inside by oil lamps. Nancy used her key to open the pedestrian's door that was part of the carriage gates, relocking it behind her and Mai before leading Mai inside, to the kitchen. The cook, Charlotte Truffaut, looked at Mai with a mix of surprise and pity.

"My god, Jeanne, where did you find that poor girl?"

"On the shores of the Seine and about to be abused by three men. She is homeless and needs to eat something."

"I will get some bread and cheese at once."

"Boil as well some water to make tea and fill a hot bath, Charlotte."

As the cook got busy, Nancy gently made Mai sit down at the large kitchen table, bought in the last days, like the rest of the furniture in the residence.

"You are now safe, Mai: you are with friends here. So, tell me your story...from the start."

The Chinese teenager lowered her head as painful souvenirs came back to her.

"There is not much to say, miss. I was born in Canton, in China, and I am fifteen years old. I became an orphan at the age of seven and was then picked up by French missionaries, who cared for me and educated me. A French officer serving with the French delegation in Canton then noticed me a year ago and married me just before returning to France, bringing me with him. Unfortunately, Bertrand died from the cholera just after arriving in France and his family then refused to accept me, taking away my

marriage certificate and burning it. They even stole the pension I had the right to as the widow of a French officer. I then had no choice but to live in the streets since.”

Nancy, moved by her story, put her right hand on top of Mai’s left hand.

“You now have a home, Mai: my residence. Know that I am as well a young widow and that I recently arrived from the Caribbeans, where my husband died from a tropical fever.”

“You...you are too good, miss.” Said Mai, bordering on tears. Nancy shook her head slowly at that.

“No, I am simply humane, Mai. Now, if you want to live and work in my home, you will have to obey the main rule here: call me simply Jeanne.”

“Okay, Jeanne. What kind of work do you have in mind for me?”

“We will see about that later, Mai. For the moment, eat. Afterwards, you will take a good hot bath, so that your beauty could come out from under all that dirt.”

Nancy then left Mai alone at the table as Charlotte put a plate with bread, butter and cheese in front of the Chinese teenager. Mai thanked Charlotte and started eating at once while thinking how lucky she had been to meet Jeanne.

Jeanne returned in the kitchen twenty minutes later, as Mai was sipping with delight a cup of green tea.

“So, feeling better now, Mai?”

“A lot better, Jeanne. Thank you again for everything.”

“Bah, that’s nothing! Once you will have finished your cup of tea, I will bring you to the master bathroom.”

Nancy then went to check the temperature of the water heating up in a big iron pot resting on top of the kitchen’s stove. Satisfied, she filled two buckets with hot water and, grabbing them effortlessly, climbed the steep stairs leading from the kitchen to the upper floor. Mai, like Charlotte, watched her go with her heavy load, mystified.

“My god! Jeanne is really incredibly strong. First, she gets rid of the three men bent on abusing me, then this.”

“I must say that she is making many talk about her.” Said the cook as she picked up the now empty plate and cup in front of Mai. “Apart from being very strong, she is highly educated and speaks many languages. What is most important, however, is that she is kind and generous.”

“Too true!”

Nancy's voice came from the top of the stairs a moment later.

"MAI, GET YOUR CUTE ASS UP HERE!"

"Did I say as well that she can be very informal at times?" Said Charlotte with a smile as Mai got up from the table. The latter giggled at that and hurried up the stairs, finding Nancy waiting for her on the upper floor.

"Follow me, Mai. We are going to my private master bathroom."

Passing through the grand staircase well, Nancy led Mai down the corridor leading to the east wing, entering into her large bedroom, which she had recently furnished with Louis XIV style furniture. There, she pushed open a door giving on a bathroom with a marble floor and a tile-covered tub. Nancy pointed to Mai the bathtub, now half full with hot water.

"Take off your clothes and soak in, Mai. I will wash your hair while you soap up." Mai's modesty made her hesitate for a moment before she obeyed and shed her dirty dress, then her underwear. Nancy eyed with sorrow her thin body, with the ribs visible.

"Nobody should live through such misery. I promise you that you will not be lacking anything here, Mai. Now, step in and sit down."

Mai stepped in the bathtub and let herself sink down with delight to her chin in the hot water. As she rubbed a bar of soap on her body, Nancy poured water on her head and started washing thoroughly her hair, checking at the same time for the presence of vermin.

"You don't have any fleas or lice, thank God! Were you forced to bed men before tonight? Answer me frankly: I only want to evaluate your overall health."

"No!" Answered Mai truthfully. "I did everything to avoid surviving by such means, but the thug that you killed had in mind to force me to prostitute myself for his profit. I owe you my honor, on top of my life, Jeanne."

"Think nothing of it, Mai. I would have done the same for anyone. Let's talk about your employment here. I would like to use you as my personal assistant and receptionist. You would greet my guests, would serve them and also do some shopping for me. I am offering you the same pay and benefits as for my other servants: three francs a day, plus lodging, food, working clothes and medical care."

Mai looked with surprise at Nancy.

"But...that's a lot more than the normal wages. A servant can usually count herself lucky in Paris if she earns one franc a day."

“Well, I don’t believe in exploiting my employees, contrary to too many nobles and big bourgeois. I also have the financial means to pay good salaries. Tomorrow, we will go shopping together to buy you a decent wardrobe, along with furniture to furnish your room, which is still empty. You will sleep in my bed tonight, unless you object to that.”

“Uh, not at all. You are too good, Jeanne.”

“Bof! My goal is to create a charitable foundation here in Paris. I might as well start by being generous now.”

The next morning, Nancy gave a detailed tour of her residence to Mai, showing her in particular the room in the attic level that was going to be hers, which faced the Charles-V Street and had two dormer windows. Mai didn’t miss the fact that her room had been up to recently two separate rooms, the adjoining wall having been thorn away to create a single room measuring eight by three meters. She found out at the same occasion that the other domestics that lived in the residence occupied similar rooms, much more spacious than what was considered the norm for servants. There was even a large, comfortably furnished lounge reserved for the employees. What however surprised the most Mai was the small steam-powered pump that now occupied the old gardener’s hut, situated in a back corner of the courtyard. Workers were busy welding in place copper pipes that linked the hut and the residence to a water tower that was still under construction. Other workers were installing on the roofs a number of shallow basins made of tin, which were connected to the water tower by pipes.

“What is all this, Jeanne?”

“Progress!” Replied Nancy, smiling proudly. “Once all this is completed, this water tower and those water collecting basins will provide clean water by gravity to the residence. My maids won’t have to carry anymore buckets full of water up and down stairs, or to pump water from a well. This steam engine will in turn pump water up into the water tower in periods of droughts, on top of heating a hot water tank. That hot water will then circulate through the residence via copper pipes equipped with faucets. I am planning soon to go to England, in order to open a bank account there. That will give me the opportunity to go hire a British sanitary engineer, so that he could come install flush toilets in my residence. It may not be the biggest or most luxurious in Paris, but I will make it the most comfortable.”

“And who thought about all this, Jeanne? You hired an engineer for this work?”

“No! I took care of the plans and calculations myself.”

Mai didn't ask her where she got such knowledge, instead adding this to the growing list of the surprising abilities of Jeanne.

Once the visit was completed, Nancy went out with Mai to go shopping in the small carriage pulled by Pegasus, her personal horse. To the surprise and profound emotion of Mai, Nancy stopped her carriage in front of a boutique that specialized in oriental imports. Tears came down on her cheeks when she saw the various pieces of furniture, decorations and silk clothes that had come from her native country. Nancy then spent without a second thought a small fortune to buy for Mai a complete set of lackered wood furniture for her room, plus a few Chinese art objects and multiple rolls of embroidered silk. Mai couldn't stop herself from openly crying as she looked at herself in a mirror while wearing a splendid Chinese silk dress bought for her by Nancy.

“Thank you, thank you for everything, Jeanne.”

In response, Nancy gently put one hand on her shoulder as she still cried.

“Mai, consider me as a friend, and not as your employer.”

## **CHAPTER 10 – SOVIET BLUFF**

**09:25 (Germany Time)**

**Monday, July 27, 1953 'C'**

**Headquarters of the 81<sup>st</sup> Fighter Interceptor Wing**

**Neubiberg Airfield, southern suburbs of Munich**

**German Federal Republic**

“AND YOU DECIDED THAT SAVING A WEEK IN THE TRANSITION PROGRAM OF THE WING TO THE F-83 WAS WORTH WASTING ONE OF THE MAJOR ADVANTAGES OF THE F-83? WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU THINKING, TISDALE?”

Roger Tisdale, standing at rigid attention in front of the desk of Gertrude Meserve, kept an obtuse expression while replying to the dressing down he was getting from his wing commander.

“Colonel, no Soviet plane could even approach the operational ceiling of the F-83 and our oxygen masks are sufficient up to past 50,000 feet. In addition, those pressurized flight suits cost a fortune and require some very specialized maintenance. I believed that the time and money expenditure was not worth it and Colonel Morgan agreed with me.”

Gertrude, furious like she had rarely been, contained herself with difficulty, fixing Tisdale with looks that could kill.

“Lieutenant Colonel Tisdale, do you know what he ‘Tornado Funnel’ tactic is?”

“Uh, no, Colonel.”

“Then know that this tactic, invented by Major General Dows and used in Indochina against the Communist Chinese, allows our F-83s to do diving attacks from high altitude while avoiding radar detection during their approach. This however necessitates that our planes approach at the altitude of 95,000 feet, in order to fly above the electronic detection lobes from enemy radars, thus the need for pressurized flight suits with sealed helmets. Now, thanks to your exercise in penny-pinching, this wing now has only seven F-83 flight crews able to use the Tornado Funnel tactic, basically me and the girls I brought from Palestine, instead of all of our 63 crews. This could cost us

heavily in any conflict with the Soviets and will force the majority of our pilots to fly at an altitude where they will be detectable.”

“But, I could not possibly know about that new tactic, Colonel, and...”

“You could simply have followed the established procedures of the F-83 conversion program, which specify the need to acquire pressurized flight suits and which were written by General Dows while she was based in Muroc a year ago. Now, I will be forced to inform her that my wing is suffering from a major operational deficiency and I can predict that she will not like that at all. You will now get out of my office and immediately initiate a program to acquire pressurized suits for all of our flight crews, along with the needed technical support. DISMISSED!”

His face red, Tisdale pivoted on his heels and walked out, leaving Gertrude alone to fume behind her work desk.

After taking the time to calm down, Gertrude picked up her telephone receiver and called the headquarters of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Air Force in Stuttgart, using an encrypted line. She hesitated for a moment when Ingrid Dows' voice answered her: she detested passing bad news to her old combat comrade and friend.

“Ingrid, this is Gertrude. I have some bad news to pass to you concerning my wing. A detailed inspection has revealed to me a major operational deficiency.”

The voice of Ingrid, jovial at first, grew guarded.

“Go ahead, Gertrude.”

Taking a deep breath, Gertrude then explained what she had found, with Ingrid listening in silence before speaking in a comprehending tone.

“Listen, Gertrude, this is not your fault. In fact, Colonel Morgan was at least if not more at fault in this than your Tisdale. I suppose that you will immediately initiate the acquisition of pressurized flight suits?”

“I ordered my deputy to get on it at once, Ingrid. Unfortunately, this will take at the least a few weeks before we could get those suits and have them adjusted to our flight crews.”

“A few weeks...” Said Ingrid in a discouraged tone. “Gertrude, we may not have a few weeks. Know that recent intelligence reports indicate large concentrations of Soviet troops along the borders of Poland and of the Baltic states. The Soviets announced this morning through a public communiqué that they will soon hold some joint military exercises in Ukraine, Belorussia and in the Leningrad area. I however don't

believe that this is for simple maneuvers. I am due to go see today General Ridgway at the headquarters of the EUCOM in Frankfurt, to discuss with him the situation concerning the Soviets. I will keep you posted on this. In the meantime, be prepared to disperse your squadrons and your ammunition and spare parts reserves around your alternate airfields. And continue to push for those pressurized suits.”

“You can count on me, Ingrid.”

“Good! We will speak further tomorrow.” Said Ingrid before putting down her receiver. Now deeply preoccupied, Gertrude cut the line and looked with apprehension at the map of Europe pinned to one of the walls of her office. She had already fought with Ingrid in four wars: in the Pacific during World War 2, in Korea, in Indochina and in Palestine. Now, however, this could involve a direct conflict between two nuclear powers, a prospect that should scare any sensible person.

**08:12, Tuesday, July 28, 1953 ‘C’**

**Office of the Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union**

**Kremlin, Moscow**

**USSR**

“Enter!” Said Joseph Stalin after hearing someone knock on the door. His secretary then came in, announcing that Marshal Fedorovich, the commander of the Soviet Air Force, wanted to see him. Stalin nodded his head and waited for Fedorovich to enter and come to attention in front of his desk.

“So, what do you have for me this morning, Marshal Fedorovich?”

“Comrade Secretary, I came to bring you for your approval the draft of a disinformation plan that should greatly help our impending military plans.”

Stalin, who perfectly knew what those plans implied, simply put his hand forward.

“Please show me that plan, Comrade Fedorovich.”

Taking a file from his leather briefcase, the marshal approached the desk and handed it to Stalin, who started to read it at once. A smile appeared progressively on the face of the dictator, who finally grabbed a pen and scribbled a note at the bottom of the last page before giving back the document to Fedorovich.

“An excellent plan indeed, Comrade Fedorovich. Approved!”

“Thank you, Comrade Secretary.”



Fedorovich then pivoted around and walked out of the office, with Stalin watching him go. The dictator then got up from his chair and went to study the large World map pinned to one wall board. The plan proposed by Fedorovich, while risky, was truly brilliant and would strongly reinforce the bluff he intended to do while facing the American president. If all went well, the Soviet Union would soon possess new buffer territories to shield its own territory from any enemy surprise attacks. The only irritant at this time for him was the unexpected coriacity of a young troublemaker that his MGB secret police seemed incapable of getting rid of. If this went on, he was going to have to find someone more competent to do that job.

### **17:39 (Germany Time)**

**Wednesday, July 29, 1953 'C'**

**Family housing for American officers**

**Patch Barracks, Stuttgart**

**German Federal Republic**

Ingrid, still wearing a flight suit, entered her residence only to be greeted by a tornado on four legs named 'Miniflick', followed closely by Hien. Ingrid had bought the Dalmatian puppy for Hien after returning from her trip to the North. Her daughter had fallen in love with the little young dog at the first sight. Now, Miniflick was her best playing companion, on top of being her pride when she walked it outside.

"You went flying today, Mommy?" Asked the little Vietnamese girl on seeing her flight suit. Ingrid took her in her arms and kissed her on the cheek before answering her.

"Effectively, my sweet love. I went up for a good four hours in my faithful LADY HAWK. And you, how was your day?"

"Well!" Said Hien in her tiny voice. "I played with Freddy, John and Cynthia and I walked Miniflick with Sarah. Sarah also gave me a few English lessons. She wants to tell you something, by the way."

"Oh?" Said Ingrid, forcing herself to keep smiling: when Sarah wanted to tell her about something, it was often about very serious things. "In that case, I will go see her right away. Where is she?"

"In the kitchen: she is preparing supper."

"I will go talk to her there. After, I will come play with you and Miniflick. Would you like that, Hien?"

"Oh yes!" Said Hien enthusiastically, who kissed Ingrid before she was put down on her feet, near Miniflick. Ingrid then went to the kitchen of her residence, which was part of a row of brick town houses. She found Sarah busy cooking German-style veal scallops called schnitzels, which Ingrid craved.

"Aah, this smells good! Hien told me that you had something to tell me, Sarah." The spiritual entity that used the ancient shape of Sarah Ur looked at her soberly while continuing her cooking job. Ingrid knew that the angel could concentrate her attention and powers on many things at the same time and could not be taken by surprise. While capable of humor, Sarah appeared most of the time as being serious and sober. She answered Ingrid in a low voice, so that Hien couldn't hear her.

"Effectively, Ingrid. Know that I disposed of another team of Soviet assassins this morning, as you departed for work. I vaporized them and their car, but nobody in the neighborhood saw that."

"Another team?!" Exclaimed Ingrid, alarmed. "But, that makes the third Soviet assassination team in five months, without counting the Jews from the Irgoun who attacked and wounded me in Haifa. Stalin is this scared of me?"

"Contrary to many American politicians and generals, Stalin understands how dangerous you could be for his plans of domination. About those plans, you now have only a few days left before a new war starts. You will be primordial in defeating Stalin's plans. As for Hien, don't worry about her: I will protect her and make sure that she is safe during the fighting to come."

"Thank you, Sarah." Said Ingrid, partly relieved. "Uh, you really can't tell me more about what will happen?"

The angel shook slowly her head.

"I'm sorry, Ingrid. You must realize yourself your destiny. Go play with Hien and Miniflick while I finish cooking supper."

"Yes Mom!" Said jockingly Ingrid, earning a pinch on her butt and a smile from her guardian angel.

**09:17 (California Time)**

**Saturday, August 1, 1953 'C'**

**Pan American Airlines Boeing 717**

**600 kilometers west of Los Angeles**

**8,000 meters above the Pacific Ocean**

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is the Captain speaking. We are presently about 375 miles from Los Angeles and will arrive at our destination in about fifty minutes. The present temperature in Los Angeles is 89 degrees Fahrenheit and the weather there is sunny, with a clear sky. I hope that you had a pleasant flight and will warn you when we will start our descent towards Los Angeles. Thank you for your attention."

The pilot, Ross Davidson, then hooked down his public announcement microphone and looked at his copilot, Charlie Quinn.

"I must say that I sometimes regret my wartime service as a B-24 bomber pilot. This job pays fairly well but it could be downright monotonous at times."

"Even with Shirley aboard as a stewardess?" Replied with a knowing smile the copilot. "Personally, one look at her legs or her chest is enough to excite me for the rest of the flight."

"And Jennifer? She doesn't excite you?"

"Of course that she excites me, Ross. I simply prefer Shirley. She..."

The copilot then paused, while his eyes looked at something outside in the sky. Following his eyes, Ross then saw through his windshield two jet planes flying in formation in front and above them. Without being in danger of causing a collision with the airliner, the two big aircraft were flying on a heading at a slight angle from that of the Boeing 717 and were about to cut across its path, but at an altitude of 200 meters above.

"But, what are those two idiots doing right in the middle of a known main airliner highway?" Exclaimed Charlie Quinn. "These are big planes indeed, maybe heavy bombers, judging by their tail gun turrets. Ross, are you still familiar with our bomber types? Ross? Hey, Ross?"

"Fucking shit!" Swore violently the pilot, his eyes fixed on the two bombers. "They are Soviet bombers! Look at the red stars under their wings! We have commie heavy bombers approaching Los Angeles!"

"Soviet bombers, here?" Asked the copilot in disbelief while looking at the two aircraft, soon noticing the red stars. "Damn! You are right! Look at the size of those two bastards!"

Turning partly in his seat, the pilot looked at his navigator/flight engineer, Neil Watts, sitting sideways behind Charlie Quinn.

"Neil, find a camera in a hurry! Borrow it from a passenger if need be but I want pictures taken of those Soviet bombers."

"Understood!" Said Neil, leaving his seat and walking out of the cockpit. Ross then returned his attention on the bombers to examine them in detail. He then noticed with a shock that the bombers had altered their heading in order to fly parallel with his Boeing 717 and were starting to lose slowly altitude. He was soon able to detail from less than 200 meters the Soviet planes, with their four enormous jet engines in sunken positions at the root of their long swept wings and with long, slender fuselages. Grabbing his radio microphone, he pressed the 'send' button and called the Los Angeles air traffic control center.

"Los Angeles Control, this is flight Pan Am 502, coming from Honolulu and presently 355 miles west of Los Angeles. I just met two unidentified aircraft that appear to be Soviet heavy bombers. I request that you urgently advise the Air Force of this, over."

"Did you say Soviet heavy bombers, Pan Am 502?" Replied the air controller, clearly skeptical, irritating Ross.

"Affirmative, Los Angeles! I have two enormous aircraft wearing red starts on their wings and vertical tail. They each have four big jet engines at their wing roots, with swept wings, long and thin fuselage and with tail gun turrets. I can now see that they are equipped with in-flight refueling booms. These big babies must have an enormous radius of action."

"Where are presently those bombers in relation to you, Pan Am 502?"

Neil Watts came back in the cockpit at that moment, a camera in his hands.

"I borrowed Shirley's camera, Ross."

"I don't give a shit from whom you borrowed it, Neil." Grumbled the pilot. "Just take pictures of those two bastards from all angles possible. Los Angeles, those bombers just came down to my level and are now flying parallel to me, 600 feet away. SHIT! THEIR TAIL GUN TURRETS ARE STARTING TO POINT AT ME!"

Ross could now hear screams of panic coming from the passengers cabin as Neil Watts was taking picture after picture.

"Los Angeles, from Pan Am 502, have you advised the Air Force, over?"

"Uh, not yet, Pan Am 502."

"DAMMIT, WAKE UP, LOS ANGELES CONTROL! WILL YOU WAIT FOR THOSE TWO COMMIE BASTARDS TO DROP ATOMIC BOMBS ON LOS ANGELES BEFORE REACTING?"

"Uh, understood, Pan Am 502." Answered rather ineptly the air controller. On his part, Ross decided to take his distances from the two intruders and went into a shallow dive while pushing his four jet engines to the maximum. To his profound relief, the Soviets didn't shoot at him and started turning away, heading towards the Northwest before disappearing in the distance.

"Christ! When I think that I was complaining about the monotony of this job." Said Ross to himself, his jaws clenched together.

Aboard the lead Myasishchev M-4 heavy bomber, Colonel Piotr Souvorov laughed heartily on seeing the airliner flee. He then smiled to his copilot, Major Vassili Kouglov.

"Well, I think that our little demonstration worked, Vassili. If only the Americans knew that our two M-4 are the only ones built to date and that we each used two in-flight refueling to get here."

"But they can't know that, Colonel. They will never believe that our planes are only prototypes. Anyway, their airforce is bound to panic on hearing about our presence so close to their coast."

"That's for sure! Navigator, give me a return heading to Petropavlovsk, before we run out of fuel and have to belly-land in the Pacific."

With many military personnel on weekend leave, the news of the encounter between Pan Am 502 and the two bombers took nearly one hour to reach the Pentagon in Washington, plus another hour before the story was taken seriously. By that time, the telephone lines at the Pentagon had started to be clogged with calls from reporters based in Los Angeles and who had spoken with the crew and passengers of Pan Am 502. The first official reaction from the Pentagon, basically denying that the Soviets could have bombers capable of reaching the American West Coast, was met with derision and accusations of negligence by the medias. President Thomas Dewey became furious when he learned about the incident the same way that most of his citizens did: by listening to his radio in his office. Grabbing his telephone, he then placed a number of angry calls to the Pentagon, the first one going to General Hoyt

Vandenberg, the head of the Air Force. Vandenberg was in his small shoes while answering Dewey.

“Uh, I still don’t have an independent confirmation of that report, Mister President. It would be too early for me to speculate on this incident.”

“Speculate? SPECULATE? General, if I understand well the media reports about that incident, two Soviet heavy jet bombers were seen less than 400 miles from Los Angeles, flying in formation as if they owned the sky. These bombers could have easily erased San Francisco and Los Angeles with atomic bombs before our fighters could react, if I go by the slowness of the reaction of your people at the Pentagon. I want to see you in the Oval Office at four this afternoon, and with full explanations about this. I also plan in having the other service chiefs present at that meeting.”

“I will be there, Mister President.”

As Dewey thought that things couldn’t get worse, he received a bit before three o’clock in the afternoon a call from his new secretary of state, Christian Herter. Herter seemed to be seriously shaken, apart from being furious as hell.

“Mister President, I have now with me the Finnish ambassador, who just brought me an ultimatum from Stalin.”

Dewey had to sit down on hearing that, cold sweat breaking on his forehead.

“An ultimatum? What kind of ultimatum?”

“Basically, Mister President, Stalin is telling us that he will occupy Poland and the Baltic states and that, if we try to stop him with atomic bombs, the United States and our European allies will be struck by massive nuclear strikes. The ultimatum says that the two bombers spotted off our West Coast were only a warning for us. Should I escort the Finnish ambassador to the White House, Mister President?”

“This ultimatum, do you have it on paper?”

“Yes, Mister President.”

“Then, pass my thanks to the ambassador and send him on his way after telling him that I will reply to this Soviet ultimatum before tomorrow morning. Then, come and bring me that ultimatum as fast as you can.”

“Very well, Mister President.”

Cutting the line, Dewey was thoughtful for a long moment, eaten up by worry and bitterness. The American successes in Indochina against the Soviet and Chinese forces had given him some hope that Stalin would finally become reasonable. Yet, despite

that, the Soviet dictator seemed ready for a nuclear arm-wrestling match in order to grab part of Europe. Dewey could not even be certain that his ambitions didn't include more than simply Poland and the Baltic states this time. On the other hand, he could bet that many of his own military leaders would want to reply with nuclear weapons to this ultimatum, despite the risks that this would entail for the United States. Taking a decision, Dewey activated his intercom to call his personal secretary.

"Madam Miller, contact all the heads of the armed services at the Pentagon, as well as the secretaries of defense and of state, and tell them that the meeting planned for four o'clock at the White House will be held instead at the Pentagon, in the conference room of the National Military Command Center. Then, have my limousine come to the main entrance and cancel all my remaining appointments for today and tomorrow. Warn as well Vice-President Warren that he is coming with me."

"Right away, Mister President."

Escorted by close to twenty Secret Service agents, Dewey and his vice-president, Earl Warren, soon got into two White House limousines and drove off towards the Pentagon, escorted by six cars full of agents. Crossing the Potomac River, the convoy arrived at the Pentagon fifteen minutes later, with Dewey and Warren being greeted at the main entrance of the enormous building by General Omar Bradley, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who saluted them before speaking in a somber tone.

"Mister President, the conference room is ready and the service chiefs are waiting for you there, as well as Secretary Herter and Secretary Wilson."

"Thank you, General! Do we know more about those two Soviet bombers spotted off the California coast?"

Bradley answered him while walking besides him towards the NMCC<sup>17</sup> and its conference room.

"We have received by telex copies of the photos taken of the bombers by the crew of the Pan Am flight that encountered them, Mister President. Those photos are being analyzed by our experts right now but those bombers appear quite formidable and are probably able to transport at least one atomic bomb over intercontinental range. I

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<sup>17</sup> NMCC : National Military Command Center. The heart of the American military command network, situated inside the Pentagon.

must say that these bombers come as a very bad surprise for us: nobody knew about the existence of that bomber type before today.”

“And now they show up off the California coast, as if to challenge us.” Said Dewey, displeased. “Did the Air Force at least attempt to intercept them, General?”

Bradley hesitated before answering, knowing that Dewey would not like his answer.

“Uh, it took over twenty minutes for the alert to be passed to our nearest fighter base, Mister President. F-80 fighters took off but they were unable to catch those bombers, having insufficient range.”

Dewey brutally stopped at those last words and fixed Bradley angrily.

“And our new F-83 fighters, they couldn’t intercept those bombers?”

“We still don’t have F-83 operational units on the West Coast, except for a few prototypes in Muroc, Mister President. The number of F-83s in our inventories is still quite limited, like for our B-50 supersonic bomber, and the East Coast and Europe were given priority for their deployments.”

“Decidedly, Stalin seems to have calculated with care his time to act.” Growled Dewey while resuming his walk, followed closely by Earl Warren and the escort agents.

The group arrived a bit before four o’clock at the NMCC’s conference room, where Dewey took place at the big table with Bradley and Warren. Looking at the faces around the table, Dewey saw a mix of uncertainty and worry. His secretary of state, Christian Herter, sitting to his right, then passed to him a two-page document.

“Here is Stalin’s ultimatum delivered by Ambassador Saamin, Mister President. It is clear, direct...and most shocking. I unfortunately don’t believe that it is simply a bluff. Our intelligence about massive concentrations of Soviet units along the Polish and Baltic borders support the seriousness of that ultimatum.”

“Hum... Stalin is certainly clear about any use of nuclear weapons by us or by the British. He says that he is ready to strike massively the continental United States and various West European capitals if any atomic bombs explode over Soviet territory. Does someone have a copy of the photos taken of the bombers seen off California?”

“Here, Mister President!” Replied General Vandenberg, the chief of staff of the Air Force, passing three prints to Dewey via a junior officer. Dewey, like Warren, frowned as he examined the photos.

“Those bombers indeed look formidable. Could they be supersonic?”



"We don't think so, Mister President. They however seemed designed to have a very long range. Their flight up to the California coast from the Soviet Pacific coast implies a range of at least 7,500 miles. This would allow their bombers based on their Pacific coast to reach most of the continental United States, while bombers flying out of Murmansk and passing over the North Pole could strike anywhere along our east coast and even our southern states. The fact that a pair of those bombers was seen so far from the Soviet Union implies that this bomber type is now in active operational service. This unfortunately changes drastically the nuclear equation between us and the Soviets, Mister President. We could strike them hard with our B-50 bombers, but the Soviets can now strike us as well and we could not be certain of being able to intercept all of their bombers. Any nuclear exchange would end with the destruction of at least a few of our cities or bases, Mister President."

"And how many atomic bombs do the Soviets possess, General?"

Vandenberg shrugged, embarrassment on his face.

"Nobody knows for sure, Mister President. We have only estimates at this time."

"Then, give me your best figures, General."

"Our best intelligence estimates are that the Soviets could have about 300 atomic bombs ready to be delivered by bombers, plus about fifty nuclear-tipped SS-3 medium range ballistic missiles able to reach most cities in Western Europe, including London."

"And our own nuclear arsenal?" Asked Dewey after swallowing that information.

"We presently have in service a total of 960 nuclear bombs delivered by air, plus thirty atomic shells for our Army heavy howitzers. Our most powerful bomb has a power of 160 kilotons. Mister President, in view of our probable nuclear superiority, I would advise to return Stalin's bluff: if he attacks Poland, then we will devastate the Soviet Union."

"At the price of how many of our cities, General Vandenberg?" Replied at once Dewey, horrified by such a cold calculation. "And what would our European allies would say to seeing their capitals go up in smoke? I doubt that even the British would be ready to test Stalin's ultimatum."

"But, Mister President, our doctrine is based on a massive nuclear response in case of Soviet attack. What is the point of having nuclear weapons if we are not ready to use them?"

Dewey's face hardened as something that Ingrid Dows had told him many times in the past came back to his mind.

"General, your question actually raises a very good point. If the fact that the enemy can reply with nuclear weapons is sufficient to limit or even stop us from using our own nuclear weapons, then why have we based so much of our defense doctrine and budgets on our nuclear forces?"

"Precisely to prevent the Soviets from using their own atomic weapons, Mister President."

"Great!" Said Dewey on a sarcastic tone. "We spend billions of dollars on our nuclear forces, simply to arrive at a point where neither us nor the Soviet can use those bombs without mutually destroying each other. In the meantime, the cuts made to our conventional forces in order to buy all that nuclear weaponry leave us too weak militarily to oppose the Soviets in conventional ground combat. Truly great!"

The generals and admirals present around the table lowered their heads at Dewey's stinging remark, as did Charles Wilson, the secretary of defense. Most of them had fought tooth and nail during the last few years to get as big a piece of the American nuclear pie as they could, to increase the prestige and importance of their respective services. On his part, Dewey could now clearly see how much most of his generals and admirals lacked in true vision and passed the good of their respective services ahead of the national good. Getting truly pissed off by now, Dewey looked at General Joseph Lawton Collins, the Army Chief of Staff.

"General Collins, remind me what are our conventional forces in Europe at this time."

Having recently reviewed those figures, Collins answered him from memory.

"Mister President, our forces in Germany consist mostly of the 7<sup>th</sup> Army, with three divisions in place, and in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Air Force, which counts four wings of combat aircraft, plus transport and support squadrons. We also have the 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet in the Meditarreanean. The commander of our European command, or EUCOM, is General Matthew Ridgway, a solid and very competent officer. The commander of our air assets in Germany, Major General Dows, is also a very competent officer. We in fact couldn't ask for better commanders for our forces in Europe, Mister President."

"And have Generals Ridgway and Dows been informed about the Soviet ultimatum?" Asked Dewey, assuming that such an elementary thing had been taken

care of. His mouth opened from shock when Bradley answered him in an embarrassed tone.

“Not yet, Mister President. I wanted to wait until after our discussion, so that I could then inform General Ridgway of the directives we would decide now. The Soviets probably won’t move for a few days yet, time for them to evaluate our diplomatic response.”

Dewey then exploded, completely frustrated.

“Two Soviet heavy bombers appear off the California coast and we get an ultimatum from Stalin concerning Europe, and you didn’t think it necessary to warn at once the commanders of our first line forces in Europe, General Bradley? I want you to call at once General Ridgway! I want to talk to him.”

“Yes, Mister President!” Said Bradley before making frantic signs to an aide.

While an officer was opening a line to the EUCOM headquarters in Germany, Dewey grimly made a mental assessment of his generals and admirals here in Washington. He then remembered a conversation he had once with Ingrid Dows, where he had asked her her opinion about the quality of the American military leadership. Dows had then named in decreasing order of competence and strategic genius the generals she knew, listing in order MacArthur, Patton and Kenney. He had then asked her why she had not included Bradley or Eisenhower, to which she had replied that she considered Bradley as a general with an overblown reputation and with no real genius. As for Eisenhower, while Dows had confessed that she had immense respect for him, she only rated her as a top of the line diplomat, planner and team leader, but not as a fighting general. She also had not been kind to British generals, particularly Montgomery, and had made a grimace at the mention of Admiral Mountbatten. Dewey was now starting to see what she had meant about Bradley. He was finally drawn out of his thoughts when Bradley announced that he had General Ridgway on an encrypted line. Grabbing the receiver of the telephone in front of him, Dewey cleared his voice and spoke in a measured tone, while the officers and politicians present listened on their own telephones.

“General Ridgway, this is the President speaking. I am sorry for calling at what must be a very late hour in Germany, but we have a delicate situation that has shown itself here in Washington concerning the Soviets.”

To the surprise of Dewey, Ridgway answered him in a firm, alert tone, being apparently fully awake.

"If you are calling about the Soviet ultimatum concerning Poland and the Baltic states, Mister President, then I am already aware of it. German Chancellor Adenauer, as well as Polish Prime Minister Zwiuki and French President Auriol, all called me in a near state of panic one hour ago to ask me if the United States would defend Poland, especially with atomic weapons. I answered that I did not have the personal authority to permit the use of nuclear weapons and that our response to the Soviets would be purely conventional, unless ordered otherwise by you. I however have taken on myself to put all my forces on maximum alert for two days now, due to the growing concentration of Soviet units along the Polish and Baltic borders, and have ordered my units to start dispersing out of their garrisons."

"Excellent initiative, General Ridgway. Know however that an incident a few hours ago off the coast of California has now made any use of atomic weapons against the Soviets rather problematic. General Vandenberg, please tell General Ridgway what you told me about those Soviet bombers."

Dewey let Vandenberg speak with Ridgway for a couple of minutes, then returned on the line.

"General Ridgway, what are your latest intelligence estimates on the size of the Soviet forces massed near the Polish and Baltic borders?"

"Mister President, I estimate the deployed Soviet forces at over ninety divisions facing Poland and twenty more divisions facing the Baltic states. Those divisions in turn total about 14,000 tanks and 11,000 artillery pieces. Our latest high altitude reconnaissance flights have also revealed the presence of about 1,800 combat aircraft massed on the various Soviet airfields in Ukraine and Belorussia."

Dewey paled on hearing those numbers.

"My God! And what can the Poles and Balts oppose to that, General?"

"The Balts, nearly nothing, Mister President. I expect them to be swept away in a few hours at the most. As for the Poles, they have now started to mobilize their forces and told me that they will fight to the death. They still remember the Soviet treachery of 1939 and the Katyn Forest massacres. They however have only the equivalent of eight divisions and 300 combat aircraft, nearly all of the latter being propeller aircraft. I would thus like to concentrate my efforts in helping the Poles resist the coming Soviet offensive. President Auriol informed me via his military staff that he was ordering a

general mobilization in France and that the French forces based in Germany will support my units here.”

“But you have only three divisions and about 200 combat aircraft, Ridgway.” Exclaimed Bradley, jumping in the conversation. “By committing your forces in the defense of Poland, you risk leaving Germany wide open. This is a hopeless fight, especially since we can’t use our atomic weapons. You would be better to take defensive positions along the eastern borders of Germany, as our present contingency plans dictate.”

Dewey, who was about to call Bradley to order, then detected a sudden hardening in Ridgway’s voice as he replied to his superior.

“General Bradley, I perfectly realize how outnumbered my forces are, but I am not ready to abandon the Poles the way the British seem ready to do right now. We have a defense pact with Poland and I intend to honor it. Major General Dows, who had been anticipating such a Soviet offensive for a couple of weeks now, is ready to launch on my order a preemptive air offensive against the Soviet forces. The goal of that air offensive will be to nail the Soviet Air Force on the ground and to destroy the enemy forward supply dumps and its lines of communication. If successful, this will give a chance to the Polish forces to resist the Soviets, time for the latter to burn their initial frontline stocks of fuel and ammunition and then be forced to slow down or stop. I am going at the same time to send my helicopter brigade to Poland, to support directly the Polish forces.”

“Not before I authorize such a move, Ridgway.” Said Bradley on the line, attracting a black look from Dewey. “We must study carefully the situation before committing our forces, if we commit them in Poland.”

“General Bradley, with all the respect due to you, we don’t have the time anymore to discuss around a map. My instinct, which General Dows shares with me, is that today’s Soviet ultimatum means that they will attack early tomorrow, or even tonight. If we concede the initiative to the enemy and let him launch first his aircraft, then our forces will be overwhelmed and crushed and we will lose this war on the first day. If Poland falls, then Germany will become indefensible with my actual forces, and the Soviets know this.”

“Gentlemen,” cut in Dewey, “I believe that such a decision to attack or not and defend the Poles is mine to take as commander in chief. General Ridgway, how much time would Major General Dows need to launch her air offensive once I authorize it?”

"Five minutes, Mister President."

Dewey was left speechless for a moment by that answer, like the generals and admirals around him. Ridgway then went on.

"General Dows used the past two weeks to devise a contingency plan for just the present situation and started dispersing her squadrons three days ago. Her planes are fully armed and fuelled on their airfields and her pilots have already been briefed on their intended targets. Dows herself will fly in the initial air attack wave and is presently waiting besides her plane for the authorization to attack. I already authorized in principle her attack plan yesterday. You just need to let go her leash, Mister President."

"Uh, and you think that her plan could succeed, General?"

"If she can take the initiative and obtain the benefit of surprise before the Soviets start their offensive, then yes, Mister President. While I have you on the phone with the service chiefs, could I ask you to relay a demand from General Dows to be able to use the 353<sup>rd</sup> Heavy Bomber Squadron of the Strategic Air Command, which is presently deployed in Germany, for conventional bombing missions?"

"I believe that to be a reasonable request, General Ridgway. General Vandenberg, do you see a problem with that?"

Vandenberg hesitated for a moment, thinking about the possible reaction of Curtiss LeMay, SAC's temperamental commander.

"Let me first call General LeMay, Mister President."

Dewey then had enough of all this pussyfooting and slammed his open hand on the table, raising his voice.

"The hell with what LeMay will think about this, General! We have wasted enough time here already and our commanders in Europe need support, now! I want those B-50s transferred right now under the tactical control of General Dows, ready to execute conventional bombing missions. If General LeMay objects to that or tries to impede this decision, then he will have to find himself a new job. Let's move, gentlemen!"

Dewey then returned on the line with Ridgway as Vandenberg and the other generals present smarted from his criticism.

"General Ridgway, you may tell General Dows that the 353<sup>rd</sup> Heavy Bomber Squadron is now under her tactical control."

"Dows will be happy to hear that, Mister President: she was really short of planes to strike quickly the enemy railway network."

"Would it be possible for me to speak with her, General?"

"Certainly, Mister President. Just one moment, please."

Dewey only had to wait for a few seconds before he heard the young voice of Ingrid Dows. He was also able to hear in the background other noises, including the whistling of the wind and vehicles circulating around her.

"This is Major General Ingrid Dows, Mister President."

"General Dows, I was just informed of the situation in Europe by General Ridgway, who told me about your air attack plan. You now have my express authorization to attack at will the Soviet forces massed along the Polish borders, as well as their supporting air units, and this the moment you are ready. I also ordered that the 353<sup>rd</sup> Heavy Bomber Squadron be temporarily put under your tactical command for conventional strike mission. Make a good use of them and good luck, General Dows."

"Thank you, Mister President. My planes will now start to fly out. I will now have to leave this line."

Dewey heard her shout orders for her pilots to climb in their cockpits before Ridgway came back on the line.

"What are your orders for my forces, Mister President?"

"Do the maximum, both in the air and on the ground, to stop the Soviet invasion with the help of the Polish forces and of the other allied forces that would become available. My only restriction is to avoid the use of nuclear weapons unless I give my express permission for such use. Also, direct your operations the best you can and as you see fit: I give you a total free hand in this. The rest of the American forces will support you to the maximum, including by sending you reinforcements. As of now, consider your forces to be on DEFCON 1 against the Soviets. Good luck, General!"

"Thank you, Mister President. We will do all that is humanly possible to stop those Soviets."

Dewey then closed the line and looked severely at the generals and admirals around the table, concentrating in particular on Bradley.

"Gentlemen, you now have the job of supporting and reinforcing to the maximum our units in Europe. We have two of our best commanders in place there and I expect that no one here at the Pentagon will impose restrictions on them or will impede in any way their efforts. Put the rest of our forces on DEFCON 1, but make sure that our atomic weapons stay under my exclusive control unless released by me. General Vandenberg, make sure that this directive is obeyed. If a single American atomic bomb

is launched without my express permission, then the responsible ones will be immediately relieved of command and will be court-martialed. In the meantime, I will contact the Polish Prime Minister and the other European leaders concerned by this, in order to coordinate our resistance to the Soviets. Vice-President Warren, you will now have to leave Washington at once, to ensure an executive command continuity if there ever is an enemy nuclear strike on Washington. You will go install yourself at the SAC headquarters in Nebraska: they have excellent strategic communications means there, as well as an underground command bunker.”

“Understood, Mister President.” Replied Earl Warren, shaken by the gravity of the situation. He then left the conference room, accompanied by Dewey and Christian Herter. The graying diplomat shook slowly his head as they walked towards the exit, surrounded by Secret Service agents.

“Even if we manage to stop the Soviets, the damage in Europe will be appalling, Mister President. Expect a lot of timidity, if not political cowardice, from most European leaders not directly threatened by the Soviets.”

“Then, I expect you to help me convince these cowards to help, Christian. Talking of cowards, what did you think of the various reactions of our generals and admirals?”

“Let’s say that I was quite disappointed by their lack of foresight and their reliance on nuclear weapons. On the other hand, the fact that this young Dows already had an attack plan ready to go frankly stunned me. That girl is incredible.”

“Yeah! She is a stark contrast to the collection of paper shufflers we just left.” Replied Dewey in a bitter tone.

## **22:43 (Germany Time) / 16:43 (Washington Time)**

### **Neubiberg Airfield, southern suburbs of Munich**

#### **Bavaria, German Federal Republic**

Ingrid, wearing her bulky pressurized flight suit, like Julia Miller, felt a mix of excitement and worry as she took off from Neubiberg in her faithful F-83A ‘LADY HAWK’. Excitement for the fact that President Dewey had given her a free hand, something that would give her command a chance to win this new war. Worry because, apart from Teresa James and the other female aircrews that had come with her from Palestine, she didn’t know really the true level of professionalism of the male pilots of her



3<sup>rd</sup> Air Force. She could rightly claim that she had trained for years the women of the 99<sup>th</sup> Wing to a level of competence rarely seen, but she had only one month by now to inspect and evaluate her new command. From what she had learned during her previous years as an American officer, Ingrid knew too well that many American unit commanders often followed the path of least effort. Others put the emphasis on points that had little to do with combat efficiency and more to do with appearances, so that they would look good at first glance. Colonel Morgan's negligence, when he had let his deputy reject the need for pressurized suits, was an example among many of a standard in leadership and training that was either deficient or skewered. She however had no choice now than to use what she had at hand presently.

Followed by the planes of Gertrude Meserve and of her six other female F-83 crews, the only ones with her and Teresa to possess the pressurized suits allowing the use of the 'Tornado Funnel' tactic, Ingrid climbed rapidly in the night sky, piloting with the help of her instruments and of her infrared cameras. Her navigation lights were on at the moment, to facilitate flying as a group while over German territory and to help avoid collisions. That last danger was very real, with Neubiberg being close to the Munich International Airport. Taking a northeastern heading, Ingrid climbed gradually to an altitude of 20,000 meters, much higher than most other existing planes but still well short of the operational ceiling of the F-83. Her group of eight fighter-bombers, each carrying underwing fuel drop tanks in view of the range necessitated by their mission, soon overflew the Czech border and went on towards Poland, flying at subsonic speed in order to economize fuel. Julia Miller, who was carefully monitoring their navigation, spoke from her aft seat to Ingrid as they were about to overfly the Polish city of Radom.

"It is time to climb to our maximum altitude, Ingrid."

"Understood, Julia!" Replied Ingrid on her intercom before activating her radio to speak with her group.

"Fifinella One to Fifinella Red: start climbing to top altitude. Oracle Three, from Fifinella One: we will soon start to tango, over."

The voice of the operations officer aboard the EC-200R electronic command and reconnaissance aircraft flying along the Polish-Soviet border answered her at once.

"Oracle Three, understood!"

Knowing that close to 200 combat aircraft would soon follow her and that the success of her present mission would decide how heavy her casualties would be, Ingrid followed

carefully the flight profile previously calculated by Julia, sending on her signal a short order on the radio.

"Fifinella One to Fifinella Red, proceed on your individual mission profiles. We will see each other back at the base, out."

Without answering her message, Gertrude Meserve and her six female crews then split from Ingrid's plane, each adopting specific headings and speeds that would make them arrive over their objectives at roughly the same time. Those objectives were in fact widely dispersed all over Belorussia and the Ukraine, deep in Soviet territory. Ingrid watched with a pinch of her heart her pilots disperse and disappear in the night sky: one or more of them could very well never return from this mission.

"Good luck, girls!" She whispered in her sealed helmet. She then concentrated back on her navigation, alternating looks to her instruments and outside her canopy. The Earth's curvature was now clearly visible in the night from her actual altitude. As their F-83 flew deeper and deeper inside enemy airspace, Julia reported to her the various air surveillance radars detected by her electronic warfare equipment. By comparing the intercepted radar signals with a list of Soviet radars located and classified during the last few days by EC-200R aircraft that had been flying non-stop for a week over Poland, she would be able to warn Ingrid when they approached one of their designated targets. The eight F-83s on penetration over Soviet territory had as their priority goal the elimination of selected enemy air defense radars, to blind the enemy air defenses and to open a door for the 200 combat aircraft that had taken off from their airbases in Germany thirty minutes after Ingrid's group.

As Ingrid was overflying the city of Borisov in Belorussia and was continuing towards the Northeast, Julia suddenly spoke in an excited tone.

"I am starting to detect the signals from the radars of the Vitebsk site, Ingrid. Signal strength is however much lower than needed for detection: we will be passing well above the antenna lobes of those radars."

"As long as the Soviets will not put in service radars that could detect planes above 80,000 feet, they will keep open the door to our F-83s. That failing will now cost them...dearly."

"My trigger finger is already hitching." Joked Julia, trying to hide her nervousness: in any other plane than the F-83, this would be a near suicide mission. "Heading correction: three degrees to the left, Ingrid."

"Heading correction done. How many radar signals are you detecting from Vitebsk?"

"Three! One long range surveillance radar; one height-finding radar and one short range air traffic control radar. The last one is slightly separated from the other two and is probably the approach control radar for the Vitebsk Northeast airfield. I am also now detecting something else but the signal is still too weak for identification."

"A possible fire control radar for antiaircraft guns. We will have to be careful about it."

Nine minutes later, Julia spoke again, tense.

"I can now identify that unknown radar signal: it is effectively a FIRE CAN fire control radar. There is thus a minimum of one battery of antiaircraft guns in Vitebsk Northeast, probably 37mm or 57mm guns."

"Shit! Those guns could hurt our incoming attack planes. Add that FIRE CAN radar to your target list for our anti-radiation missiles."

"Right away, Ingrid." Replied Julia, who was then silent for the next two minutes before speaking again.

"We are now nearly at the vertical of the Vitebsk radar station. You can start your dive, Ingrid."

"Then hold on to your stomach: the roller coaster is starting."

Ingrid then lowered her two engine power settings to idle and activated their thrust reversing mechanisms, while opening her dive airbrakes and pushing on her control stick, putting her F-83 in a vertiginous eighty degree dive. Pushing back up her engine power throttles, she was able to use her jet engines as additional brakes to her dive. That allowed her to dive much more slowly than normal and to refine her aim on her target. She could now clearly see the city of Vitebsk, lit up as in peacetime, as well as the lights of the airfield to the Northeast, thirty kilometers below her plane. Looking around quickly, she saw as well the lights of the two secondary military airfields of Vitebsk, one to the West and the other to the Southwest. Once down to an altitude of twenty kilometers and with the signals of the enemy radars clearly pinpointed by her instruments, Julia gave a warning to Ingrid.

"I am within missile range. Starting to shoot now."

Selecting one of her AGM-2R NAGA anti-radiation missiles carried by their F-83, Julia activated it and programmed its passive seeker to the frequency used by the long range

surveillance radar positioned on top of a hill west of the city. A shrill tone in her headset told her after two seconds that the missile had acquired its target and was now locked on to it. Pushing her firing button just after warning Ingrid that she was firing, she was momentarily blinded by the long trail of fire from the missile rocket motor as it flew off in the night. Not wasting one second, Julia then selected and fired one after the other three more NAGA missiles, targeting the other radars active around Vitebsk. By the time that the four missiles were fired, their F-83 was at an altitude of thirteen kilometers, still diving at a vertiginous angle. The first missile impacted and exploded as the F-84 came down to 10,000 meters. Julia shouted in triumph a bit after Ingrid saw the explosion from the one hundred kilos explosive fragmentation warhead of the missile.

“The signal from the surveillance radar just disappeared.”

She then announced the results from her other missiles as the enemy radar signals shut off one by one.

“I have no radar signal left on my detectors, Ingrid: Vitebsk is now blind.”

“Yes, but it is not inoffensive yet. Look at our forward FLIR camera: there are more planes on the northeast airfield than when we did our photo reconnaissance mission three days ago.”

Julia’s blood froze when she saw on the television screen switched to their forward FLIR camera the over eighty jet aircraft crammed on the Soviet airfield.

“My god! I see at least two aviation regiments on the airfield, one of Il-28 medium bombers and one of Mig-15 or Mig-17 fighters.”

“I will go have a look at the two other airfields: I want to be sure about this.”

Ingrid then started the delicate procedure to come out of her dive, throttling down her engines and disengaging their thrust reversers before pulling on her stick and retracting her dive brakes. She finally got her F-83 back on level flight at an altitude of 5,000 meters and flew around the city to go examine the Vitebsk Southwest airfield. She was able to count with Julia about thirty propeller-driven, twin-engined Tu-2 bombers, as well as over forty propeller-driven Yak-9 fighters. As she was flying towards the third airfield, to the west of the city, a dozen antiaircraft guns and heavy machine guns opened fire, spraying tracer projectiles around the dark sky. Their fire was however wild and seemed to sweep the sky at random.

“They heard our engines and are firing blind.” Gussed Ingrid out loud. “At least, we now know what kind of defenses they have here.”

"Yeah, and more guns are now firing from the two other airfields." Announced Julia. "Each airfield seems to be defended by one or two antiaircraft batteries."

"Useful information for our pilots about to attack here." Said Ingrid, smiling. "Let's see what the last airfield is containing."

The two women found a total of close to sixty Tu-2 propeller-driven bombers on that last airfield. The antiaircraft fire had now stopped, the Soviet gunners probably realizing that they were wasting their ammunition for nothing. Satisfied by her work in Vitebsk, Ingrid then headed towards her second objective, the radars around Orsha, letting Julia send an encrypted radio message to the EC-200R flying presently over Poland, informing its operation officer of their observations in Vitebsk. The EC-200R in turn relayed that information to the squadron of F-10 FALCON fighters on their way to strike the airfields of Vitebsk. In Orsha, Ingrid repeated her high altitude dive attack, destroying the air traffic control radar there and also finding sixty jet fighters and medium bombers, plus thirty propeller-driven Tu-4 heavy bombers.

Seriously shaken by the intimidating number of Soviet planes they had found to date, Ingrid headed back West, towards the Lithuanian border and her last objective, a group of air defense radars belonging to one of the Soviet field armies massed along the border. She smiled with satisfaction when Julia announced that she was not detecting a single air surveillance radar anymore across the whole of Belorussia.

"Our girls did their job well. Our other pilots will now have a good chance to surprise and destroy on the ground the Soviet Air Force in the West. If all goes well, the Polish Air Force will in turn be free to bomb and strafe Soviet ground columns at will."

"Yes, but the Soviet antiaircraft artillery will still be a formidable enemy, with its thousands of guns and heavy machine guns. And this doesn't even take into account the tens of thousands of heavy machine guns mounted on Soviet armored vehicles." Ingrid had to cool down at those words: Julia was unfortunately too right.

Julia's warning came true when they attacked the group of five Soviet Army radars, one a surveillance radar and the four others being fire control radars, which were camouflaged but active to the west of Lepel, near the Lithuanian border. The sky filled at once with tracer projectiles fired at random but still forming a dangerous curtain of fire. With a pale Julia hanging on firmly in her seat, Ingrid twisted her F-83 brutally at low

altitude to avoid the projectiles while searching for a worthy target for her own guns and rockets. She suddenly sighted through her FLIR cameras a long convoy of trucks rolling along a road towards the border. Many of the vehicles were tanker trucks. Quickly lining them up in her gun sight, Ingrid fired half of her 120 75mm rockets, spreading them down the truck column and making many of them explode in spectacular fireballs. As she was leveling her aircraft, pursued by tracers, Julia shouted a warning.

“ARTILLERY POSITION AT ELEVEN O’CLOCK, ONE KILOMETER AWAY!”

“Thank you!” Simply said Ingrid, reversing her turn to line up on the Soviet pieces. She shouted in triumph when her FLIR camera showed her a long line of stationary trucks carrying sets of big caliber rocket launching tubes.

“YES! BMD-20<sup>18</sup>s!”

Selecting the rest of her 75mm rockets, Ingrid copiously sprayed the battalion of rocket launchers, making the big 200mm rockets explode in their tubes and making the artillery position disappear in an orgy of explosions. As Ingrid was climbing to take back altitude, Julia spoke from her aft seat with a pleading tone.

“Uh, can we return to base now, Ingrid?”

“Naah! I still have a full load of 30mm shells for my guns. I’m going to offer myself those trucks full of reload rockets hiding along the trees of that clearing.”

Julia sighed with relief when Ingrid finally decided to take the direction of the Southwest after two gun strafing passes marked by spectacular explosions and by the firing of thousands of tracer bullets towards their aircraft.

## **23:52 (Germany Time)**

### **F-83A of Captain Catherine ‘Cappy’ Vail**

#### **1,600 meters above the Ukraine, west of Zhitomir**

Returning from her mission over the Kiev area, where she had destroyed the surveillance radar and the three fire control radars for SA-1 surface-to-air missiles defending the city and its four airfields, Catherine ‘Cappy’ Vail had just destroyed three Soviet Army anti-aircraft fire control radars near the Polish border. She and her radar officer, Captain Angela Harper, were now searching for a worthy target for their

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<sup>18</sup> BMD-20 : Soviet heavy rocket artillery system, with four tubes for 200mm caliber rockets mounted on a truck chassis. Maximum range of the rocket : 19.5 km.

unguided rockets and 30mm cannons while following the rail line leading to Rovno, in Polish territory. Angela suddenly spoke excitedly in the intercom.

"Cappy, I see what seems to be an enormous field depot summarily camouflaged at two o'clock, one mile ahead."

"Okay, let's go check it out." Answered the 31 year-old brunette while throwing her powerful fighter-bomber in a right turn. She then saw on her frontal infrared camera screen what had attracted the attention of her comrade and friend.

"Christ! The word 'enormous' was justified, Angela. Look at all those piles of crates: there must be hundreds of thousands of them. I also see trucks circulating between the rows of piles. Sold! I am going to use our 75mm rockets."

First circling around the depot in order to line up parallel to the long piles of crates, Catherine selected half of her 75mm rockets for a long salvo. Lining up her sight on the longest line of piles in the center of the depot, she then pulled her firing trigger while slowly raising the nose of her aircraft, sending her rockets down the lines of piles. The rockets, rather imprecise weapons that were meant for area targets like this one, flew off in the night ahead of long trails of fire and, drifting slightly with distance, hit the depot in a large, long oval pattern. Catherine's eyes opened wide with horror when her rockets initiated a series of titanic explosions just ahead of her aircraft.

"SHIT! THAT'S AN AMMUNITION DEPOT!"

As nearly 60,000 tons of artillery shells and rockets and other munitions started to explode in an infernal chain reaction, she desperately tried to turn away but was struck by a powerful shock wave. Her F-83 was thrown around like a simple toy, while she felt numerous violent impacts on her plane. She was still fighting to regain control of her fighter-bomber when her instruments dashboard lit up like a Christmas tree, while Angela shouted on the intercom.

"OUR STARBOARD REACTOR IS ON FIRE! WE ALSO LOST OUR PORT CANARD SURFACE!"

"SHIT, SHIT, SHIT! WE'RE GOING TO HAVE TO WALK VERY SOON!"

Replied Catherine between her clenched teeth while regaining a precarious control of her aircraft. Her F-83 was however clearly not in a state to fly much longer now. She was also way too low to eject but she detested the idea of being possibly captured by the Soviets, especially after causing such mayhem in their lines. She then spotted back the Kiev-Rovno rail line to her right, thanks to the continuous light flashes from the exploding ammunition depot. Without really thinking, she turned her crippled plane

around as best she could and started following the rail line westward at low altitude. Her remaining engine was however losing power gradually, while she could barely control her increasingly unstable aircraft.

“Come on, baby, you can do it! Just a few more miles...”

Her port jet engine died down in a long whine less than a minute later, just as a small river appeared in front of the F-83: the Polish border was in sight! Her heart in her throat and being tense as a steel bar, Catherine controlled as best she could the fall of her crippled plane, which trailed a long tail of fire from its starboard engine. Raising the nose of her F-83 at the ultimate second, Catherine succeeded in making her plane ricochet on the surface of the water, just forty meters to the north of the railway bridge crossing the river. The F-83 bounced on the water by a few meters, just enough to avoid brutally crashing against the western bank of the river, then belly-landed in a cultivated field bordered by a forest. In a last reflex before they impacted the first trees, Catherine pulled the canopy ejection handle, then protected her face with her forearms. Thankfully for her and Angela, the canopy flew off, barely one second before the F-83 slid inside the forest, ripping off both of its wings on impact with the first trees. In something that was just short of a miracle, the forward section of the fuselage, which contained the cockpit, only scraped against a big tree instead of squarely hitting it. Breaking off from the rest of the plane, the forward section spun wildly around like a toupee before crashing against another tree and coming to a stop while lying on its right side. Seriously shaken by the impact, Catherine needed many seconds before recovering her wits and looking around her.

“ANGELA, ARE YOU ALRIGHT?”

“Uh, I think so, Cappy.” Answered back her radar officer, sounding dazzled. “My god, what a crash!”

“Let’s get out of here before the fuel and our cannon ammunition catch fire.”

Undoing her own harness and crawling out of the cockpit, Catherine went to help Angela, whose seat harness seemed jammed. She finally had to use her survival knife to cut the harness and free Angela. Before running away from the wreck, she however took the time to recuperate their two M2A2 carbines, stowed besides their ejection seats. Angela, who had opened the visor of her pressurized suit’s helmet, looked at Catherine with fear barely disguised as she took the carbine offered by her pilot.

“Do you think that we are still in Soviet territory, Cappy?”



"I am not sure. However, remember Ingrid's warnings about what we can expect from the Soviets if captured: they will want to know the secrets of our F-83 and we can only expect the worst from them. Leave your last bullet to yourself, if it comes to that." Angela paled but nodded her head and followed her through the forest, running away from the crash site. Thankfully, the fact that the forward section had broken away had left it some distance from the rest of the plane, which was now burning merrily and illuminating the forest around it. The 30mm cannon shells still stored in the fuselage then started cooking off and exploding, forcing the two aviatrix to flatten themselves on the ground behind a large tree. The shells kept exploding for over two minutes, to Catherine's frustration, who wanted to get away from the wreck as quickly as possible in order to disappear in the woods, in case they were still behind Soviet lines.

As it finally became relatively safe to get up, Catherine saw from a corner of one eye a number of silhouettes approaching in their back. The newcomers were visibly armed and were at least a dozen men, advancing in extended line towards the crash site.

"Angela, soldiers are approaching behind us." Said in a low voice Catherine while grabbing her carbine. That simple movement however attracted the attention of at least two of the soldiers, who immediately crouched down while pointing their rifles towards the two Americans while shouting warnings to their comrades in a guttural tongue. Angela Harper shivered with fear as she pointed her carbine towards the soldiers.

"Are they Russians, Cappy?"

The latter sighed with relief as the soldiers shouted more words while crouching behind trees and pointing their weapons.

"No, I don't think so. I believe that I recognized a few words in Polish. Lower your carbine for the moment but don't let it go. I will try something."

Slowly raising her two arms in the air while still holding her carbine, Catherine shouted at the soldiers in English.

"WE ARE AMERICANS! WHO ARE YOU?"

After a short hesitation, a soldier shouted back.

"POLSKY! YOU AMERICANS?"

"YES!"

One of the soldiers then got up and slung his rifle before walking towards the two aviatrix. The American women soon could clearly detail the soldier with the help of the light from their burning aircraft: the man had Polish insignias on his uniform.

“You can relax, Angela: they are Polish soldiers.”

Getting up, Catherine faced the soldier, who was eyeing her pressurized suit as she was some kind of Martian.

“You, pilots?” Asked in rudimentary English the soldier. Catherine answered him while slinging her own weapon.

“Yes! We are Americans and we just bombed the Soviets.”

The soldier suddenly smiled from one ear to the other while pointing the impressive fireworks from the exploding Soviet ammunition dump, clearly visible in the distant night.

“Ah, you, boom?”

“Yes, me, boom.” Replied Catherine, amused. The soldier then turned his head to speak in Polish with his comrades, who approached while slinging their rifles. He then looked back at the aviatrix and spoke in a polite tone.

“You, follow!”

Catherine and Angela obeyed with good grace, too happy to have escaped the Soviets, and followed the soldiers to a small farm situated about 300 meters away from the crash site. The farm turned out to be a Polish Army tactical command post, where a young captain greeted them in a decent English while saluting them, with the Americans returning his salute.

“Ladies, I am Captain Vladimir Tzerniky, of the Polish Army. You are American pilots?”

“Captains Catherine Vail and Angela Harper, United States Air Force. We were coming back from a mission deep inside the Soviet Union when we found a large depot and decided to shoot at it. Unfortunately, that was an ammunition depot and the explosions damaged our plane, forcing us to crash land here. We would need some transportation to go to your nearest airfield, where we could call our base and arrange our return trip.”

“I will call the command post of my battalion, to have a vehicle come and pick you up. Where is your base, exactly?”

Catherine hesitated before answering in a vague manner.

“In Germany, Captain.”

Tzerniky didn't seem offended by her caution and made a short call on one of his field telephones before looking soberly at Catherine.

"Captain Vail, my unit was just mobilized and we don't know much about the situation on the other side of the border. Were the Soviets really ready to invade Poland?"

"Unfortunately yes, Captain Tzerniky. The Soviet airfields we overflew were all crammed with combat aircraft. Also, dozens of Soviet divisions are massed along your border and will probably attack at dawn. If this could raise the morale of your men, I can tell you that our own aircraft are at this moment hitting those Soviet airfields and destroying the enemy airforce on the ground. Your own airforce will thus have the sky to itself tomorrow morning to attack the Soviet ground units and support you."

Tzerniky smiled and nodded his head at those words.

"This will effectively encourage my men, Captain Vail. Judging by the show visible to the East, the depot that you have struck must be a big one."

"Oh yes! It probably contained a few tens of thousands of tons of ammunition and was at least an army-level depot. Its loss should hurt the Soviets."

"I hope so, Captain. Would you like some tea or coffee, you and your comrade?"

"Coffee will be nice, Captain. Uh, the forward section of our plane, which contains the cockpit, broke away from the rest of our aircraft and is mostly intact. It contains a lot of classified electronic equipment that cannot fall into Soviet hands. Would it be possible for you to have it destroyed?"

"I will send right away a team of combat engineers to do the work."

Tzerniky then offered them seats and had a young soldier serve them coffee while giving orders around. Twenty minutes later, a Polish jeep arrived for them. Three hours later, the two American women were in Lvov Airport, where they found six American C-152 transport aircraft busy unloading the ground support personnel and equipment of a tactical helicopter battalion from the 7<sup>th</sup> U.S. Army. Catherine smiled and patted Angela's shoulder on seeing the big four-engined jet transports.

"We will soon be back in Neubiberg. We truly can thank our luck, Angela."

"I already did that a while ago, Cappy."

**03:29 (Belorussia Time)**

**Sunday, August 2, 1953 'C'**

**Forward command post of the Western Group of Fronts**

**Bobruysk, Belorussia**

**Soviet Union**

"ALL OUR TACTICAL AVIATION HAS BEEN DESTROYED ON THE GROUND? HOW IS THAT POSSIBLE? WHAT WERE OUR RADAR OPERATORS DOING? SLEEPING AT THEIR POSTS?"

The major general in charge of the tactical aviation supporting the Western Group of Fronts, which controlled the forces about to invade Poland and the Baltic states, stiffened and paled under the remonstrance served to him by Marshal Konstantin Rokossovskiy. The latter, who answered directly to Moscow and Stalin, was known to be a man without pity for those who he judged to be at fault or of being negligent about their duties towards the Communist Party.

"We still don't know how the enemy planes were able to evade detection by our radars, comrade Marshal. Our surveillance and air defense radars were in fact the first to be struck and destroyed. The enemy objective was probably to gain air superiority before the start of our invasion. Most of our frontline air defense radars at divisional and army levels were also destroyed, along with a number of other targets."

Rokossovskiy stared at the major general with contained fury, asking his next question in a dangerous tone.

"I hope that you have a solution to offer to give back air support to my troops?"

"Uh, I can ask for the support of our heavy bombers, comrade Marshal."

"THEN WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR? GET TO IT!"

As the head of his tactical aviation hurried out of the operations section of the field headquarters, Rokossovskiy slammed his fist on the map table in front of him. His offensive was due to start in a mere hour with a massive artillery barrage. Half an hour after that, his frontline troops would rush the enemy borders at dawn. However, without the support of his tactical aviation, the objectives situated deeper in enemy territory will stay intact, something that could only help the enemy in resisting the Soviet troops. Rokossovskiy did not doubt that his soldiers could still sweep away the Poles and the Balts, but the price to pay was going to be higher. That last factor did not weigh much in

the mind of the marshal, for whom his soldiers were only mere instruments for him and the Party. He was much more worried about what Stalin would say about this fiasco.

Rokossovskiy's chief of staff, a man he considered competent and loyal, approached him hesitantly to ask a question in a low voice.

"Shouldn't we delay the time of the attack until we could get more air support assets, comrade Marshal?"

"No!" Said firmly Rokossovskiy, a solidly-built man of 55 with piercing blue eyes. "We have 117 divisions and 26 heavy artillery brigades ready to act according to a carefully laid plan that is due to start in about one hour. To delay or suspend our attack now would create huge confusion among our forces, with the danger that some units won't get the word in time and would then launch individual, uncoordinated attacks. Our soldiers will have to do without air support if need be."

"And the enemy airforce, comrade Marshal? It certainly just proved itself to be very dangerous."

"I suppose that those planes that did all this damage were American, Dimitri?"

"Most probably, comrade Marshal. They are the only ones with the British to possess supersonic aircraft in Europe. In my opinion, however, the British are too conservative to have planned such a masterful attack on our radars and airfields."

"Hum, that seems logical. I know that the American commander in Europe, General Ridgway, has a reputation as an aggressive and charismatic leader. Who commands his airforce?"

"Uh, I will go ask our GRU<sup>19</sup> officer. One moment please, comrade Marshal." His chief of staff came back to the map table four minutes later, as Rokossovskiy was studying the big tactical map laid on it. The marshal noted at once the shaken expression of his subaltern, who was holding a file in his hands.

"What's wrong, Dimitri? Don't tell me that the Devil himself is in charge of the enemy airforce!"

"Nearly, comrade Marshal! Major General Dows took command of the American 3<sup>rd</sup> Air Force in Germany last month."

Rokossovskiy straightened up at once, while his voice hardened.

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<sup>19</sup> GRU : Russian acronym for the Soviet military intelligence service.

"HER?! The same woman who prevented us from throwing the French out of Indochin? The one who bombarded Beijing last December?"

"That's her, comrade Marshal. Here is the file on her kept by the GRU."

Grabbing and opening the file, Rokossovskiy couldn't help admire the picture of the beautiful young woman, a teenager actually judging by her face, included in the file. He then read quickly the five pages of text. At the end of his reading, he gave back the file to his chief of staff and shook slowly his head.

"Shit! I am already wondering what will be her next surprise for us. Too bad! Our attack will start at the planned hour. However, tell our air defense gunners to be ready for anything."

**02:35 (Germany Time) / 03:35 (Belorussia Time)**

**Main tarmac, Neubiberg Airbase**

**German Federal Republic**

"HURRY UP! WE HAVE TO BE IN POSITION ABOVE THE POLISH BORDER BEFORE TWILIGHT."

Giving the example, Gertrude Meserve quickly climbed the ladder laid against the side of her cockpit and sat in her ejection seat. A mechanic helped her at once to strap her harness, then removed the safety pins of her ejection seat, while another mechanic did the same with her radar officer, Captain Betty Smith. Around her aircraft, the crews of Lieutenant Colonel Maxwell Radner's 78<sup>th</sup> Fighter Interceptor Squadron were also getting into their F-83s, their fighter-bombers already rearmed and refueled after returning from their first mission of the war. By a bitter irony, Gertrude didn't have to worry anymore about the insubordination of her deputy: Tisdale had been shot down by antiaircraft guns while attacking with three other F-83s one of the airfields around Kharkov, with his plane exploding on the ground before he or his radar officer could eject. Gertrude's wing was now taking off for the second phase of Ingrid Dows' plan with three less aircraft than yesterday: one had been destroyed, one was missing and one was being repaired for shell holes in one wing.

Gertrude's F-83 took off first from Neubiberg, followed by eighteen other fighter-bombers heavily loaded with fuel and bombs. As she performed a turn above Munich, Gertrude was struck by the fact that the city was still fully illuminated. She then realized

that the great majority of the German citizens still didn't know that war had started again in Europe. Envyng their peace of mind, Gertrude adjusted her heading and made sure that all her planes were forming up around her for the flight towards Poland. During the approximately one hour of her outbound flight, she had ample time to review in her head the plan devised by Ingrid Dows. The first phase had gone as planned with great success, nailing the enemy tactical aviation on the ground at a comparatively ludicrous price. Gertrude knew however that any human loss was serious for Ingrid, however small it was. More casualties would certainly follow today despite Ingrid's genius and the brio of her pilots: the Soviet Army was justly known to possess a fearsome air defense system, even without radars. Only the cover of the night was going to offer some protection against the concentrated fire from enemy anti-aircraft guns and heavy machine guns. The darkness was also going to provide a second advantage to Gertrude and her pilots, by making plainly visible for kilometers around the gun flashes of the Soviet artillery, the designated target of Phase Two of Ingrid's plan. According to long established doctrine, the Soviet Army favored dawn attacks preceded at twilight by a massive artillery barrage. Spotting from the air guns and rocket launchers firing at night was going to be dead easy. The catch was to be present at the right time.

Knowing that her two other F-83 squadrons, dispersed in Erding and Giebelstadt, as well as the other combat squadrons of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Air Force, were also due over the Polish border, Gertrude arrived over her assigned patrol zone barely eight minutes before the first lights of dawn. She immediately made her planes split by pairs and started orbiting her target zone near the Soviet city of Volochisk, looking down at the darkened ground below and trying to locate the enemy units. She didn't even have time to complete a circuit with her assigned wingman, Major Walther Pensky, before the darkness was ripped apart by hundreds of gun flashes. In fact, she could now see gun flashes from one end of the horizon to the other, roughly lined up along a North-South axis. Just in her assigned patrol zone, Gertrude could see a minimum of a hundred artillery guns and multiple rocket launchers firing towards Polish territory.

"My god!" Exclaimed Betty Smith, her radar officer. "That's what I call a target-rich environment."

"It sure is, Betty. We will now have to strike as many targets as rapidly as we can while saving on our bombs. I will dive on that group of guns visible at one o'clock. Set our eighteen 750 pound bombs for quick successive releases from low altitude."

"Understood!... Bombs armed and ready!"

"Thank you! Walkiry to Puncher, I will take care of the guns at our one o'clock. Take care of the guns visible at our ten o'clock. Be sparing with your munitions: we will never have enough for all this."

"No joke, Walkiry!" Replied the wing's operations officer before turning and diving away, disappearing in the night sky. Gertrude was already concentrating on her own target, a long row of heavy caliber guns that were firing at maximum rate from a clearing in the forest below. She could also see many trucks, probably loaded with extra shells, waiting near the treeline. Setting aside in her mind the trucks, Gertrude dove at a shallow angle on the line of guns and pressed her trigger once they were in her sight, then slowly raised the nose of her aircraft. Her eighteen bombs, their aerobreaks opening after release, quickly lost speed, allowing her plane to fly to a safe distance before they hit the ground and exploded. The string of powerful explosions projected in the air or ripped apart the unfortunate Soviet gunners and also damaged or destroyed most of the artillery pieces. Gertrude immediately made a wide turn to come back towards the artillery unit, this time targeting the trucks parked along the treeline while giving instructions to Betty Smith. The latter selected for their second pass their eight incendiary bombs, each containing 380 liters of napalm and hooked inside the internal weapons bays of the F-83. The treeline and the clearing disappeared in big, spectacular fireballs as the powerful fighter-bomber swooped by, chased by tracer bullets from numerous machine guns. The shells and propellant charges in the trucks soon started to burn and explode as Gertrude performed a third pass, targeting the guns that had escaped her bombs with a salvo of 75mm rockets. Satisfied with her work here, Gertrude climbed back to an altitude of 1,500 meters to look for new targets. She actually had plenty of choice, with at least two more Soviet artillery units firing from inside her designated zone. Alerting by radio Major Pensky, she dove on one of the two units, a battalion of 122mm towed howitzers, and fired the rest of her 75mm rockets.

After less than six minutes of combat, Gertrude found herself out of bombs and rockets, having now only her 30mm cannons and two air-to-air missiles. Reforming on Pensky's plane, who had also shot all his bombs and rockets, she gave him a thumbs up signal.

"Good work, Puncher. Too bad that we don't have more bombs left: there is so much still to be done."



“Quite true, Walkiry. What do we do now?”

“We wait for dawn to come and see what will rush at the Polish border then. We will then spray enemy armored vehicles with our guns.”

“That sounds like a plan, Walkiry. God! It sure feels good to be able to defend my native Poland like this.”

Twenty minutes later, as predicted by Ingrid Dows, long lines of tanks and masses of infantrymen emerged from the woods adjacent to the Polish border. Gertrude and Pensky dove at once on the tanks as the Polish defenders, severely outnumbered, started to fire with their machine guns and their rare antitank guns. Five T-54 tanks burst out in flames under the 30mm shells fired at their thin engine upper decks, but over thirty other tanks kept rushing westward. Gertrude was about to turn around for the return trip to Germany, disappointed that she couldn't do more, when she saw in the sky about fifteen small black dots coming from the West. She nearly shouted with joy when she recognized the shapes of P-38NC propeller-driven fighter-bombers wearing Polish markings, the same kind of plane she had flown with Ingrid Dows during the Second World War and the Korean War.

“The Polish cavalry is arriving just in time, Puncher.”

“God be praised!” Exclaimed with fervor the Polish-American. The two American pilots watched for a moment as the Polish P-38NCs, loaded down with 127mm rockets, started destroying tank after tank. Gertrude finally headed towards Germany with her wingman in order to get more bombs. The war was unfortunately just starting and there was a lot left to do.

**18:41 (Central Siberia Time) / 12:41 (Belorussia Time)**

**Northrop B-50 CONDOR heavy bomber**

**Area of Krasnoyarsk, Central Siberia**

**Soviet Union**

“I must say that this part of Siberia is of great natural beauty. The hunting and fishing must be fantastic here.”

Brigadier General Helen Richey, Commander of the 405th Composite Wing (Provisional) based in Da Nang, Vietnam, smiled at the remark from her copilot, Major Elizabeth Gardner, also a veteran of the 99<sup>th</sup> Wing, The Fifinellas.

"There is the problem of the Soviet gamekeepers, Elizabeth, but nothing stops you from taking a few pictures of the scenery below...as long as you leave a few photos for the objective."

"I certainly will, Helen. I already can see many officers at the headquarters of the Strategic Air Command drool when they will see our mission films."

"They sure will!" Said Helen before glancing at the screen of her inertial navigation system display. Her four B-50 CONDOR heavy bombers were flying at low altitude and high subsonic speed, approaching their first target after a flight of over 4,500 kilometers from Da Nang, Vietnam. She had gone into action the moment she got a short, cryptic message from Ingrid Dows in Germany, in which Ingrid was asking her under the cover of a prearranged codeword to execute an attack plan that had been discussed weeks in advance between the two of them, without the knowledge of other American generals. Helen had been keen to do a favor to her old friend and mentor, as the headquarters of the Pacific Command and the Pentagon had been agonizingly slow to react to the Soviet attack in Europe and had yet to provide her wing in Da Nang with any meaningful mission orders. Technically she was presently executing an unauthorized mission but she couldn't care less right now about the egos of those paperpushers in the Pentagon. If this mission was a success, it could well cripple the Soviet war effort for months.

The voice of her bomber-navigator, Captain Jennifer Watts, made Helen look up through the windshield.

"Krasnoyarsk is in sight dead ahead, General. I can see in my targeting telescope the railway bridge on the Yenisei River at eleven o'clock, seven miles away."

"Still no signals from Soviet radars detected, General." Added their electronic warfare officer, or EWO, Captain Diane Ferguson. "No Soviet planes are detected within radar range."

"Very well! Let's slow down our speed to 400 knots. Jennifer, deploy our four first air-to-ground missiles out of their internal bays. Diane, signal to our other bombers to go take care of the roadway bridges upstream while I do a job on this bridge." With the three other heavy bombers splitting up to each go destroy one of the road bridges crossing the Yenisei, Helen did a first flyby pass at low altitude over the railway bridge, studying it visually. In truth, the intelligence information she had on the bridges she was targeting today was quite scant and she wanted to see how best to destroy

them before launching her first missiles. The railway bridge consisted of two parallel, sid-by-side bridges and appeared to be quite robust but was otherwise unremarkable...except for the fact that it constituted the sole railway bridge that the trains of the Transsiberian Line could use to cross the Yenisei, a major water obstacle. Destroying this bridge would in fact cut in two the USSR at a point where there were no other crossing modes for trains, except for ferries. With the Transsiberian rail line carrying a full 30% of the merchandises circulating within the Soviet Union and being the sole mean of mass transportation linking the western and eastern halves of the country, this bridge was truly a choice strategic target. Helen was happy to see that no anti-aircraft gun seemed to protect the bridge, probably because of its location smack in the middle of the USSR, far from any enemy base. That was however without taking into account the enormous range of the B-50 CONDOR. After taking note of the six segments and five pillars per bridge, each bridge supporting a single rail line across the 800 meters of the river, Helen flew away for a few kilometers before performing a wide turn to come back at the double bridge.

"It's now your show, Jennifer."

"First missile on the way!" Replied the bomber-navigator a few seconds later while keeping her eyes glued to the television screen that retransmitted the image taken by the nose camera of their first AGM-2A HELLHOUND heavy air-to-surface missile to be fired. With Jennifer Watts using a joystick control to keep the crosshairs of the camera picture on the precise point of the bridge she wanted to hit, the missile impacted the central stone pillar of the northern bridge and exploded after nine seconds of flight. The one-ton armor piercing warhead reduced the pillar to rubble while throwing in the air the extremities of the two bridge segments supported by the pillar, making them crash down in the river. While satisfied by that result, Helen ordered Jennifer to prepare a second missile for the northern bridge while she made a wide circle: she wanted the bridge to be unusable for many months. Their second missile also hit, destroying another pillar and dropping two more sections in the water. Doing repeated circles, Helen had Jennifer shoot a total of six missiles, destroying nearly completely the twin bridge in less than seven minutes. By that time, Helen's three wingmen had joined back with her bomber, having destroyed the road bridges over the Yenisei. Making a quick count of the number of missiles left in her bombers, Helen then headed towards their secondary objective in Kansk, some 200 kilometers to the East.

Flying this time at medium altitude and subsonic speed in order to be able to sight her next target from afar, Helen reviewed mentally what she knew about Kansk, which was meager indeed. The classified Air Force file on Kansk stated that there was one rail and one road bridge crossing a tributary of the Yenisei and that there was a Soviet airfield in Kansk. The long range of 120 kilometers of her AGM-2 missiles would however allow her planes to destroy the bridges at Kansk without even approaching the town. The informations about a Soviet airfield in Kansk turned out to be accurate when Diane Ferguson gave a warning while they were still sixty kilometers west of Kansk.

"I am detecting the signal of a short range radar coming from Kansk. I classify it as a probable low power air traffic control radar. They should be able to detect us in a minute or two. With the fracas we caused in Krasnoyarsk, those Reds in Kansk should be able to add two plus two and figure out who is approaching them."

"Then, start jamming that radar in forty seconds, Diane."

Helen next spoke on her radio.

"Condor One to all Condors: a Soviet airfield is situated in Kansk. We will split in pairs and launch our missiles against the two bridges in Kansk from beyond visual range, to avoid any enemy air defenses. Condor Two, you come with me to destroy the rail bridge. Condor three and Four, you go destroy the road bridge. If Soviet fighters show up, then use your air-to-air missiles. Condor One, out!"

The two pairs of bombers split up and flew wide hooks around Kansk and its airfield, then started launching missiles again, firing from forty kilometers away from the bridges. They expended a total of eight missiles in order to destroy the two bridges, then turned east to go hit their tertiary target. By the time a squadron of Yak-9 propeller-driven fighters had taken off from Kansk, the heavy bombers were gone, flying away at a speed the Yak-9s could not even approach.

Similar scenarios played out at Biryusinsk and then Tulun, where the four B-50s fired their last AGM-2 missiles and destroyed a total of five more bridges. Her mission now fulfilled even more successfully than she had hoped for, Helen took a return heading to Da Nang, knowing that she had just delivered a very painful blow to the Soviet economy and its logistical system. She was however only starting to flex the muscles of her air wing in this war: the Soviet Pacific Fleet base in Vladivostok was going to soon taste the wrath of her bombers and fighter-bombers.

**09:00 (Washington Time) 16:00 (Belorussia Time)**

**Oval Office, The White House**

**Washington, D.C.**

**U.S.A.**

“Mister President, in three, two, one...”

At the signal from the telecommunications technician from the CBS television network, Thomas Dewey, sitting straight behind his Oval Office presidential desk, started to read in a calm but firm manner the short speech he had prepared.

“My dear American citizens. I am addressing you this morning to announce to you a grave news. Yesterday afternoon, the Soviet Union had the effrontery to present us with an ultimatum that was also given to our European allies: either we let Soviet forces take by force Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, or we risked war with the USSR. That ultimatum included the threat to use atomic weapons against the continental United States and against the European capitals if our own forces used atomic weapons to stop the Soviet invasion forces in Europe. In view of the situation, and with the near certainty that the Soviet attack against Poland and the Baltic states would follow in only a few hours, I decided that the United States could not bow down to such a cynical ultimatum, nor abandon our allies. With the know duplicity of Soviet leaders, demonstrated by their barely disguised attempt to help the Communist Chinese grab Indochina eight months ago, nothing assured us that the Soviet ground forces would not simply continue their assault across Poland to then grab Germany as well, and possibly the rest of Western Europe. I view of all this, while forbidding the use of atomic weapons for the time being, I ordered our conventional forces stationed in Europe to oppose the coming Soviet invasion and to support to the maximum the Polish and Balt forces. We are thus since yesterday night in a state of effective war with the Soviet Union in Europe. Since then, the Soviet forces massed along the Polish and Baltic states’ borders have launched their anticipated invasion and combat is presently raging in Europe.”

Dewey then made a short pause, managing his effect, and looked resolutely at the cameras pointed at him.

“We however will not be alone to oppose this act of naked Soviet aggression. On top of the Polish and Balt forces, which have mobilized and are now fighting heroically to defend their territories, France, Belgium, the Luxembourg and the

Netherlands have promised their military support to help stop this Soviet invasion. Canada, which already had fighter planes and troops stationed in Germany, also joined us in this fight. I have personally thanked by telephone Prime Minister Louis St-Laurent for this. We thus are leading an alliance of democracies to resist communist expansionism and defend Poland and the Baltic states, which have defense treaties with us. I can announce at this hour that our forces are in action and have already caused severe losses to the Soviets, notably by destroying the Soviet Air Force on the ground. Polish forces are resisting ferociously the Soviet invasion and will soon be joined by our own mechanized forces and by squadrons from the French Air Force. My dear compatriots, I urge you to stay calm and to pray for our soldiers and aviators presently fighting for the cause of liberty in Europe. God bless the United States! I will now take questions from the representatives of the medias present in the Oval Office.”

The reporters waiting behind the cameras then started shouting frantic questions at him.

“Mister President, has Congress approved a declaration of war against the USSR?”

“Not yet! However, a request for such a declaration has been prepared by me and is due to be debated in the Congress this morning. You must realize that the Soviet ultimatum was given to us at the last minute, clearly in the hope that this would let us too little time to react effectively. The appearance yesterday of two Soviet heavy bombers off the coast of California was probably meant to give more weight to their ultimatum.”

“Are the Polish forces, along with other allied forces, able to stop the Soviet invasion without using nuclear weapons, Mister President?”

“I sincerely believe so. The first reports I received from the battlefield were certainly encouraging.”

“Mister President, you didn’t mention Great Britain in the list of European states ready to help militarily. Do you know what their response to this Soviet invasion is?”

Dewey paused for a short moment as he remembered the short but acrimonious telephone conversation he had a few hours ago with Prime Minister Churchill. That conversation had in fact awakened further bitterness in Dewey. The British were essentially putting the interests of their empire above everything else, again, and didn’t want to risk Soviet retaliation. Dewey however had to concede that Churchill seemed to have taken that position only as a result of a revolt by a majority of his cabinet and party, who had panicked at the receipt of the Soviet ultimatum. He thus didn’t mince his words when he answered the famous reporter from CBS, Edward Murrow.

"I had a telephone conversation last night with Prime Minister Churchill on the subject of the expected Soviet invasion of Poland. Unfortunately, he told me that Great Britain was not ready at this time to involve itself in the fight for Poland. Prime Minister Churchill is worried that any type of military response could eventually attract Soviet limited nuclear strikes on Europe and that such a risk was too great to take."

"So, Great Britain is ready to let down Poland and the Baltic states and do nothing, Mister President?"

"That's the gist of it, at least for the moment. Prime Minister Churchill however said that British forces stationed in Germany would defend the German borders if the Soviets tried to push past Poland."

Murrow, who had reported on the radio from London during the early days of World War Two, shook his head in disbelief as another reporter shouted a question.

"Have the Soviets managed to penetrate inside Poland and the Baltic states, Mister President?"

"Yes! They are already deep inside the Baltic states, but their advance inside Poland is both slow and very costly, especially since they now lack air cover."

"Mister President, could you tell us when American forces started intervening in Europe?"

"Certainly! Our combat planes started striking Soviet airfields in the middle of the night yesterday, local time. Their attacks destroyed nearly all the Soviet tactical airforce on the ground and rendered its airfields unusable for many days. Our planes are now concentrating on striking Soviet ground units and supporting our allies in Poland."

"And what are our losses to date, Mister President?"

"We have lost to date less than twenty planes. In exchange, and using surprise and the cover of the night to good effect, our pilots destroyed on the ground over 2,000 Soviet aircraft, on top of destroying hundreds of artillery guns and tanks. As I said earlier, combat already seems to be turning in our favor. Stalin should understand soon that he made a very bad bet."

"Who is in command of our forces in Europe, Mister President?"

"General Matthew Ridgway, an illustrious veteran of World War Two, is in command of all American forces in Europe, while Major General Ingrid Dows is in charge of our airforce there."

"General Dows of Indochina and Palestine fame, Mister President? The one called by many as 'God's General'?"

"That's right, mister." Replied Dewey, smiling. "As you can see, two of our best combat commanders are in charge in Europe and the Soviets are in for a very rough ride."

In the House of Representatives of the Congress, the representatives had followed the presidential television message and the question period on both radio and television. When the television address was concluded, the House exploded in excited mayhem, with the democrat representatives protesting what they called an abuse of power by the President for launching into a war before getting congressional approval. On their side, the republican representatives saw the democrats' response as a cheap attempt at payback to avenge the fact that the republicans had impeached President Truman, a democrat, for the exact same reason in 1948. They were also bent on defending the President, who was a republican, pointing at the immediate threat represented by the Soviet ultimatum. Joseph Martin, Speaker of the House and past interim president for a few months in 1948, finally banged his gavel on his table, having had enough.

"Gentlemen, we are here to examine the request for a declaration of war prepared by the President and to then pass a vote on it. Our soldiers are presently fighting and dying while you are arguing between yourselves."

"AND BY WHAT RIGHT DOES THE PRESIDENT DECIDE BY HIMSELF TO RISK NUCLEAR STRIKES ON THE UNITED STATES WHILE OUR COUNTRY IS NOT DIRECTLY THREATENED BY THIS SOVIET INVASION OF POLAND?" Shouted a democrat representative, angering Martin.

"POLAND IS OUR ALLY AND IS LINKED TO US BY A DEFENSE TREATY RATIFIED BY THIS CONGRESS, MISTER. DO YOU WANT TO RENEGE ON THAT TREATY NOW THAT THE SOVIETS ARE BREAKING THE PEACE IN EUROPE?"

"MISTER SPEAKER, I ASK TO ADDRESS THE HOUSE!" Then shouted from his bench John Fitzgerald Kenney. Joseph Martin nodded his head and banged his gavel again.

"THE DEMOCRAT REPRESENTATIVE FROM MASSACHUSETTS NOW HAS THE FLOOR."

John, leaving his bench, walked to the lectern reserved to the orators, taking place behind it. He waited for the majority of the representatives to quiet down before speaking in a firm, strong voice in the lectern's microphone.



"Ladies and gentlemen from the House, today is no time to act like cheap politicians, or to insist on a rigid interpretation of the respective powers of the executive and of the legislative. This crisis was started by Staline announcing his intention to break the peace in Europe by invading without any justification four countries that are allies of the United States. Right now, it is time to behave like patriots and to honor our treaties signed with Poland and the Baltic states. Poland has already been betrayed many times in its history, notably in 1939, when the Soviet Union allied itself with the Nazis to split the Polish territories between themselves. That treason was made even more odious by the massacres of Polish prisoners committed at that time by the Soviets. Stalin again tried to grab back Poland in 1944, but we and the British then prevented them from entering Poland. Now, Stalin is trying to take yet another time Poland, but is also threatening the use of atomic weapons against us if we try to stop him with our own weapons. Our soldiers and aviators are now fighting and dying to keep Poland free from communist tyranny. Are we going to let Stalin intimidate us, or are we going to respect our solemn word and defend democracy in Europe? On my part, my decision is already made. I am not simply a democrat anymore: I am a representative of the largest democracy in the World and I intend to firmly stand behind our soldiers and aviators fighting for the cause of liberty in Europe. TODAY, WE ARE ALL SOLDIERS OF DEMOCRACY!"

After a short hesitation, the democratic representatives joined their republican colleagues in a concert of applauses for John F. Kennedy. Grinning from ear to ear, Joseph Martin was then able to get a unanimous vote of approval for the declaration of war.

**19:36 (Moscow Time) 18:36 (Belorussia Time)**

**Office of the Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR**

**Kremlin, Moscow**

**USSR**

Joseph Stalin frowned on seeing the nearly scared expression on Marshal Sokolovsky's face. The Chief of Staff of the Red Army had just been admitted in his office, a message in one hand. Stalin had often seen that expression in the past, when officers or officials came to bring him bad news and were fearing, with good reasons, a

negative reaction on his part. The Devil knew how many bad news this barely started war had already brought to him, taxing his old heart.

“What is it this time, Comrade Sokolovsky? Rokossovskiy again got a brick on his head?”

“Worst, Comrade Stalin, much worst.” Replied Sokolovsky while handing him the message, which Stalin grabbed and started reading with impatience. The marshal, who was observing with dread the reactions of the dictator, saw his face turn purple with anger as he read the message. Stalin finally slammed his fist on his work desk while shouting.

“HOW COULD SUCH A THING HAPPEN? WHAT WERE THOSE INCOMPETENTS FROM OUR AIR DEFENSE UNITS DOING?”

“The American bombers were way too fast for our fighters based in Siberia, Comrade Stalin. The commander of our air defense units in Central Siberia committed suicide after those raids.”

“That really solves a lot of problems.” Replied sarcastically the dictator. “What is the time estimate to repair the damages and reestablish the service on the Transsiberian Line?”

“Uh, a few months at the minimum. A total of eleven bridges were destroyed and...”

“A FEW MONTHS?! WE DON'T HAVE A FEW MONTHS, SOKOLOVSKY! I...” Stalin, who had risen from his chair in anger, his face red, suddenly hesitated, while an expression of intense pain appeared on his face and he gripped his chest with his right hand. Without being able to say another word, the old dictator collapsed on top of his desk, blood leaving his face. Understanding that Staline had just been struck down by a heart attack, Sokolovsky's first reflex was to turn around and go seek help. He however changed his mind and stayed on the spot as Stalin slid off his desk and fell on the carpet. The marshal knew that every second counted during a heart attack and that any delay could cause irreversible damage to the brain. However, many officers that Sokolovsky admired had been purged in the past by Stalin, falsely accused of treason and then tortured and executed. He himself had often feared the day when Stalin would judge that his competence made him a possible rival for power and would have him purged as well. He thus simply watched with satisfaction as Stalin stopped breathing and stayed still after a few spasms. Looking at his watch, Sokolovsky waited another

three minutes before turning around and running out of the office, shouting in a panicked tone at the dictator's private secretary and at the two guards present in the anteroom.

"CALL A DOCTOR, QUICK! COMRADE STALINE JUST COLLAPSED!"

Then running out of the anteroom as the secretary grabbed his telephone and the guards ran inside Stalin's office, Sokolovsky went back to his own office to go make a telephone call, his door closed and locked.

"Comrade Khrushchev? Something very grave just happened and I believe that you should be one of the first informed about it."

"Marshal Sokolovsky? What is going on?" Asked the Moscow Party boss.

"Comrade Stalin just collapsed in his office. I believe that he was victim of a heart attack."

"Is he still alive?" Asked Khrushchev after a moment of stupor.

"I am not sure. He was not breathing anymore when I ran out of his office."

"Very well, I will get on top of things. You did well to call me, Comrade Marshal."

Khrushchev then closed the line, leaving Sokolovsky to ask himself anxiously what was going to happen now. One thing was certain: accounts were going to be settled soon in the Kremlin if Stalin turned out to be effectively dead.

### **19:55 (Germany Time)**

**Wednesday, August 5, 1953 'C'**

**Pilots briefing room, 81<sup>st</sup> Fighter Interceptor Wing**

**Neubiberg Airfield, southern suburbs of Munich**

**German Federal Republic**

Gertrude Meserve, her eyes red from fatigue, looked at the forty or so men sitting in the pilots' briefing room of her wing, while her three squadron commanders stood behind and to one side of her. The newcomers were the aircrews of the twelve F-83 fighter-bombers just arrived from the United States to reinforce her wing, plus three extra flight crews and a number of ground technicians and mechanics. From the original 56 aircraft she had before the start of the war, there had been only 49 left, including six being repaired, before the arrival of these new planes. These extra planes and personnel were indeed a gift for her and her overworked crews.

"Gentlemen, welcome to Neubiberg! I know that you are tired by your long transatlantic trip and by the change in time zones, so I will make it short. We still enjoy

air superiority over Poland and continue to strike targets deep in Ukraine and Belorussia, but the Soviets have not yet declared themselves beaten, by a long shot. Their ground units have managed to push the Poles by a few dozen miles since the start of their invasion, and this despite extremely heavy losses, mostly from our airstrikes. They are also trying to replace their initial aircraft losses by deploying old World War Two era propeller-driven aircraft. Unfortunately for us, those old prop planes can use simple grass airfields that are a lot harder to spot than regular airbases with paved runways. We thus have to keep our eyes open more than ever in order to deny the skies to the Soviets. After taking a few hours to sleep after this briefing, you will be integrated in the morning rotation of our air superiority patrols over the Polish eastern border. You will then be able to fly your first combat mission in this war.”

The new pilots cheered at that prospect, making Gertrude smile.

“I am happy to see that you are eager to face the Soviets. I promise you that you will not lack action tomorrow morning. Even if no Soviet aircraft show up during your patrol, which will go on for a good four hours, my policy is that my pilots use their 30mm cannon ammo and their rockets on ground targets of opportunity before returning to base. I can assure you in passing that Soviet ground targets are plenty. However, make sure to identify positively your targets before firing: the Poles already are having a hard time opposing the Soviets and they don’t need extra casualties due to friendly fire. My experienced pilots who will lead each of our combat flights tomorrow morning will thus designate the ground targets for you. Know as well that Major General Dows, the commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Air Force, will be part of the morning air cover patrol. She and her deputy, Brigadier General Teresa James, alternate between the two of them to fly combat missions and thus support and lead directly our pilots, while keeping effective control of our air operations.”

The major that had led the wave of reinforcements from Langley AFB, near Washington, D.C., then raised one hand to ask a question while smiling.

“Has General Dows added to her already astronomical air victory score, or do we still have a chance to catch up with her, Colonel?”

Gertrude, like Jane Plant and Shirley Slade, who were standing behind and to the left of her, laughed briefly.

“I like your combativeness, Major Stern. Yes, she has added to her old pre-war score of 165 air victories, which now stands at 188. Good luck to you to catch her up.”

“And you, Colonel?” Asked another pilot.

“Me? My score is now at 68 confirmed air victories. Lieutenant Colonel Plant and Major Slade, behind me and to my left, now have each 41 confirmed air victories, while Lieutenant Colonel Radner, who had four air victories before this war, now has a total of ten victories. Gentlemen, you are flying in what is presently the best fighter-bomber by far in the whole World. Don’t use it just to add to your personal score and glory, but to fulfill your main mission, which is to protect and support our ground forces fighting to protect Poland. Do that and I guarantee you that you will quickly pile on air victories. I will now let you go sleep until two o’clock in the morning. You will then eat a quick breakfast and will receive a pre-mission briefing before taking off in order to be over the eastern border of Poland by four thirty in the morning, just before dawn. On this, I wish you a good night, gentlemen.”

Letting Jane Plant and Maxwell Radner guide the newcomers to their respective rooms, Gertrude passed her last instructions to Shirley Slade, who was going to lead with Ingrid Dows the morning air patrol. She then went herself to sleep, truly exhausted by mission after mission flown every day, sometimes flying up to three long missions in the same day. These new reinforcements were going to do a lot to help relieve some of the pressure on her equally tired surviving pilots from her pre-war roster. However, what was really needed to put an end to this war was some kind of dramatic political development, like the Soviet leadership finally recognizing that they couldn’t ultimately win and then making their invasion forces turn around and return to Soviet territory. That was unfortunately an unlikely prospect, in view of Stalin’s well documented paranoia and thirst for power.

**07:19 (Moscow Time)**

**Saturday, August 8, 1953 ‘C’**

**Datcha of the Moscow Region Communist Party chief**

**Moscow suburbs, USSR**

Nina Khrushchev, a short, stubby woman in her fifties, threw a worried look at her husband while holding his right hand in her own hands.

“Be careful, Nikita, and do not trust anyone in Moscow. Anything could happen at this morning’s meeting of the Praesidium.”

Nikita, a bald, portly man of 58, smiled reassuringly to his wife.

“Don’t worry, Nina: I have the support of most of the members of the Praesidium. Malenkov is the one who will have to be careful.”

After a last kiss to his wife, the politician and ex metal worker left his datcha<sup>20</sup> and walked to his official car, hiding his own worries. In reality, Nikita expected to lose his position as the boss of the Communist Party for the Moscow region and was not even certain that he would not be going to be thrown in jail under some kind of trumped up charges at this morning’s meeting. The Praesidium was officially meeting today to chose one or more successors to Stalin. Unofficially, personal accounts were going to be settled between the members of the Politburo, who all wanted to obtain supreme power.

With his bodyguard opening his door, Nikita sat in the back of the car as his driver started the engine of the big black vehicle. Nikita waved one last time to his wife through his car window before his vehicle started rolling along the private road of the property. He then retreated into a dark reflexion about the present situation. The war started in such a cavalier way by Stalin was quickly turning into a disaster, even though the official propaganda and the secret police were careful to make the public believe that the Soviet forces were winning and advancing rapidly inside Poland and the Baltic states. The cutting in half of the Transsiberian Line was also proving to be a long term calamity for the whole country, cutting the western half of the country from the mineral resources and cereals from the eastern half, while the fuel and manufactured goods from the West could no longer be transported eastward, leaving the Soviet bases along the Pacific coast short of fuel, ammunition and spare parts. That was on top of the recent, devastating airstrikes that had sunk over a dozen warships and heavily damaged the port facilities and naval depots in Vladivostok. Nikita knew that the other members of the Praesidium were going to try to find scapegoats for these reverses, while promoting their own personal interests. Very few Soviet leaders really cared about the common good of the country in all this.

The big sedan suddenly swerved on the road after a weak detonation could be heard, forcing the driver to slow down and finally stop on the side of the suburban street they were following. Nikita waited impatiently as his driver got out to check his vehicle. The man suddenly started to swear, attracting a question from Nikita.

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<sup>20</sup> Datcha : Secondary rural residence. A much sought privilege often enjoyed by the Soviet elite.

"What is it, Viktor?"

The driver approached Nikita's window, a disgusted expression on his face, and showed him a large piece of glass that had evidently been part of a bottle.

"Our front right tire is punctured and must be replaced, Comrad Khrushchev. Some idiot threw an empty vodka bottle on the pavement. Our rear right tire was also damaged but the air is only coming out slowly. The tire change should take about ten minutes."

Nikita contained his anger with difficulty: to arrive late at the Praesidium meeting would allow his enemies to dirty his name in his absence.

"Very well, Viktor, but make it quick."

"Yes, Comrad Khrushchev."

The driver then hurried to take out the spare tire from the trunk of the car, along with his tools, and frantically went to work while Nikita's bodyguard got out of the vehicle in order to protect him in case this was an ambush. On top of changing the punctured tire, the driver also took the time to pump some air in the damaged rear right tire before sitting back in the car with the bodyguard and starting to roll again.

Forty minutes later, the sedan was barely entering downtown Moscow, to the frustration of Nikita. Viktor had done his best but had to stop three times to pump air in the right tire and avoid that it blew up for good, on top of having to roll at a low speed. Nikita was now officially late by over ten minutes for the Praesidium meeting. That delay grew to over twenty minutes before the big car into view of the Kremlin and started rolling along the Red Square, parallel to the walls of the old fortress and towards the Spasskaya Gate, the main entrance of the Kremlin. The sedan was still a good 300 meters from the tower gate when a series of terrifying explosions from inside the walls of the Kremlin sent shock waves that brutally shook the car. Viktor immediately braked brutally before putting the car in reverse and rolling back as more explosions shook the Kremlin.

"WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON?" Shouted Nikita, overwhelmed. His bodyguard, a Red Army major, suddenly pointed the sky through the windshield.

"ENEMY AIRCRAFT! THEY ARE BOMBARDING THE KREMLIN!"

"WHAT? BUT, WHERE ARE OUR OWN FIGHTERS?"

"I DON'T KNOW, COMRAD KHRUSHCHEV, BUT WE CAN'T STAY HERE!"

For Nikita, who had participated in many battles during the Great Patriotic War<sup>21</sup>, including the Battle of Stalingrad, the statement of his bodyguard made a lot of sense. Quickly rolling down his window, Nikita stuck his head out to better see, just in time to see four fantastic gray shapes fly across the sky at high speed just above Red Square. Four more aircraft followed after a few seconds in the thunder of their jet engines, as more explosions shook the Kremlin. Nikita could now see that the enemy bombs seemed to have targeted the Senate building and the Praesidium building, the seats of the power in Moscow. The two buildings, along with the Spasskaya Tower, had now disappeared in enormous clouds of dust and smoke. Those clouds suddenly lit up before being blown away by huge fireballs that started rising over the Kremlin. As Nikita stared with horror and shock at the fireballs, a new series of explosions came from the distance, making his head turn towards the Northeast.

“STOP, VIKTOR! GO SEE WHAT THE AMERICANS ARE STRIKING IN THAT DIRECTION.”

“BUT, COMRAD KHRUSHCHEV...”

“THAT’S AN ORDER, VIKTOR!”

His bodyguard looked at Nikita with worry as the driver obeyed reluctantly and reversed gears.

“Comrad Khrushchev, you are risking a lot by doing this. Right now, you could very well be the sold surviving member of the Praesidium and would thus be important for the nation.”

Nikita realized with a jump of his heart that his bodyguard could very well be right about that. Hiding his jubilation, he didn’t say a word and again stuck his head out by his car window. He had to pull it back in a hurry when a rain of debris started to fall on and around his car. Viktor swore loudly when the car emerged on Dzerjinski Square, only to be confronted by the burning ruins of the infamous Lubyanka Prison, which was also the headquarters of the MGB, the Soviet secret police, previously known as the NKVD. There was practically nothing left intact of the imposing nine storey building, now reduced to a giant pile of bricks and stones that burned fiercely. Nikita stared at the spectacle with wide eyes.

“The Senate and the Praesidium, now the Lubyanka...and nothing else. The Americans wanted to decapitate us, like they decapitated the Chinese in Beijing.”

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<sup>21</sup> Great Patriotic War : Name use by the Soviets to designate World War Two.



"I doubt that anyone will be able to come out alive from these ruins, Comrad Khrushchev." Said his bodyguard after a moment of shocked silence. "I hope that the damage will not be as severe at the Kremlin."

"Don't be too hopeful about that, Major. If this raid was planned by the same woman who struck Beijing last December, then you can expect to find no survivors. I however agree with you that we have to go see if any members of the Praesidium survived this attack."

Nikita then looked around him while listening carefully, to then swear loudly.

"Damn! Not one of our antiaircraft guns has opened fire yet. The air defense commander for Moscow will have to answer for that bloody fiasco."

The bodyguard nodded his head, understanding that the said commander was probably going to be arrested and executed in the days to come. In that, Khrushchev was only reacting like any typical Soviet leader would.

By the time that their car returned to Red Square and stopped in front of the Nikolskaya Tower, soldiers and military vehicles were arriving to form a cordon around the northern walls of the Kremlin and stop passersby from approaching, while ambulances and fire trucks rushed in with sirens blarring. Nikita, accompanied by his bodyguard and brandishing his Praesidium pass, made his way through the cordon of soldiers and entered the Kremlin. What he found inside, once he had gone through the Nikolskaya Gate, rivaled the worst damage he had seen during the Battle of Stalingrad. The American bombs, striking with incredible precision, had completely destroyed the buildings housing the Senate, which had contained Stalin's offices, and the Praesidium, which had been the seat of the Soviet Communist Party administration. What was left of the buildings were now burning fiercely, the radiated heat making Nikita hesitate and attracting a bitter remark from his bodyguard.

"The Americans must have dropped napalm after their bombs. It will take a miracle for anyone to come out of this inferno alive."

"Still, let's see if we can find if any member of the Praesidium is alive. Maybe I was not the only one to be late or absent."

"Yes, Comrad Khrushchev. I would however counsel that you stay behind me and to not take any unnecessary risks."

Nikita nodded his head at this eminently sensible counsel and followed his bodyguard, tripping often on bricks and other debris.

After over two hours of searching, and with hundreds of soldiers and firemen assisting them, Nikita had to accept that all the occupants of the two destroyed buildings had to be considered dead. That probably meant in turn that he was now the sole surviving member of the Praesidium and that the central organization of the Party had been decapitated. As for the attack on the Lubyanka Prison, it had effectively decapitated the secret police, while its boss, Semyon Ignatiev, probably lay dead under the ruins of the Praesidium building. Nikita didn't regret one second the death of that man, far from it: Ignatiev had been the man to whom Stalin gave his dirty jobs and Nikita detested him with a passion. The fact that only the high command of the Red Army was now left intact by this American attack then struck Nikita. Was that intentional? Turning towards his bodyguard, he spoke to him in a low voice, in order not to be heard by the rescue workers around them.

"Major Ponianin, I believe that we now should find quickly Marshal Sokolovsky. We must make sure that this will not paralyze our war effort. He could also ensure that this disaster does not become common knowledge immediately, something that would give us time to reorganize our national command structure."

"I understand, Comrad Khrushchev. The offices of Marshal Sokolovsky are in the southwestern part of the Arsenal."

"Then, let's go there!"

The two men actually found Marshal Sokolovsky near the ruins of the Senate, directing the rescue efforts there. Sokolovsky immediately ran to Khrushchev on seeing him.

"By the Virgin Mother Mary, you are safe, Comrade Khrushchev! You are the first member of the Praesidium to turn out alive to date. How did you manage to survive that bombardment?"

"Easy: I was late." Replied cynically Nikita, who then told the marshal what had happened to him, making Sokolovsky nod slowly his head.

"Decidedly, luck was with you this morning, Comrad Khrushchev."

"Yeah! Don't you think that this looks a lot like the strike the Americans did on Beijing last December, Comrad Marshal?"

"Effectively, Comrade Khrushchev. Unfortunately, the new American aircraft and their commander, General Dows, are turning out to be a real plague for us since the start of the war. This strike is definitely in the style of that young woman."

Nikita stayed silent for a moment, looking at the ruins and watching as the rescue workers took out of the burning debris the dislocated body of a woman, probably one of the secretaries assigned to the Senate.

"Comrade Marshal, give me your frank opinion on the state of this war. Don't hide anything and cling to the facts."

Sokolovsky hesitated before answering him in a low voice.

"Our forces have penetrated deeply in the Baltic states, but are marking time in Poland. Our supply lines are cut everywhere by constant air attacks and the large majority of our field depots have been destroyed. Our frontline units are nearly out of fuel and ammunition and our field artillery has suffered extremely heavy losses, again due mostly to air attacks. As for our airforce, it was mostly rendered impotent even before the start of our invasion. The cutting of the Transsiberian Line is preventing us from transferring any significant reinforcements from Siberia, while our Pacific fleet in Vladivostok is not getting any ammunition, fuel or spare parts."

"What could we do then to correct that situation?"

"Nothing as long as the Americans enjoy absolute air superiority, Comrade Khrushchev."

Nikita threw a severe look at the marshal, irritated by this confession of helplessness. Sokolovsky however cut him in advance in a firm voice.

"You asked for the truth, Comrade Khrushchev, and I gave it to you. We never should have started this war: its potential benefits were negligible compared to the risks. However, Comrade Stalin insisted on us launching our invasion."

Nikita slowly nodded his head, understanding Sokolovsky's point of view. When Stalin wanted something, it was not wise to contradict him. However, Stalin had now been dead for five days, while all those who had been faithful to him now lay dead in the ruins of the Praesidium.

"Return to your headquarters, Marshal. I will take care of the rescue work here. Be ready to present me alternate war plans tomorrow, plans that only I will see."

"What sort of alternate war plans, Comrade Khrushchev?"

"Plans for all the options left to us, and I mean all the options." Said Nikita while fixing the marshal in the eyes. Sokolovsky nodded his head to show that he had understood.

"I will get to it at once, Comrade Khrushchev."

"Thank you, Comrade Marshal."

As Sokolovsky was walking away, a fireman suddenly shouted that he had found a body, attracting more rescuers. Curious, Nikita also approached and looked with a stony expression as the body of Georgy Malenkov, his main rival for power in the Praesidium, was pulled out, soon followed by that of Semyon Ignatiev. The dislocated and burned bodies of the other members of the Praesidium were all found in the following hours. Nikita had to hide the growing feeling of triumph that filled him progressively then: his hands were now free to take power over the Kremlin and to reestablish at least a semblance of common sense in the direction of the state and of the Party. Mostly, he would not have to worry again about being purged and ending up in jail or being executed. Nina was going to be able to sleep quietly tonight.

**07:20 (Washington Time) / 15:20 (Moscow Time)**

**Presidential dining room, The White House**

**Washington, D.C.**

**U.S.A**

President Dewey was eating his breakfast with his wife, Frances, when General Hoyt Vandenberg, the chief of the Air Force, entered the presidential dining room, a leather briefcase in one hand. Vandenberg then came to attention and saluted.

"Mister President, I came here to bring you news of the war that could not wait."

"Good news I hope, General?" Said Dewey after wiping his mouth with his napkin. Vandenberg smiled and nodded his head.

"Very good news, Mister President. General Dows has again taken a most fortunate initiative: she and a squadron of F-83 fighter-bombers bombarded the Kremlin and the headquarters of the Soviet secret police in Moscow about seven hours ago. She suffered no losses in that raid. We just received photos of the results by fax."

"My god! Show them to me at once, General!" Replied enthusiastically Dewey, while his wife opened her eyes wide.

"Our planes were able to strike Moscow without any losses? How could that be possible?"

"That is the magic of General Dows, Madam Dewey." Said Vandenberg while stepping forward and opening his briefcase. He took out from it a classified file and gave it to the President, who opened it and started reading the message inside. He then looked at the air photos taken after the raid by a F-83 flying at very high altitude over Moscow.

"A truly fantastic job!" Exulted Dewey, who then passed the file to his wife before looking at Vandenberg. "What are the chances that Stalin or at least a few high-level Soviet leaders could have been killed in that raid, General?"

"Reasonable ones, Mister President, specially in view of the fact that Dows dropped a total of 36 3,000-pound demolition bombs and eight napalm canisters just on the Kremlin, plus an equal amount on the Lubyanka Prison. However, to have been able to strike the heart of Soviet power with impunity should have a profound effect on the enemy. With luck, the Soviets will now reconsider their wish to take Poland and the Baltic states."

"That would suit me just fine." Said Dewey, thoughtful. "Even if the Polish lines have resisted to date to the Soviet pressure, the losses on the ground are heavy and mounting rapidly. By the way, do you know when our own ground troops in Europe will join the fight in Poland?"

"The paratroopers of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division arrived last night in Poland and immediately reinforced the Polish lines in the central sector, Mister President. As for General Ridgway's 7<sup>th</sup> Army, it should right now be pushing against the right flank of the Soviets in the central sector, while the Canadian mechanized brigade covers its northern flank. General Dows' attack planes are now concentrating on providing a maximum of close air support to our ground troops. With our aircraft still in command of the sky over Poland, the Soviets will quickly find themselves in a very bad position. A mechanized army, even a powerful one, is very vulnerable to air attacks when stripped of fighter protection. The Germans learned that the hard way in France in 1944. In my opinion, the next 48 hours will be critical for the outcome of this war."

Dewey sighed, thinking about what these 48 hours will mean.

"Too many young men will still die, on both sides. May God damn this Stalin and his thirst for power!"

**21:18 (Warsaw Time) / 15:18 (Washington Time)**

**Tuesday, August 11, 1953 'C'**

**Field headquarters of the U.S. 7<sup>th</sup> Army**

**Baranovitchi sector, Poland**

Matthew Ridgway was studying a tactical map of Poland with Lieutenant General Manton Eddy, commander of the American 7<sup>th</sup> Army, and with General Tadeuz Komorowski, commander of the Polish ground forces in the northern sector of the front, when a young captain came to him and stood at attention, saluting him.

"General, General Dows' helicopter has just landed."

"Ah, perfect! Please guide General Dows to me, Captain." Replied Ridgway, smiling, while returning his salute. As the young officer turned around and walked out of the empty warehouse that had been turned into a field headquarters, Komorowski threw a look at Ridgway.

"This young Dows, is she really as competent as they say?"

Ridgway, like Eddy, nodded his head without hesitation.

"She is by far our best tactical aviation commander, General Komorowski. She is also an expert in combined operations and would probably surprise you if used as a ground commander. We wouldn't be here if not for her."

"She is also one hell of a beautiful girl." Added Manton Eddy with a smile. "By the way, she speaks Polish, on top of many other languages."

Komorowski nodded slowly his head at that, thoughtful. He was a competent cavalry officer but was also old-fashioned. He was thus shocked when a beautiful teenager with reddish-brown hair and wearing a flight suit with major general rank insignias was escorted to their map table. She saluted Ridgway and announced herself in a clear girlish voice that made heads turn around the command center.

"Major General Dows, reporting as requested, General."

"At ease, Ingrid. I believe that you already know well General Eddy?"

"Effectively, General. I met him many times following our landings in France in 1944."

"I'm really happy to see you again, Ingrid." Said Eddy while shaking hands with her. Ridgway then pointed Komorowski.

"Ingrid, this is General Komorowski, commander of the Polish forces on the northern front."

"Pleased to meet you, General Komorowski." Said Ingrid in Polish while shaking the hand of the old, bald Polish officer. She then concentrated her attention on the map spread on the table as Ridgway spoke again.

"As you can all see, our combined forces have succeeded in throwing back the Soviet forces situated north of the Pripet River, which splits the Polish front in two, to the other side of the border. The Soviets still occupy a portion of Polish territory south of the Pripet but their forces there are short of ammunition and fuel and are retreating. Our forces to the South should be able to reestablish the Polish border in about two days, unless something unforeseen happens. The question for us now is: what are our objectives once the whole of the border has been reestablished? We could continue to push the Soviet forces eastward, or we could try to surround them and destroy them systematically. We could also turn our attention on the Baltic states, the majority of which is now in Soviet hands. Personally, I am not ready to let what remains of the Soviet forces an opportunity to dig themselves in defensive positions along the border. I don't want Stalin to be able to try again to invade Poland after reconstituting his forces. While we are winning right now, our forces are still in a state of numerical inferiority compared to the enemy."

"I say let's pursue and destroy the enemy forces in detail." Said with conviction Komorowski. "Let's eliminate once and for all this threat to my country and to Europe."

"That would probably be the ideal end result," replied Manton Eddy, "but I don't think that we have the forces necessary for such extensive encirclement maneuvers. If we stretch our forces too much, we then themselves become vulnerable to encirclement."

"I fear the same thing as General Eddy, gentlemen." Added Ingrid, her eyes fixed on the tactical map. "However, we still could destroy most of the Soviet forces without exposing our own troops into risky maneuvers."

"And how would we do that?" Asked Komorowski, intrigued.

"By using our ground forces to continue pushing the Soviets, forcing them to continue retreating. My aircraft will then strike the enemy columns as they fill the roads leading East. Our goal should be to destroy as much heavy Soviet equipment as possible, and not to kill masses of enemy soldiers. I would however avoid to push our own units too far eastward, something that could trigger a survival reflex in the Soviet leaders and convince them to use atomic weapons to stop us. I would fix a maximum line of advance to about, say, twenty miles east of the Polish border, far enough to put

Polish territory out of range of the Soviet artillery. Once that is done, we could then concentrate on liberating the Baltic states.”

“That sounds like a good plan.” Said Ridgway, nodding his head slowly. “What do you think, gentlemen?”

“I like this plan.” Answered Eddy. “It represents the least risk for the maximum gain.”

“Do you have enough planes to adequately cover all the East-West roads, General Dows?” Asked in turn Komorowski, making Ingrid nod.

“I just received more reinforcements from the United States that allowed me to compensate for my losses. I was also able to establish advanced bases for my planes on your airfields, notably in Warsaw and Lvov, something that has cut by much the time spent in transit by my aircraft. I can now provide for the next few days about 500 close air support sorties per day, plus 150 air superiority and deep interdiction sorties per day. This does not count the sorties that the Polish, French, Belgian, Dutch and Canadian squadrons can provide, which would add about 900 sorties per day, half of them in ground support and the other half in air superiority. I will thus simply need our ground units to continue their push eastward for a day or two and we will be able to destroy most of the vehicles and guns of the Red Army on the roads.”

What Ingrid didn't say was how painful her losses in aircrews had been to her. Out of her original force at the start of the war, she had lost over thirty percent of her aircraft and a quarter of her pilots and aircrews, mostly because of the dense Soviet antiaircraft artillery fire. Rena d'Arcy and her radar officer were part of the missing, lost yesterday during a mission over the area of Minsk. Komorowsky, like Ridgway and Eddy, was impressed by her numbers.

“This could really hurt the Soviets, if I can judge from the damage already done by your aircraft. I agree with your plan. I will advise the commander of our aviation to follow your directives and suggestions. You do have Polish liaison officers at your forward bases?”

“Yes, General! I must say that I am very satisfied about the way our various units collaborate together.”

“Excellent!” Said Ridgway. “Let's now cover in detail our next moves...”

Ridgway, going out of his headquarters for a few minutes to relax and smoke a cigarette an hour later, found Ingrid contemplating the dark horizon to the East, where



the flashes of explosions and gun departure shots were visible at intervals. He approached her quietly and stopped by her side, downwind: he knew that she disliked tobacco smoke.

"How are your aircrews, Ingrid?"

"Tired, General, but not as much as our ground soldiers in the frontlines. Morale is still good, despite our losses to date."

"And your morale, Ingrid?" Asked softly Ridgway, making her head turn. She then stared at him with a sober expression.

"I have seen worst before, but losing people is always hard on me, General. Right now, I wish that I could strangle the bastards in Moscow that started this war and caused all that suffering and destruction just to satisfy their thirst for power."

"Maybe those bastards are already dead, thanks to your raid on the Kremlin."

"I hope with all my heart that this is the case, General. Unfortunately, the Soviets have kept hidden to date the results of my bombardment, even to their own population. We still have nothing more than rumors to date. I however can't get myself to hate the simple Soviet soldiers facing us: they are as much victims of this as we are."

"True!" Recognized Ridgway, who was silent for a moment before speaking again in a low voice.

"Have you received news about your adorable little daughter?"

"Yes, I did! Hien is in Montana with her nanny, spending time in the family ranch of my late adoptive father. I received a telegram from her four days ago. She loves Montana but said that she misses me a lot. I also miss her a lot."

"I can understand you, Ingrid. I miss my own family as well. Unfortunately, war has no consideration for the feeling of those that endure it."

"I know! I feel like my whole life was spent in the shadows of one war or the other. I would like to be able to serve my country in other ways than by killing, notably by developing new aircraft technology or something similar, but Humanity seems condemned to live in perpetual war."

"Some would say that war is an opportunity to gain glory, Ingrid."

"Glory..." Said Ingrid in a derisive tone. "Let them say that to those that have been amputated, or burned and disfigured. I nearly stayed disfigured and half blind myself after the assassination attempt against me in Palestine. Only a miracle saved me from that."

Ridgway gave her a discreet glance then. Ingrid was talking like many soldiers and officers he had known, men who had suffered what was politely called 'combat fatigue'. After months of continuous combat duty in Indochina, Palestine and now Europe, Ingrid had more than earned the right to be tired of fighting. No sensible person, and certainly not Ridgway, would accuse her of cowardice because of that.

"You can at least say that you have God on your side, literally. With some luck, this war will be over in a few weeks and we will be victorious, thanks mostly to you. Be sure that your merits, and that of your pilots, will be recognized."

Ridgway then walked away, leaving Ingrid alone with her thoughts.

**08:41 (Washington Time)**

**Friday, August 14, 1953 'C'**

**Office of the Secretary of State**

**State Department, Washington, D.C.**

**U.S.A.**

Christian Herter raised his nose from the report he was reading when someone knocked on the door of his large office.

"Come in!"

His secretary then half opened the door, sticking her head inside.

"Mister Secretary, the Finnish ambassador is here. He says that he has a most urgent letter from the Soviets for you."

Herter's heart jumped in his chest at those words but he answered with outward calm.

"Very well, Madam Buckmaster. Let him in!"

"Yes, Mister Secretary."

The secretary then opened wide the door, letting in the Finnish ambassador, a tall and solidly built man in his fifties. Herter got up from his chair and walked around his desk to go shake hands with him, while pointing a sofa in one corner of the room.

"Good morning, Mister Ambassador. Please, have a seat! Would you like some tea or coffee?"

"No, thank you, Mister Secretary." Replied the Finn before sitting down on the sofa. He then took an envelope from his briefcase as Herter sat facing him and gave it to him.

"My embassy received last night from Helsinki this diplomatic letter, sent by Moscow to our minister of foreign affairs. Basically, the Soviets are asking for an armistice."

Herter couldn't help smile then, feeling triumph and relief fill him: the Soviets were finally giving up. Rapidly opening the letter and extracting a two-page document, he read it carefully before looking at the Finnish ambassador.

"The Soviets say that they want to discuss peace, but they don't mention the fact that they still occupy a good part of the Baltic states. They should know that we would never accept that they keep the Baltic region."

"My minister thinks the same thing, Mister Secretary, and he speculates that the Soviets simply are trying to save face by trying to keep at least part of their initial gains. The ball is now in your court, if I may say so. Be assured that my country is ready to offer a neutral ground for any meeting between your country and the Soviet Union."

"And I accept with pleasure the offer of your country, Mister Ambassador. I will advise at once President Dewey of this request for an armistice. Be assured that you will be advised immediately once a decision has been taken about this Soviet request. Thank you for bringing promptly this letter to us, Mister Ambassador."

"The pleasure was mine, Mister Secretary." Replied the Finn while getting up from his sofa. He shook hands with Herter before leaving the office. Herter then ran to his telephone and called the White House, getting President Dewey on the line within seconds.

"Mister President, this is Herter. The Finnish ambassador just brought me a request for an armistice from the Soviets. I am coming at once to bring it to you."

Herter then called on another line to ask that his limousine come pick him up at the main entrance of the building, then left his office, the precious letter in his leather briefcase. While rolling towards the White House, he thought with bitterness at the tens of thousands of dead that this war had already cost. The American forces in Europe had lost by themselves over 4,200 dead and wounded, and this in only seven days of ground combat. As for the Polish forces, which had fought ferociously from the start, their losses now topped 50,000 dead and wounded. Those losses would however have been much worse in the case of a Soviet victory, while the political cost would have been dreadful.

**09:16 (Moscow Time) / 01:16 (Washington Time)**

**Saturday, August 15, 1953 'C'**

**Poteshny Palace, Kremlin**

**Moscow, U.S.S.R.**

Nikita Khrushchev, with Marshals Sokolovsky and Zhukov sitting facing him and waiting anxiously his verdict, read with growing agitation the response from Washington to his offer of an armistice. He finally threw the letter on the table and slammed his fist on it.

"The arrogance of these capitalists! They refuse to consider or armistice offer as long as our forces occupy the Baltic states. President Dewey say that the American airstrikes will continue until we have withdrawn all our forces. There is no way that I will accept such a humiliation."

Sokolovsky glanced at Marshal Zhukov, recently recalled from his semi-exile in the Ural Military District, where Stalin had demoted him to a secondary command. The Chief of Staff of the Red Army then did something that would have been unthinkable under Stalin: he contradicted the new leader of the Soviet Union.

"Comrade Secretary, we don't have much choice in accepting those conditions. Every day our losses from the American planes grow. Our air defense network has simply ceased to exist and we have only left to us a few propeller-driven aircraft that are too slow to intercept the American jets. Our frontline mechanized units are presently being massacred from the air, on top of being out of fuel and of ammunition. The roads leading East are full of abandoned or destroyed vehicles and guns and our railway network in Belorussia and the Ukraine lies in tatters. Even if the war stopped right now, it would take us months to rebuild our transportation network, and this is without counting in the devastating effects of the cutting of the Transsiberian Line on our economy. Only the threat from our atomic weapons is stopping the Americans from systematically destroying from the air the rest of our vital infrastructures."

"The Devil take those American planes! Are we so vulnerable to their attacks? Can't our airforce do anything?"

"Our airforce is moribund, Comrade Secretary, and lost nearly all its jet aircraft right at the start of the war. The blow that this Major General Dows dealt us early was fatal to our invasion plans. We also have nothing that could oppose the F-83 fighter-bomber or the B-50 heavy bomber: we still have no supersonic fighters in our inventory."

"Comrade Khrushchev," added Zhukov, "I just completed a quick visit around the frontlines and I can tell you that the situation there is truly disastrous. The vehicles that have not been destroyed by the American planes have been mostly abandoned due to the lack of fuel. Our armies in the West are basically down to being a mass of men on foot. The units that ran out of fuel and were surrounded and then surrendered to the enemy are too numerous to count."

"And our MGB secret police battalions are letting our soldiers surrender like this without doing a thing?" Countered Khrushchev, frustrated. Zhukov threw him a most unsympathetic look.

"The field units of our glorious secret police, which were too happy to shoot our soldiers when they retreated during the Great Patriotic War, were the first to flee from the frontlines in Poland, often grabbing the little stocks of fuel left available so that they could run away faster. I took on me to order our forces to disarm the MGB field battalions and to confiscate their vehicles in order to help the withdrawal of our units. Comrade Khrushchev, if we don't accept to evacuate the Baltic states, then we will lose our troops, on top of losing eventually all the territories that we took since the start of the war. To continue fighting doesn't make any sense anymore if we want to avoid the total destruction of our armies and the possible loss of a sizeable chunk of our own territory in the West. As to threaten the Americans with nuclear weapons, we would only ensure our mutual destruction that way."

Khrushchev stared at Zhukov, stunned.

"You gave the order to disarm our MGB battalions? On whose authority?"

"The authority of the Red Army, Comrade Khrushchev!" Replied Zhukov, who was following a scenario coordinated in advance with other high level Red Army commanders. "Our damn secret police has done nothing better for years than to arrest and execute hundreds of thousands of loyal and honest citizens under the flimsiest of pretext, or after receiving anonymous denunciations, and this to justify its arbitrary powers and to satisfy Stalin's paranoia. It is high time that the Party governs for the good of the people and not through the terror spread by its secret police. How do you think that the Americans were able to make so much progress with new aircraft, while any attempt at using imagination and initiative here in the Soviet Union is discouraged by threats of arrests if you prove too good or competent? The progress of our country has been strangled by the MGB and by its predecessor, the NKVD, which saw plots everywhere and terrorized even the highest members of the Party. The Party is

supposed to hold the power in the name of the people, not to be a puppet for one man and his secret police. In view of the disaster that Stalin's last folly brought on us, it is evident that things can't go on as before."

Khrushchev then understood that he was facing nothing less than a disguised military coup, with Zhukov and Sokolovsky holding the cards. With cold sweat running down his forehead, he quickly evaluated his options as the two marshals fixed him coldly. With most of the high level members of the Party dead and with the MGB decapitated by the American airstrike, only the Red Army was left with an intact command net. Khrushchev knew for a fact that the people would follow en masse the Red Army against a secret police detested by all. With the destruction of its Lubyanka headquarters and of the millions of secret files held there on Soviet citizens, the MGB had lost a lot of its effective power and was still disorganized, with the lieutenants of Ignatiev fighting each other to succeed him. If Zhukov really had the field units of the MGB disarmed, then it could very well be in its last gasps. On the other hand, Khrushchev had a genuine respect for the Red Army and was proud of his own service as a political officer during the Great Patriotic War. In truth, an alliance between the Party and the Red Army against the MGB would not be such a bad thing indeed for most people in the Soviet Union.

"Very well, I approve and support your order to disarm the field units of the MGB for reasons of treason and cowardice in the face of the enemy. The Red Army is free to arrest and eliminate the remaining MGB units and offices across the country. Now, concerning the American response to our armistice request, what do you suggest, gentlemen?"

Sokolovsky nodded his head once in satisfaction.

"In view of the military impasse we are in presently, I believe that we have no choice but to start withdrawing immediately our troops from the Balt countries and to then tell the Americans that we are ready to start the talks for an armistice. Helsinki seems to me to be an acceptable location for those talks."

"Our sole condition for starting those talks should be to refuse to let go a single piece of Soviet land." Added Zhukov. Khrushchev was thoughtful for a moment, thinking about the possible demands from the Poles for war reparations. He finally nodded his head once.

"Very well, gentlemen: we will do as you suggested. However, we will have to review the results of this war and learn the pertinent lessons from it. In particular, we must produce soon a plane capable of intercepting the American F-83."

"That could take some time, Comrade Khrushchev, although I agree on that necessity." Replied Sokolovsky. "However, we could develop quickly new surface-to-air missiles capable of shooting down the new American planes. We already made some notable progress in missile technology in the last few years."

"That would be an acceptable temporary solution." Conceded Khrushchev. "To return to the talks to come, we still have to select dependable and solid members for our delegation. I wish that I could go myself, but the country is still too unstable politically for me to leave Moscow."

"I propose Comrade Zhukov for our delegation." Said calmly Sokolovsky. "He is well aware of our actual military situation and enjoys a solid prestige across the country." Khrushchev liked that idea at once. Stalin had in fact demoted Zhukov because he was looked on as a war hero by the people and was becoming too popular to his taste. Zhukov was also a very competent military leader able to take difficult decisions. He then pointed the old marshal with one index.

"Very well: you will be the leader of our delegation in Helsinki, Comrade Zhukov. Get the best terms possible for our country and try to limit the damage. Once back in Moscow, your work will not be finished, by far: we will have to rebuild our armed forces while eliminating for good the unhealthy influence of the secret police on our society."

"You can count on me, Comrade Khrushchev."

**10:46 (Helsinki Time) / 03:46 (Washington Time)**

**Tuesday, August 18, 1953 'C'**

**Malmi Airport, Helsinki**

**Finland**

Zhukov, like the other persons present near the large windows of the Helsinki Airport's passengers terminal, opened his eyes wide on seeing the Northrop C-5000 supersonic airliner that was in its final approach to the main runway.

"By the Devil! The American delegation is certainly arriving in grand style." His aide for this mission, Major Andrei Ulanov, nodded his head, as impressed as his superior.

"They sure do, Comrade Marshal!"

The two Soviet officers watched as the supersonic airliner, painted in the colors of the presidential fleet, landed on the main runway and then rolled towards the terminal. Both

Zhukov and Ulanov raised binoculars to their eyes as passengers started to come out of the C-5000. Zhukov quickly concentrated his attention on a young woman in Air Force uniform who was the third to come out.

“They sent their Major General Dows to accompany their secretary of state. That doesn’t surprise me, in view of her reputation and talent for languages. We will have to play with our cards close to our vests with her.”

Zhukov counted a total of five members for the American delegation, which was being greeted on the tarmac by a Finnish official and by the American ambassador in Helsinki. To the surprise of Zhukov, another group went down from the plane before the horde of journalists brought from the United States by the plane also came down on the tarmac.

“Ha! It seems that the Americans did a stopover in Warsaw, time to take with them the Polish delegation. It was to be expected. We have seen enough here, Ulanov. Let’s go back to our hotel.”

Going to the Soviet embassy car provided to them, they told their driver to return to the Kamp Hotel, where the Soviet delegation was lodging. To their surprise, they saw American diplomatic limousines pull up to the main entrance of their hotel just as they were about to collect their room keys at the reception desk. Zhukov then made a slight smile.

“Well, it seems that this hotel will lodge all of the delegations. This should make things interesting.”

He watched closely as the Americans walked to the reception desk, concentrating in particular on Ingrid Dows, with her angelic face and impossible youth. In return, Ingrid gave him a correct military salute, which Zhukov returned, before speaking to him in Russian.

“Good morning, Marshal Zhukov. I am happy to see that we are sharing the same hotel. Maybe we could speak together later during the day.”

“Maybe, General Dows. You do speak Russian with a slight Ukrainian accent.” Ingrid smiled to that, becoming even more beautiful.

“I was the daughter of a Kiev boyard<sup>22</sup> in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. You may find my Russian a bit archaic.”

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<sup>22</sup> Boyard : Old slavic nobility title from the Middle Ages.



"But it is still excellent, General Dows. And your military genius, from where did you get it?"

"It is part of my actual personality, but I also profited from lessons given by my late adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante."

"Ah, a remarkable woman indeed. You do her honor."

"Thank you, Marshal Zhukov. Have a good day."

"And to you too, General Dows."

Zhukov exchanged a few polite greetings as well with Secretary of State Herter, who used Ingrid as a translator, then went to the nearest elevators with Major Ulanov. The later waited until the door of their cabin closed before speaking in a low voice.

"God! That girl could hypnotize any man."

"Indeed! I will see you back at noon at the hotel's restaurant."

On her part, Ingrid went to her room and unpacked her suitcases, then decided that she needed more urgently to sleep than to eat and undressed. Before going to bed, however, she called Herter to warn him that she was going to sleep for a few hours. With Herter being fine with that, she slipped naked into bed, not bothering to set the alarm clock provided by the hotel: the atomic precision clock included in her implants would suffice, with the micro computer fixed to the base of her cranium alerting her at the right hour via mental waves. As a fully qualified and equipped field agent of the Time Patrol for two months now, Ingrid was always aware of the precise space-time coordinates she was in at any one time. Since Ingrid was the only Time Patrol agent operating in Timeline 'C', Farah Tolkonen 'A' had finally decided to fully equip her with implants for her dangerous work, especially in view of the unhealthy attention the Imperium 'C' could pay to her. As she was going to fall asleep, Ingrid debated for a moment if she could contact telepathically Hien in order to reassure her about herself, but decided to wait, in view of the early hour in Montana, and let her adopted daughter sleep.

Ingrid woke up at five in the afternoon, still tired. She could have slept more to get rid of the fatigue she had accumulated during the war, but she had promised to Herter that she would be present for supper. Splashing cold water on her face to wake up, Ingrid decided to dress in civilian clothes for supper, something she had not been able to do for weeks. Going through the limited wardrobe she had brought with her, she

quickly decided on a modern royal blue female suit with trousers and vest that had been custom fit to put in valor her curves. She chose with that a pair of low heel shoes, since she detested wearing high heels. She then took the time to apply some makeup carefully, to perfume herself and to put on a set of jewels made of silver and semi-precious stones, finally combing her hair. Her ultra-compact GLOCK pistol went in an ankle holster tied to the inside of her left ankle, covered by the bottom of her trousers, while a magazine holder went against her right ankle. She smiled to herself when she went in front of a mirror to admire herself.

“You should make a few heads turn this evening, you sinful young girl.”

The first heads she made turn were those of the two Secret Service agents guarding the corridor on which the rooms of the members of the American delegation opened. She threw them a provocative smile before going to the elevators, followed by the captivated eyes of the two admiring men. The various male customers of the hotel that she met, along with more than one female customer, also followed her with their eyes as she made her way to the restaurant of the hotel. On entering the restaurant room, Ingrid saw nearly at once Herter and the rest of the American delegation, sitting at a table in one corner with the American ambassador in Helsinki, Ronald Humphrey. The four men sitting at the table followed her with their eyes, captivated, as she approached them.

“Good evening, General Dows.” Said Herter as Ingrid stopped near the table and was about to take a chair. “I must say that you look just resplendent in that suit.”

“Thank you, Mister Secretary. I didn’t make you wait, I hope?”

“Not at all, General. Have a seat!”

Once she had sat, the State Department translator, Dave Milgaard, gave her a questioning smile.

“I heard about your linguistic prowesses, General. You wouldn’t happen to speak Finnish, by chance?”

“Finnish, no.” Replied Ingrid as the rest of the delegation listened with intense curiosity. “As for languages that will be pertinent to the talks, I speak Russian, Polish and Ukrainian. I also speak Norse, having been a Norwegian carpenter fourteen centuries ago. Finnish took some words from Norse but is not directly linked to it.”

"This talent to be able to remember your past incarnations is fascinating, General." Said enthusiastically Evelyn Lincoln, the State Department secretary assigned to Christian Herter. "You got it from God, like your physical youth?"

"The one who opened my mind to my old souvenirs is called 'The One', not God, Miss Lincoln. The One also resurrected me once, in 1942 in Guadalcanal, on top of healing and rejuvenating me in Palestine a few months ago. From what I understand of him after his mind mixed with mine briefly, The One is an immaterial psychic being that can manipulate matter and energy at will. Its influence extends to the whole of the Solar System, but not to the rest of the Universe. In fact, it was created at the same time as the Universe, so it cannot technically be called 'God'. However, its powers are immense. Each of us shelter during our life a tiny part of The One, which we could call our soul. That soul returns to The One after our death, before going to a newborn."

"That...One," asked Herter, "could it be what the Catholic Church call the Holy Spirit?"

"Some could think so, but no! The One is not connected directly to any specific religion, although its actions and influence in the past were often wrongly attributed to a specific God. It doesn't want to be venerated in any way and only wants to see Humanity, which it had been shepherding for millions of years, improve gradually and eventually abandon its wars, its intolerance and its hatreds, to live in peace."

"But, the Bible says clearly that Man was created with the rest of the Universe, a few thousand years ago, and not millions of years ago, General."

Ingrid gave a hard look at John Galloway, Herter's assistant. She had met the man barely one day ago and she already felt antipathy towards the Mississippi native, who had quickly revealed himself as a man with rigid religious beliefs, on top of being openly racist.

"Mister Galloway, I consider the Bible to be nothing more than a collection of old stories retransmitted verbally during centuries before being put on paper, often with translation errors and intentional distortions. The Bible does not represent the word of God in my eyes, but rather the distorted souvenirs of imperfect men. Believe me: the Universe is many billion years old, while the human species has been evolving for millions of years, like other animal species. Know that my souvenirs go back a full 7,000 years, while Nancy Laplante's souvenirs went back 9,000 years."

"Uh, let's forget those religious stories for the moment." Herter said hurriedly, not wanting to see a dispute start among his delegation. "Let's talk instead about our opening strategy for tomorrow's negotiations...once we have ordered our meals."

"I fully agree with you, Mister Secretary." Said Ingrid before grabbing and opening her menu to study it. She smiled on seeing a particular dish on the menu.

"They have a traditional Finnish recipe made with reindeer meat. That sounds interesting."

"You ate reindeer before, General?" Asked Dave Milgaard, making her nod her head.

"A few centuries ago, yes."

Galloway was tempted to say something then but a severe look from Herter shut him up.

As the group was waiting at their table after giving their orders, Herter spoke in a low voice, in order not to be heard by the other customers of the restaurant.

"General Dows, what should be in your mind our initial approach to the talks?"

"I would let the Poles and the Balts speak first, then would support their demands as long as they are reasonable, Mister Secretary. They were the direct targets of the Soviets and suffered a lot more than us in this war. The one thing that we should avoid, however, would be to try to annex any part of the Soviet territory, either in the Ukraine or in Belorussia. Such a land grab would inflame the opinion of the Russian people and would harden significantly the Soviet posture."

"The Soviets weren't shy about trying to annex Poland and the Baltic states." Objected Galloway. "Why should we play nice with them?"

"Because they have atomic weapons and still can pulverize half of Europe, along with a few American cities." Replied Ingrid. "Also, we don't know yet who is presently in charge of the Soviet Union and who survived my airstrike against the Kremlin. Our priority should be to find out as soon as possible in whose name Marshal Zhukov is talking."

"I agree with you, General." Said Herter. "We won't be able to judge correctly the Soviet position until we know who is leading in Moscow."

"Maybe, with luck, the Soviets will tell us themselves tomorrow." Proposed Ronald Humphrey, making the others nod their heads.

**09:07 (Helsinki Time)**

**Wednesday, August 19, 1953 'C'**

**State Council Palace, Senate Square**

**Helsinki, Finland**

Even Georgy Zhukov, himself covered with medals, was impressed on seeing Ingrid Dows in her parade uniform. On top of her two Medals of Honor around her neck, eighteen other medals, many of them won more than once, were pinned on her chest, while the long, large ribbons of two national orders, the National Order of Vietnam and the Taiwanese Order of the Blue Sky and White Sun, were worn across her chest from her right shoulder, with their respective stars pinned under her medals. Zhukov could not remember another American officer as decorated as Dows. The press reporters and photographers also took note of the medals and followed her with their cameras at her arrival at the Finnish State Council Palace, where the armistice negotiations were to be held. Over 700 press, radio and television representatives had come from all over the World, invading Helsinki and turning the normally placid Finnish capital into the center of attention of Europe and North America.

Without letting it show, Ingrid was particularly proud to have been named by President Dewey as a major member of the American delegation, an honor that showed her the degree of confidence and respect he had for her. She smiled to herself while thinking at the face her detractors in the Pentagon and among the Air Force old guard would do on seeing her pictures in the newspapers and magazines. She however adopted a neutral expression when she sat down at the negotiations table, facing the Soviet delegation. Herter, the official head of the American delegation, sat to her left, while the Polish and Balt delegations sat to her right. France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Canada each had one representative sitting at the table, having fought in the war besides the Poles and Americans. The Soviet delegation appeared tiny in comparison, counting only four members. Conspicuously absent in the room was any representative from Great Britain. Due to their refusal to defend Poland and the Baltic states and to their timid stance about the Soviet invasion, the British had been firmly told by the Western European participants and by the United States to stay away from the talks. The severe loss of prestige that this ostracization had caused to Great Britain fitted

Ingrid to a 'T', since it played with her long term agenda of putting down the British Empire and thus prevent it from causing eventually a future nuclear war.

The Finnish minister of foreign affairs, who presided over the armistice talks, finally opened the meeting with three bangs of his gavel on the table, speaking first in English and then in Russian.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I welcome you all in Helsinki. I now declare these armistice talks open. I will let speak first the Soviet delegation, which asked for these talks."

The Soviet Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Postnikov, then got up and started reading a long declaration in Russian. Professional translators immediately translated his speech in English, Estonian, Finnish, French, Lithuanian and Polish, via a system of headsets distributed around the table. Ingrid, on her part, listened directly to Postnikov's tirade, which attempted without much success to justify the Soviet attack on Poland and the Baltic states by alluding to the imperialistic threat at its borders. Nobody gave him any credence, with the head of the Polish delegation countering him with a harsh response, mentioning the enormous disproportion of forces between Poland and its allies on one side and the Soviet forces on the other side. Marshal Zhukov took on him to try to refute his arguments.

"Minister Priluki, if the balance of forces was so favorable to us, how do you explain that we have been forced to ask for an armistice? Do you forget that the first to strike in this war was the American Air Force, which treachelously attacked our airfields deep inside Soviet territory?"

"I will let Major General Dows, the commander of the American air forces in Europe, counter your arguments, Marshal Zhukov." Replied the Polish minister before looking at Ingrid. "General, I will let you the floor."

"Thank you, Minister Priluki."

Ingrid fixed firmly Zhukov as she spoke in a clear, strong voice.

"Marshal Zhukov, the attack against your radars and airfields was decided after the reception in Washington and Warsaw of your ultimatum announcing your imminent invasion of Poland and of the Baltic states. Our airstrikes were nothing more than moves to weaken your invasion forces before they could launch their first attacks, which came barely four hours later with a total of over one hundred divisions. Will you try to make us believe that the Soviet Union was truly scared, with its one hundred plus

divisions, of a total of fifteen allied division in Poland and Germany? Germany itself is still completely disarmed and do not represent any threat to anyone. What other reason is there for a Soviet invasion, except the thirst for power of Joseph Stalin? To attack Poland in concert with Adolph Hitler in 1939 was not enough for him? As for our successes on the battlefield, they are due to the bravery and prowesses of the Polish and Balt soldiers, along with that of my pilots, and not to some imaginary military superiority on our part.”

“And your criminal attack against the Kremlin, you will also describe it as a preventative measure, General Dows?”

Ingrid’s face hardened as she replied in a harsh tone.

“The only criminals in all this are those in the Kremlin who triggered this war and caused the death of tens of thousands of young men, and that simply to satisfy their thirst for power or to keep the favors of Stalin. I much rather prefer to target with my planes the politicians responsible for causing wars, rather than the poor conscripts forced by their leaders to go fight those wars.”

Zhukov exchanged a glance with Postnikov before looking again at Ingrid.

“For your information, Comrade Stalin was killed during your attack on the Kremlin. Comrade Nikita Khrushchev is now the general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party.”

Ingrid smiled as excited whispers ran around the table.

“That monster is dead...at last!”

Postnikov threw her a look that he wanted to appear outraged, but that Ingrid interpreted for what it was: a purely theatrical gesture.

“How could you dare to call the leader of the Soviet Union a monster?”

“Because he was one! He had millions of your compatriots either executed, put in jail or starved to death during his reign and you pretend that you are mourning him? You and your colleagues in Moscow are probably relieved that you don’t have to fear anymore his emotional outbursts and his arbitrary decisions. Now that he is dead and that your armies have been soundly beaten, you should instead try to limit the damage to your country by withdrawing all of your troops from Polish and Baltic territories. If you don’t, then I will be forced to continue my airstrikes on the Soviet Union, and I promise you that they will be very painful.”

As the Soviets swallowed with difficulty her words, Herter spoke in turn to support Ingrid’s declaration.

"Gentlemen, we are here because you lost on the battlefield and subsequently requested armistice talks. Are you really interested in discussing the terms of an armistice, or are you here simply to play for time in order to resume combat in the future? If you are here for the second reason, then I warn you that the price your country will pay will be much stiffer than it already is."

Zhukov lthrew him a black look, but finally nodded his head.

"We are here to discuss an armistice and to sign a peace agreement, Secretary Herter. What are your terms?"

### **15:56 (Helsinki Time)**

**Friday, August 21, 1953 'C'**

**State Council Palace, Senate Square**

**Helsinki, Finland**

Ingrid was happy as she walked down the steps of the State Council Palace to get in the American delegation's limousine with Secretary Herter. The Soviets had finally bowed to nearly all the demands of the Allies and had just signed a formal armistice, which would soon be followed by a peace accord between the United States and the USSR. Her pilots will finally be able to reunite with their families and to enjoy some peace. More importantly for her, Hien will be able to come back to her now and she was going to be able to hug her again. Before she could get in the limousine, though, the head of the Polish delegation came to her to shake her hand and gave her a warm smile.

"General Dows, the Polish nation owes you an immense debt. Know that we will not forget it."

"My god, " she said in a joking tone, "I hope that you are not thinking of covering me with gold?"

Priluki smile widened.

"No, not with gold, General. A small medal will do."

The 'small medal' turned out three days later to be the Order of the White Eagle, the highest honor that Poland could give to a foreign officer. To be able to hold again in her arms her daughter Hien was however a much greater joy for Ingrid. The fact that she had eliminated one of the worst human monsters of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century did nothing to



diminish her joy. With luck, she was finally going to be able to enjoy a long period of peace and to take care of Hien without having to fight again.

**15:20 (Kansas Time)**

**Saturday, August 29, 1953 'C'**

**Fort Leavenworth military prison**

**Kansas, United States**

The female military police sergeant unlocked and opened the door of the cell, which was much better furnished than the other cells of the military prison that were reserved for American service members found guilty of criminal acts or of insubordination and other military code violations. She then signaled to the small young woman of thirty years of age lounging inside to come out.

"Captain Litvyak, the commandant of the prison wants to speak to you and to the other Soviet prisoners of war."

Lidiya got up from her easy chair with a mix of apprehension and hope and got out of her cell, following the military policewoman along the cellblock corridor. She was fearing for months now her eventual release to the Soviet Union, expecting a brutal reception by the Soviet secret police for having committed the 'crime' of letting herself be captured by the enemy. She knew of too many unlucky Soviet aircrews that had been freed by the Americans after the Korean War, only to be sent to Siberian reeducation camps by the MGB or, worse, being executed for 'cowardice'.

Led by her guard, Lidiya soon joined her six companions of captivity in the anteroom of the offices of the commandant of Fort Leavenworth, where eight armed MPs kept an eye on them. After a short wait, the seven Soviet pilots, two of them women, were introduced in the office of Colonel Robert Jefferson and came to attention in front of his work desk. Jefferson, who had risen from his chair when they entered, returned their salute before speaking.

"At ease!" He said in English, his tone friendly. "Ladies and gentlemen, I have some good news for you: the Soviet Union has signed yesterday a peace accord with the United States, which means that you will finally be able to be repatriated to your country. You will be flown tomorrow to Finland, where a Soviet transport aircraft will pick you up."

As Jefferson expected, that piece of news did not bring out screams of joy from his seven Soviet prisoners. He could easily understand their apparent lack of enthusiasm, knowing how the communist system could mistreat its own soldiers for the most petty of reasons.

"Have your things packed for tomorrow morning nine o'clock, at which time a bus will take you to the McConnell Air Force Base. From now on, consider yourselves as guests of the United States instead of as prisoners. Your cell doors will stay unlocked and you will be free to go see each other at will. After this interview, all of the personal effects taken from you on capture will be returned to you and you will receive your last prisoner of war stipend. If you wish so, a vehicle could bring you under protective escort to the nearby town of Leavenworth, so that you could do some last minute shopping."

Frankly surprised by so much consideration, the senior Soviet prisoner of war, Colonel Ivan Kozhedub, looked at Jefferson with a guarded expression.

"I thank you for the attention you show to my people, Colonel Jefferson. I believe that they will all want to go to town this afternoon."

"Excellent! My aide will now take care of you concerning your effects, your stipend and your visit in town. Before you go, I would like to wish you the best of luck for your return to the Soviet Union."

Looking Jefferson in the eyes, Kozhedub understood what he meant in reality and nodded his head once.

"Thank you, Colonel."

**14:19 (Moscow Time)**

**Monday, August 31, 1953 'C'**

**Soviet Ministry of Defense**

**Moscow, USSR**

Lidiya Litvyak cautiously entered the office where she had been led and came to attention, saluting the major from the Soviet Air Force who was sitting behind a work desk.

"Captain Lidiya Litvyak, from the 64<sup>th</sup> Fighter Regiment, ready to resume my duties, Comrade Major!"

The major, who wore the insignias of the GRU, the Soviet military intelligence service, looked at her with a neutral expression while returning her salute, then showed her a chair positioned in front of his desk.

“Please have a seat, Captain Litvyak.”

Hiding as best she could her nervousness, Lidiya obeyed and waited while the GRU major briefly consulted a file opened in front of him. The man spoke while still looking at the file.

“You were shot down in aerial combat against American fighters while near the coast of Indochina in December of last year, correct?”

“Yes, Major. My regiment was attacking the American airbase in Da Nang. My squadron was part of a group tasked to create a diversion in order to attract to us the American fighters and thus make the enemy base vulnerable to another group of our planes. During the combat with the Americans, I shot down three American Navy F9F PANTHER fighters. However, a long-range air-to-air missile from one of the new American F-83 fighters then gravely damaged my plane, forcing me to eject over the sea. An American helicopter found and recuperated me about two hours later.”

“I see! And what happened afterwards, Captain?”

“I was brought to an American aircraft carrier, to then be transferred the next day to Da Nang by helicopter. There, I met my regimental commander, Colonel Kozhedub, and five other of our pilots who had also been taken prisoners. Two days later, we were transferred by air to the United States, where we were interned at the military prison of Fort Leavenworth. We spent eight months there, until our liberation last Saturday at the end of the war in Europe.”

The GRU major finally raised his nose from his file, his face still impassive.

“Have you been interrogated by the enemy during your captivity, Captain?”

“Two times, but only in a superficial manner. I was not brutalized and I provided only my name, rank and my service number.”

“Nothing else?” Asked the major, his tone firming up while he looked into her eyes. Lidiya answered as calmly as she could.

“Nothing else, Major. The Americans seemed very confident about the performances of their new planes and appeared to interrogate me simply as a manner of routine. In fact, the interrogators of the American Navy gave me the impression of being amateurs: none of them spoke Russian.”

“And your second interrogation, was it done also by the American Navy?”

"No, Major! It happened at the Da Nang airbase and the one who interrogated me was their commander, Major General Dows, who spoke excellent Russian." The GRU showed interest at once then and bent forward, ready to take notes.

"Describe that interrogation to me, Captain."

"Uh, in truth that seemed more like a polite conversation than an interrogation to me, Major. Dows seemed more interested in my state of health than in any information I could give her. I don't know if it was simple bragging on her part, but she pretended to already know everything she needed about our forces then based in China."

"Did she say where she got that knowledge, Captain Litvyak?"

"No, but she did prove her knowledge by mentioning my unit's designation and the name of the airbase we were using in China. I however refused to confirm those informations to her. Major, I would like to say that I was able to observe the various types of new American aircraft in Da Nang before being flown out. I could give you good descriptions of them."

"Excellent!" Said the GRU man, showing enthusiasm for the first time. "Please describe to me in detail what you were able to see."

Lidiya did so, speaking for a good fifteen minutes and describing the planes she had seen on the tarmac in Da Nang. She was praying mentally all the while that this would be enough to put her in the good graces of the GRU officer and possibly avoid to her the unhealthy attention of the secret police. The military intelligence officer asked her a few more questions in order to clarify some points about the new American aircraft, then finally smiled to her while presenting his right hand and getting up from his chair.

"I thank you for your cooperation, Captain Litvyak. Your informations about the American planes will be very useful to us. By the way, welcome back to the Soviet Union."

Lidiya shook his hand while also getting up, still uncertain about what would happen to her now.

"Thank you, Major. Uh, where do I report after this? Will I have to meet a MGB officer?"

The GRU man gave her a reassuring smile and shook his head.

"Many things have changed lately in the USSR, Captain Litvyak. The secret police has been defanged and there are no more political officers among the units of the Red Army. The MGB has no authority left on the Red Army, which now deals with the Communist Party on an equal footing. Marshal Zhukov is now the Minister of Defense,

while Comrade Nikita Khrushchev is the Secretary General of the Party. You will now report to the Personnel Division of the Air Force, on the third floor of this building, where you will be given a new assignment to a fighter unit. Don't be too disappointed if your new unit only has propeller-driven fighters: nearly all our jet aircraft were destroyed during the recent war, mostly on the ground."

Lidiya, nearly dizzy from the relief that now washed over her, smiled in turn at the GRU major while saluting him.

"The important thing is for me to be able to fly again, Major. Thank you!"

"You are welcome, Captain."

Pivoting on her heels, Lidiya then left the office at a military step, feeling like she was coming back to life: she was going to be able to fly again, and this with her name unsullied.

## **CHAPTER 11 – THE SON OF D’ARTAGNAN**

**09:17 (Paris Time)**

**Monday, July 1, 1652**

**Royal Court of King Louis XIV**

**Castle of Maubergeon**

**Poitiers, France**

Jules Mazarin, Cardinal, Prime Minister and lover of Queen Anne of Austria, was walking in the corridors of Maubergeon Castle, doing some thinking while exercising his legs a bit. Having returned from self-exile only a few months ago at the head of an army of 7,000 German and Polish mercenaries, Mazarin had been warmly welcomed back by both the Queen and the young King. The Parisians, on the other hand, had taken little time to put a 150,000 livre reward on his head, an edict that had then been annulled by the King. Then, the Duke of Orléans had joined his armies with those of the Prince of Condé, who still hated Mazarin with a passion. The ingratitude of so many towards him despite his years of loyal service to France made Mazarin quite bitter at times, especially when the xenophobia about his Italian origins was added to that. On the other hand he could console himself with the thought that such people as the Queen, the King and a number of royal counselors appreciated him and treated him like a friend. He also could count on the loyalty of quite a few brave men, not the least of which was Charles d’Artagnan, who had faced untold dangers and discomfort to play the vital role of courier between him and Queen Anne.

As the thought about D’Artagnan crossed his mind, Mazarin saw through the window of the upper floor he was standing in front of a small covered horse cart approach the castle. It was very ordinary in appearance and was driven by what seemed to be a woman, something not unusual in the least. What attracted Mazarin’s attention was the size of the woman, who was now discussing with one of the guards standing vigil along the road from Nantes: Compared to her, the guard seemed diminutive. That fact reminded Mazarin of a girl his loyal d’Artagnan had told him about more than once. His interest now awakened, Mazarin followed with his eyes the cart as

it drove into the courtyard of the castle and stopped besides the stables, where the woman jumped out and tied up her horse before grabbing a large wicker basket and walking towards the main entrance of the central dungeon. Being able to see her from closer, Mazarin saw that she was actually a beautiful teenager, with long black hair and a generous chest. Now truly curious about her, Mazarin hurried down the main staircase, stepping in the lobby as the girl was being received by a royal valet. The girl, seeing Mazarin approach her, made a curtsy to him, prompting a gentle chiding from the Cardinal.

“No need for such formalities with me, my child: I am not the King after all.”

“But you are his prime minister, as well as the master of the man I love, Your Eminence.”

“So, you are indeed this famous Lady Nancy Sommers d’Artagnan kept telling me about?”

“I am famous, Your Eminence?” Said the girl, appearing a bit embarrassed. Mazarin had to say that she was indeed beautiful, apart from being impossibly tall for a girl. She was however also very fit and strong-looking, with a suntanned skin that denoted a lot of time spent outdoors. The Cardinal could see how d’Artagnan could fall in love with such a girl. He noted quickly the little baby sleeping inside the basket held by her.

“If young King Louis as well as the Queen keep telling me about your exploits in Paris, then I believe that this makes you famous, Lady Sommers, or should I say Marquess of Saint-Laurent?”

“Just Nancy would do, Your Eminence.” She said in her melodious voice, her green eyes sparkling with malice. “Would Monsieur d’Artagnan be in this castle by chance?”

“Unfortunately, no. He is still in Paris. May I understand that you came to present him his newborn child?”

“You are correct, Your Eminence.” Replied Nancy, her smile fading somewhat at the news that Charles was not here. “I was hoping that he would have joined you here, at the temporary court of the King.”

An idea then came to Mazarin’s mind, who smiled to Nancy.

“I was in fact thinking seriously about recalling him to me but had not had the chance yet to do so. Maybe you could pass that message to d’Artagnan in person, Lady Nancy?”

That suggestion brought a splendid smile to her face that warmed up Mazarin.

“That is a nice idea indeed, Your Eminence. I will leave for Paris at once.”

“Please,” replied Mazarin, gently stopping her from turning around and leaving, “at least let me provide you with some provisions for the road before you go. The roads are both uncomfortable and dangerous these days, especially when traveling with a small baby like you do. It would also allow me to prepare a letter for Monsieur d’Artagnan for you to carry.”

Nancy bowed again at those words.

“In that case I will be happy to delay a bit my departure, Your Eminence.”

“The pleasure is mine, Lady Nancy. Please follow me to my apartments.”

Her basket in one hand, Nancy followed the Cardinal through the lobby, then up the stairs towards the main apartments of the castle. Mazarin stopped for a moment in the middle of the stairs to pass directives to a servant apparently in his employ, ordering him to prepare a large food basket for Nancy’s trip before resuming his way to his apartments. Before they could get there they met in the hallway young King Louis, who was escorted by two valets. Wearing a large felt hat with his court outfit, young Louis beamed with joy at the sight of Nancy and went to her at once as she curtsied respectfully to him.

“Lady Nancy, it is a pleasure to see you here. Did you just arrive?”

“I did, Your Majesty. However, I am leaving at once for Paris to go fetch Monsieur d’Artagnan there.”

“But you are coming back here, are you?” Replied Louis, hiding his disappointment. Nancy smiled to him, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

“Of course, Your Majesty! I wouldn’t want to miss a chance to tell you more stories about New France.”

“That would be appreciated, Lady Nancy.” Said Louis with a big grin before looking down at the basket she held. “And may I presume that this is your baby from...” Nancy urgently motioned him to stop speaking then, whispering next to him.

“Please don’t say the name of the father, Your Majesty: I wish it to be a secret for all others but you, the Queen and the Cardinal.”

“Oh, I’m sorry for my indiscretion. I will keep mum about that from now on. Is it a boy or a girl?”

“A boy, Your Majesty. His name is Charles.”



Bending forward, the young King caressed briefly the head of the sleeping baby, then smiled back to Nancy.

“I wish your son the best in life, Lady Nancy. I will be waiting your return from Paris with impatience.”

“I will make haste on my trip, Your Majesty.” Promised Nancy, curtsying again. Louis then walked away, letting Mazarin free to lead her into his apartments. Inviting her to sit down on a chair, Mazarin then sat at his work desk and scribbled quickly a letter. Nancy used that time to give her right breast to her baby son, who had just awakened with a hungry wail. Little Charles was still happily sucking milk when Mazarin finished his letter and folded the parchment. He eyed for a moment Nancy with her breast denuded, then spoke quietly in order not to upset her baby.

“Your trip may be quite dangerous, Lady Nancy. You may very well have to go through the armies of the Duke D’Orléans and of the Prince of Condé between here and Paris. Those armies employ many foreign mercenaries who wouldn’t mind having fun with a pretty girl traveling alone. God knows that looting and raping are too frequent occurrences right now in our poor France.”

Nancy eyed Mazarin cautiously, restraining herself in extremis from remarking to him that the 7,000 mercenaries he had brought with him had also looted and raped their way to Poitiers. Whoever was in charge in France, it seemed that it was always the poor people who paid the price of those struggling to gain or keep power. In answer to Mazarin’s warning, Nancy opened her cape wide, showing him the two pistols and the dagger holstered around her belt.

“I am well aware of the dangers, Your Eminence. I am however ready to face them and am most familiar about how to deal with such situations. Let’s say that I lead a most adventurous life compared to a normal girl. If I meet those Fronde armies I will make sure to keep my eyes open and to note everything of worth.”

Mazarin nodded his head once, secretly impressed by her aplomb. Here was a teenage girl who, if he could believe all the stories he had heard about her, was at least as valiant, efficient and dangerous as his own d’Artagnan. As a spy, she indeed represented a priceless asset for the royal service.

“Lady Nancy, have you touched any part of your annual pension yet since you were ennobled last September?”

“No, Your Eminence. I had to leave the Palais-Royal soon afterwards and keep a low profile from then on, for d’Artagnan’s sake.”

Mazarin thought over that for a moment, then took another piece of parchment and wrote something on it, then went to a large, solid-looking chest and unlocked it with a key he took from inside his cardinal's robe. Pulling out a heavy leather purse, he poured its content on his desk and counted out a goodly number of large gold coins before putting them in a separate purse. He then signaled Nancy to join him at his desk, which she did, still breastfeeding her baby. Giving her the second purse, he presented as well a pen to her and the parchment.

"Here are 4,500 Livres, representing the first six months of your annual pension. Sign this receipt here, please."

Nancy signed quickly, giving back the pen and the parchment to Mazarin, then weighed the purse with apparent remorse.

"I don't know if I really deserve all that gold when I think of all the dangers my brave d'Artagnan is going through constantly."

Mazarin grinned at those words and started counting more gold pieces on his desk.

"This is the nicest way I was ever remembered of how miserly as an employer I can be, Lady Nancy. D'Artagnan and his companions in Paris have indeed worked diligently for my cause during all those months, so I will ask you to bring them their pay at the same time. Here are 600 Livres I owe to D'Artagnan, plus 600 Livres each to Messieurs De Dalleville, Bartet and Hughes de Terlon."

Mazarin put that money in yet another purse and gave it to Nancy, then eyed her gravely.

"You are now even more of a tempting target for Fronde soldiers, Lady Nancy. Please be careful during your trip."

"I will shoot my way through if need be, Your Eminence, but nothing will keep me from seeing my d'Artagnan." Said firmly Nancy, meaning each word. Someone then knocked on the door, prompting Mazarin to call him to enter. That someone turned out to be a servant, carrying a large covered basket of food. Thanking and dismissing him, Mazarin then got up and put a hand on Nancy's head, who had bowed to him.

"May God be with you and your son on your trip, Marquess of Saint-Laurent. I will pray for your safe return."

"Thank you, Your Eminence. I should be back in three weeks with d'Artagnan." Grabbing the basket of food as well as the basket containing her baby and the two purses full of gold, Nancy then left the Cardinal's apartments. Mazarin went to a window and watched her get back to her cart, putting inside it both of her baskets and the

purses, hiding the latter under a blanket before untying her horse and sitting in the front of the cart. Urging her horse on, she was soon out of the courtyard and on her way along the road to Tours, Orléans and Paris. Mazarin couldn't help reflect then on how many good people this civil war had cost France already. He frankly hated the thought that this young girl could become part of the mounting number of casualties.

**11:06 (Paris Time)**

**Friday, July 5, 1652**

**22 kilometers south-southwest of Vendôme**

Nancy, doing good time thanks to the tireless pace of her robotic horse Pegasus, was over a day past the city of Tours and was hoping to make it to the town of Vendôme for the night, so that she would not expose her baby boy to a night out. Up to now the road traffic had been light but had stopped completely since she had left in the morning the small town of Château-Renault, something that made her suspect that trouble lay ahead. She was proven right when she turned a bend of the narrow road, in reality a glorified dirt trail, and was suddenly faced with a dispersed group of over forty dead men lying in and around the road. Nancy stopped at once her cart and surveyed visually the bodies and the woods around her, her heart beating faster. The dead men, wearing what had not been looted from their uniforms, were apparently soldiers from the royal army. Seeing no movement around and not hearing any suspicious noise, Nancy discreetly pulled her blunderbuss scatter gun closer to her, hiding it under her seat, then pulled out an extra pistol from her well-stocked arsenal and hid it as well under her seat before urging Pegasus forward. She would have jumped out to at least pull out of the way the few bodies lying across the road but was afraid that this could turn into an ambush and was not ready to risk her son for this. She made Pegasus zigzag in order to avoid trampling any of the bodies, then urged it on to a fast trot, in a hurry to get away from this spot.

Her fears materialized three kilometers further down the road, when a mounted patrol of seven soldiers wearing the colors of the Duke of Orléans appeared ahead of her, turning a bend of the road. Something in the soldiers' attitude alarmed at once Nancy, who forced herself to keep going on at the same rhythm despite her misgivings. She soon understood what had awakened her suspicions when the soldiers galloped to

meet her cart, then surrounded it, forcing her to stop: they were obviously half-drunk, apart from being unshaven and unkempt. They looked and sounded like the dregs of an army and acted like it as well. Their leader, who was holding a sword, pointed it at Nancy while shouting joyously to his men.

“LOOK WHAT PROVIDENCE HAS BROUGHT TO US: A FINE LOOKING GIRL TO AMUSE US!”

Nancy tensed further, knowing that she would not be able to avoid a fight now if she wanted to live and protect her son. Still, she tried one attempt at keeping the situation calm, feigning fear while staying on the driver's bench of her cart.

“Please, sir, I am only trying to join back my husband in Paris and have my baby son with me.”

That only made the leading cavalryman scoff at her.

“A baby, eh? Good! Then you have some experience in bed. If you are really nice with us we will let you and your baby go away safely afterwards. Right, men?”

His question made his six men laugh out loud, showing to Nancy the worth of his promise. Thankfully for her, four of the men, including their leader, stood in a loose group to her left front, while two more stood to her front right and a last one stood behind her cart. They had pistols, swords and muskets but had only their swords out at this time, except for one man behind the leader who was holding a pistol. Taking the initiative while the soldiers were laughing as a group, Nancy pulled out her blunderbuss scatter gun and discharged it in the middle of the group of four men to her front left. The loud blast and the cloud of white smoke made the surviving soldiers stop their laughing abruptly as three men and two of their horses fell down, with a fourth man crying out in pain while holding his left upper arm. Not letting the other soldiers a chance to recover from their surprise, Nancy pulled out the two pistols at her belt and shot down the two men to her front right, then quickly grabbed her spare pistol from under her bench and stood on her feet while turning around. She shot the last soldier as he was trying still to pull his own pistol out. That left the one wounded soldier to her front left. Looking back around, she saw that one galloping away while still holding his arm. Sitting back down, she urged Pegasus to full gallop, intent on finishing the man off before he could get more soldiers on her. Nancy patted gently the head of little Charles, who was now crying after being awakened brutally by the detonations.

“I'm sorry about that, Charles. Be patient and I will take care of you soon.”

Pulling another loaded pistol from her reserve while holding the reins, Nancy then waited for Pegasus to overtake the soldier's horse, which didn't take long. As soon as the man was less than ten paces from her she shot him down, hitting him between the shoulder blades and dropping him from his horse. She didn't bother to check on him, instead continuing on at a full gallop along the road towards Vendôme. Using the fact that Pegasus could go on by himself without supervision, Nancy used the next minutes to reload frantically her four pistols and her blunderbuss, hiding or holstering them back afterwards, then grabbed her baby and hugged it, trying to calm him with soothing words. It was only a question of time before more soldiers appeared to investigate the shooting she had done.

Nancy felt her heart sink when a strong column of over a hundred cavalymen appeared five minutes later on the road, galloping towards her: there was no way that she could deal with so many soldiers. Subtlety was thus the order of the day now. While dressed in different uniforms from the ones she had killed, they were still recognizable as men of the Duke of Orléans. Slowing down her cart, Nancy started waiving frantically at the incoming soldiers, which were led by an officer, while shouting at them.

"THERE ARE ROYAL SOLDIERS BEHIND ME. THEY KILLED A GROUP OF FRONDE SOLDIERS."

Seeing the officer slowing down his horse as she approached him, Nancy pulled on the reins and made Pegasus stop, then shouted again excitedly at the officer.

"A HALF DOZEN FRONDE SOLDIERS WERE JUST KILLED THREE MILES BEHIND ME BY A LARGE GROUP OF ROYAL SOLDIERS HIDING IN THE FOREST! I SAW THE WHOLE THING!"

"Three miles away you say, mademoiselle?" Asked urgently the officer after tipping his hat to her. Nancy made a show of looking frightened, as if she had just run for her life.

"That is correct, monsieur! The shooting happened less than 300 paces behind my cart. Those Fronde soldiers never stood a chance, as there must have been over sixty royal soldiers."

"Sixty? It must be a raiding party intent on cutting our lines of communications." The officer then looked back at his men while waiving his sword high.

"FOLLOW ME, MEN! BE READY FOR ACTION!"

Nancy stood on her bench to watch the cavalry troop gallop away while shouting encouragement at them, then saying in a low voice one word once all of them were well past her.

“Suckers!”

She took place back on the bench at once and grabbed the reins to urge Pegasus to a gallop. As Pegasus accelerated along the road, Nancy made sure that little Charles was secure in his basket behind her driving bench, as the ride was going to be both rough and furious for a while. She ended up holding in place the basket with one hand while holding the reins in the other hand and with both of her feet braced solidly in the footrests as the cart nearly flew over the road. For a good six kilometers Nancy could have sworn that Pegasus pulled the small cart up to speeds of sixty kilometers per hour. She finally ordered her robotic horse to slow down as she spotted a narrow trail ahead and to the right. She made Pegasus veer on the trail and follow it at a relatively slow speed for about 400 meters. Seeing a particularly thick patch of coniferous trees to her left, she drove her cart to the middle of the patch and stopped it, then jumped out and hurriedly cut off branches with her sword to camouflage her cart, as the cavalymen she had fooled were liable to get information about her from one of the soldiers she had shot, if any of them had survived. Finally done, she returned inside her cart and pulled her crying son from his basket. She then gave Charles her left breast to suck on. Her baby grew quiet nearly at once, allowing her to relax somewhat. While her baby fed itself, she used one hand to open her provisions basket and ate as well, chewing on a piece of cheese and washing it down with water that she had filtered and boiled before pouring it in her water flask.

Maybe forty minutes later, she heard a troop of cavalymen approaching from the South on the main road at high speed and guessed that the Fronde officer had learned that she and not royal soldiers had shot the seven-man patrol and was now after her. That was worrying for her, as it meant that this officer, if he didn't catch her himself, was liable to pass the word about her to other Fronde officers in the area. This was going to force her to travel by night for the next day or two, in order to use to the fullest the technological advantage she enjoyed over present day soldiers thanks to the sophisticated sensors of her robotic horse, who could ride around in total darkness without difficulty. She was also going to need to change her itinerary a bit in order to take some distance from this area. After consulting a crude contemporary map, she

decided to proceed towards the city of Blois and then Orléans instead of Vendôme. Her baby then made a noise which was followed by a smell that announced to Nancy that it was time for a diaper change. She smiled to her son and kissed him tenderly on the forehead.

“I wish at times that I had a life as simple as yours, my sweet Charles. Milk, poop and sleep: can’t get simpler than that, eh?”

### **15:14 (Paris Time)**

**Wednesday, July 10, 1652**

**Faubourg St-Jacques, Paris**

A Fronde officer stopped Nancy’s cart with a sign of the hand as she got to the checkpoint established in the southern suburbs of Paris, then asked her a question in a bored voice.

“What is your reason for coming to Paris, mademoiselle?”

Nancy, wearing a blond wig and dressed in a poor peasant girl’s dress, patted the wicker basket besides her on the bench of her cart while looking at the officer.

“I’m here for a paternity affair, monsieur. My no-good fiancé believed that he could escape his responsibilities by fleeing to Paris, so I came to grab him back or, failing that, to make him pay a pension for my son.”

The officer looked with amusement at the baby in the basket, then laughed out loud before signaling to Nancy to pass.

“Have a good luck with your fiancé, mademoiselle, and have a good day.”

“Thank you, monsieur.” Said Nancy with a big smile before urging on Pegasus. Driving slowly through the checkpoint, she then went towards the Seine River, crossing it over the Pont de la Tournelle and passing through the Island of St-Louis before crossing the Pont Marie and rolling on the North Shore. It then took her less than thirty minutes to arrive at the Inn of Le Lion Noir. The sight of the inn made Nancy’s heart beat faster and she guided her horse into the courtyard of the establishment, where a stable boy grabbed the bridle of her horse to lead it into a stall of the stable. Nancy threw a silver coin to the boy and gave him a smile.

“Would you be kind enough to help me with my things before taking care of my horse?”

“Sure, mademoiselle!” Said the boy, pocketing quickly the coin and then grabbing two big bags Nancy was pulling out of the cart. Nancy herself carried the rest of her things and her baby, with her weapons hidden inside her bedroll. On entering the main hall of the inn, the innkeeper saw her full hands and called at once a servant to come help her. She grinned to the innkeeper as the servant took most of her things save for her bedroll and her baby basket.

“Thank you, monsieur, you are too kind. Do you have a room available?” The man hesitated then and eyed her carefully, recognizing her voice. He then understood who she was and played dumb.

“Of course, mademoiselle! For how long would you like to take it?”

“I am not sure yet. Maybe a few days at the most. I have to find someone in Paris.”

“A few days it will be, mademoiselle. You can pay the room once you had a chance to get all your things upstairs. Gilles, show the mademoiselle to room sixteen on the second floor.”

“Yes, boss!”

Making a show of helping her as well, the innkeeper took her bedroll from her and went upstairs as well, whispering to her as they were in the staircase.

“Monsieur d’Artagnan should be back in the inn for supper, mademoiselle. Should I announce you to him when he comes?”

“That won’t be necessary: I will wait for him downstairs during supper time.”

The innkeeper looked down at her baby and grinned to it.

“Your baby is really cute, mademoiselle. He certainly looks well fed too.”

“I’ve got lots of reserves for him.” Joked Nancy while grabbing her breasts, making the innkeeper laugh.

“That you do!”

They soon arrived at the room assigned to her and dropped her things there. The innkeeper, knowing her habits, smiled to her as she sat with a sigh on the bed.

“The usual hot bath, mademoiselle?”

“Damn right, monsieur! I just had a ten-day trip from Poitiers and feel grubby as hell.”

“Then it won’t be long, mademoiselle.” Promised the innkeeper. Before he could go, Nancy dropped four gold coins in his hand.



“Make sure that neither me nor Monsieur d’Artagnan and his friend stay hungry for the next day or two.”

“Understood, mademoiselle.” Said the happy man before leaving. Nancy used the time it took for a wooden bathtub to be brought in and filled with warm water to unpack and put her things away. Once her bath was ready, she locked her door, undressed herself and her baby and stepped into the tub with him. Washing her two month-old baby proved half of the fun, with little Charles giggling in the process and filling Nancy with pride. Once her baby was clean, Nancy wrapped him in a thick wool towel and laid him besides the tub in order to finish her own washing. She felt much better by the time she stepped out of the tub and dried herself. She put on a clean peasant’s dress supplemented by a wool cape and a linen cap over her blond wig, then put a clean diaper on her son before dressing him in a baby shirt and returning him to his padded basket. Lastly, she put her pistol belt on, hiding it under her cape, then went downstairs with her infant.

Taking a corner table in a dark part of the main hall, Nancy ordered the soup of the day, a chicken and vegetable broth, and a beef stew, plus a pitcher of red wine. It was not that she liked to drink wine all the time but drinking the water of the time was one sure way to become seriously sick quickly, so one drank either beer, wine or cider. Once she had eaten her meal, little Charles got to be breast-fed under the cover of her cape. Nancy was still nursing him when d’Artagnan walked in with Bartet, Dalleville and de Terlon. Hiding her joy, Nancy lowered her head so that they wouldn’t recognize her too fast and waited patiently while the innkeeper went to the four men and spoke in whispers to d’Artagnan. The latter still couldn’t help snap his head in her direction, a happy grin appearing on his face, but managed not to shout his joy, instead walking to her and sitting opposite her at her table. He then gently raised her chin with one hand, looking into her green eyes. She smile in turn and spoke softly.

“Hello, Charles. It was a long time. I have your son Charles with me here.” She opened a bit her cape to let him see her baby, who was still sucking milk. D’Artagnan, now 39 but still as fit and handsome as ever, gently caressed the baby’s head before bending over and kissing Nancy, who returned the favor. D’Artagnan had tears in his eyes when they parted.

“God, I missed you so much, Nancy.”

“And I missed you too, Charles. Go have supper with your friends, then come see me in room sixteen, the four of you. I have something from your master for you. By the way, I already paid the innkeeper for your supper.”

D’Artagnan grinned at that and pressed her right hand gently.

“You always think of everything, Nancy. I don’t know what I would be without you.”

“Without me you would still be the most famous musketeer in history, Charles.” D’Artagnan nodded somberly at that, remembering his fantastic trip to the year 1954.

“Well, I will see you after supper. That shouldn’t take long.”

“Take all your time, my love: we have all night after all.”

Those words made d’Artagnan grin with anticipated pleasure. He then got up and went to the table taken by his three comrades. Nancy was next to get up with her baby, going upstairs to her room. She had to wait only a half hour before someone knocked at her door. Always cautious, she grabbed a pistol before going to the door and asking who was there, then opened it on recognizing d’Artagnan’s voice. The latter and his three comrades quickly filed in the room, with Nancy locking the door behind them. Her next move was to give to d’Artagnan the letter from the Cardinal. D’Artagnan read it carefully, then looked gravely at his comrades.

“Friends, the Cardinal needs our services with him in Poitiers, where the King and his court have temporarily established themselves. With the Prince of Condé now in Bordeaux and with the Paris Parliament now mostly neutral in the Fronde, the Cardinal judges that our talents are now wasted here. We are to move to Poitiers as soon as possible.”

“That could be a risky trip.” Said somberly Hughes de Terlon. “It is said that there is constant fighting between royal and Fronde armies south of Paris.”

“I can brief you in detail right now about that.” Cut in Nancy, who then took out her map and took a couple of minutes to brief the four men on what she had noted during her trip from Poitiers. Her exposé made Hughes de Terlon look at her with disbelieving eyes.

“Tudieu, Nancy, you can explain military deployments better than many generals I have met. And you were able to evade all these enemy patrols?”

Nancy grinned with malice and pride at those words: coming from a seasoned soldier like de Terlon, those words were sweet indeed on her ego.

“Let’s say that I learned from the best. Now, I suggest that we go through Orléans, then Blois before heading towards Poitiers. Those areas are used by the enemy as rear areas for their supply lines and, as such, will have less fighting troops around them than the more direct way, where most of the fighting is happening.”

“Sounds logical.” Said thoughtfully Isaac Bartet while scratching his chin. “How do we get out of Paris?”

“In plain sight, through the southern suburbs. The Fronde soldiers manning the checkpoints there are bored and also concentrate their attention on the people entering Paris, not on those going out. Of course, if you can look less than martial on your way out, the better. I would also counsel that you split up before passing the checkpoints.”

“All good points, gentlemen!” Then said d’Artagnan in a firm voice. “Let’s be ready to leave by tomorrow morning, after breakfast.”

As the others nodded in agreement, Nancy fetched one of the heavy purses she had been lugging around and threw it at d’Artagnan.

“Before you go to your rooms, I have something else from the Cardinal: he tasked me with bringing you your back pay. There are 600 Livres for each of you in this purse.”

Those words brought a mix of joy and relief to the faces of the four agents of Mazarin, who then eagerly took their respective cuts from the purse before Dalleville, Bartet and de Terlon left Nancy’s room. That left d’Artagnan alone with Nancy, who locked the door of her room before gluing herself to her lover.

“I believe that we have some lost time to make up for, Charles.”

”I believe that you are right, Nancy.”

Charles was about to start undressing her when she stopped him and pointed at the bathtub, still sitting in a corner.

“Don’t forget my usual conditions, Charles: no bath, no sex!”

Charles sighed in mock frustration, then grinned with malice.

“Only if you help scrub me.”

“Deal!” Replied Nancy, a lecherous expression on her face.

**14:30 (Paris Time)**

**Sunday, July 21, 1652**

**Castle of Maubergeon, Poitiers**

Mazarin was on an outdoor promenade outside the castle courtyard with Queen Anne and young King Louis, profiting from a beautiful sunny afternoon, when he saw a covered cart escorted by four horsemen approach from the road to Blois and Paris. The ten royal guardsmen escorting the King also saw them and started readying their muskets but were stopped by an authoritative gesture from Mazarin.

“Hold! These are my agents and the Marquess of Saint-Laurent.”

Those words made young King Louis beam at once with joy.

“Nancy is back?”

His mother looked down at him with amusement.

“You seem quite fond of her, Louis.”

“Uh, I simply admire her for her courage and abilities, Mother.” Replied the boy, embarrassed at showing his true feelings like this. His answer made the Queen smile.

“Sure, Louis, I understand.”

Mazarin, himself smiling from the exchange, eyed with satisfaction the group as it approached them and finally stopped besides them. D’Artagnan and his three comrades took off their large felt hats and saluted the King and Queen from atop their horses, while Nancy bowed her head from the driver’s bench of her cart. D’Artagnan was the one to speak next.

“Good day, Your Majesties! We are pleased to report back from duty in Paris.”

“And we are as pleased to see you back in good health.” Answered the Queen.

“How was your trip?”

“Thankfully uneventful, Your Majesty.” Said d’Artagnan. “We were able to evade most of the enemy troops between here and Paris and tricked our way through for the rest with the help of Lady Nancy.”

“Then go make yourselves at home in the castle: you must be both tired and dirty from your long trip.”

“That we are, Your Majesty.” Replied d’Artagnan before looking at Mazarin.

“Your Eminence, we have extensive details of the enemy troop deployments that we can brief you on afterwards.”

“I wish to listen to that briefing, Monsieur d’Artagnan.” Said at once King Louis.

“I need to continue my learning of military affairs.”

“You are most welcome to attend, Your Majesty.” Replied d’Artagnan, tipping his hat again. Mazarin nodded as well, signifying his consent, then spoke next.

“While you go take your rooms, I will warn General Turenne, so that he can listen in to your briefing.”

That announcement made D’Artagnan and his three male comrades look at each other with surprise and consternation.

“Monsieur de Turenne is on our side now, Your Eminence?”

“Let’s say that I used some of my diplomatic talents to gain him to our cause.” Replied Mazarin with a faint smile. “He is now firmly in our camp. Now, go to the castle and tell my intendant, Monsieur Colbert, to provide you with good rooms. You all deserve the best after your perilous mission in Paris.”

“You are too kind, Your Eminence.”

As the four agents rode past him towards the castle, Mazarin made a sign to Nancy to stop her cart as she was about to follow d’Artagnan and his comrades. Followed closely by young Louis, Mazarin then went to her and bowed his head to her in salute.

“Well done, Marquess! You decidedly make a first class agent.”

“You flatter me, Your Eminence.” Replied Nancy politely. She did smile however when young Louis took her right hand and pressed it while beaming to her.

“I was scared for you, Lady Nancy. My heart is overjoyed at seeing you back well.”

“And seeing you again is a true privilege, Your Majesty.”

“Could I ask you to come tell me more stories about your adventures tonight, milady?”

“How could I refuse a request from you, Your Majesty? I will come see you in the evening, or at your convenience. If you will now excuse me, I would wish to go wash and change and take care of my son a bit, Your Majesty.”

“By all means, Lady Nancy.”

Louis then let Nancy drive away her cart towards the castle, watching her for a while before looking up at Mazarin, an enthusiastic smile on his face.

“Have you ever met such an extraordinary girl before in your life, Cardinal?”

“To be frank, never, Your Majesty.” Said Mazarin, thoughtful, as he also followed the cart with his eyes.

Nancy was relaxing while enjoying a hot bath with her baby son when d’Artagnan introduced himself in the bathroom next to the castle’s kitchens despite the protests from the young maid attending Nancy. Flipping a silver coin to the maid to shut her up,

d'Artagnan then knelt beside the bathtub and smiled to Nancy, admiring her and his son.

"The sight of the two of you makes my heart truly content, Nancy."

He then became serious, turning to business.

"General Turenne will be ready to listen to our briefing in one hour. Do you want to brief him or I will do it?"

"Do it, Charles. I don't want to attract more attention to me than necessary. I already am becoming a bit too well known around the court as it is."

"I understand. Still, don't hesitate to correct me if I miss something during the briefing."

Nancy caressed his cheek after he said that, eyeing him tenderly at the same time.

"Charles, stop selling yourself short. My origins may be extraordinary but you are still yourself an extraordinary man whom I am most proud and happy to love. You will do just fine."

"Thanks, Nancy. Loving you is the greatest privilege I ever had in my life." Replied d'Artagnan before kissing her, then kissing his baby son before leaving. Nancy sighed, content, as she sat in her bath: life in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century may have been hard but it had its good points.

D'Artagnan was on his way back to his room when he met Cardinal Mazarin, who was alone, in the hallway. His master then signaled him to follow him to a deserted storeroom, where he closed the door behind them before facing d'Artagnan.

"My dear d'Artagnan, you are without a doubt the best man who could answer my questions about a certain subject."

"Ask and I will do my best, Your Eminence." Replied politely d'Artagnan.

"It is about your mistress, the Marquess of Saint-Laurent."

D'Artagnan tensed up at once at those words, something that the crafty Cardinal didn't miss.

"What do you wish to know about Nancy, Your Eminence?"

"All that you know, my good d'Artagnan."

"But, Your Eminence, hasn't she proved her loyalty to our cause enough yet? I can assure you that she is not about to betray us. I would in fact trust her with my life."

"I know that you would and I do not fear any betrayal from her either, d'Artagnan. I am just curious about where she got all her incredible talents for her young age."

D'Artagnan was silent for a moment, torn between his loyalty to his employer and his word given to Farah Tolkonen. He however had only one word.

"I am sorry, Your Eminence, but I vowed to keep her personal history a secret. She may be a most extraordinary and unusual girl but I however can vouch that she has only the good of France in her mind. Please do not press me further on this, Your Eminence."

It was the turn of Mazarin to be silent for a moment, surprised by his reluctance to speak. Knowing d'Artagnan's sense of honor, he however chose to let it go at that.

"Very well, d'Artagnan. You may keep her secrets to you if you wish so and I won't hold it against you. I however expect you to warn me if she is ever to become a threat to France and to King Louis."

"That will never happen, Your Eminence! I can assure you of that." Replied at once d'Artagnan without a hesitation and in a most firm tone. That seemed to satisfy Mazarin, who smiled to him and patted his shoulder.

"I believe you, my good d'Artagnan. A girl that can impress so much a man like you must indeed be a gem."

"She is indeed a gem, Your Eminence, a truly one-of-a-kind gem. Will that be all, Your Eminence?"

"I have only one more question. How would you rate her as a secret agent?" D'Artagnan didn't hesitate one second then, answering proudly.

"Without equal, Your Eminence. She could turn circles even around me."

"Indeed?" Said Mazarin, truly surprised by that answer but also pleased by it. It thus seemed that young King Louis had fallen enamored of someone well worthy of his attention. That could only be good for the royal cause. Mazarin then promised himself to facilitate access to the King for Lady Nancy as much as he could. With that in mind he dismissed d'Artagnan, who left at once.

They met again one hour later in the King's study, with Nancy and General Turenne present as well and bent over a map of France. Turenne was a gruff, old soldier with decades of experience and who was adored by his men. While he listened with barely disguised impatience at first, the level of detail of the information given by d'Artagnan soon made him pay close attention to what was said. At one point he fingered the map at a spot north of the city of Orléans.

“You say that there was a major enemy camp there? How many troops were there? Did they have cannons with them?”

D’Artagnan, not having seen himself that camp, hesitated and looked at Nancy. The latter, wishing she had not been obliged to do this, still answered in d’Artagnan’s place while pointing at a precise point on the map.

“I went by that camp on the eight. At that time I would evaluate the number of troops in the camp at around 4,000 men, most of them infantry. Those soldiers were busy at the time practicing their battle drills and musket loading. I counted about 500 horses in the corral by the camp and saw as well twelve six-pounder brass field guns lined up near a farm building apparently used as a field headquarters by the enemy. From the uniforms and the accent of the troops I met, I would say that they were Alsatian and German mercenaries. There was also a lot of chariot traffic around the camp, with what seemed to be a gunpowder reserve being built up in a barn situated some 300 yards from the camp and kept under tight guard. Another dump on the south side of the camp appeared to contain food and horse feed. From the volumes I saw in that dump, I would guess that there was enough there to supply that force of 4,000 men for at least six weeks. The flag flying over the camp was that of the Duke of Orléans. That is all for that camp, sir.”

General Turenne eyed her in silence for a moment, stunned by the proficiency of her military reporting. Mazarin was also eyeing her, but with interest rather than surprise, while young King Louis looked with awe at her. Turenne then asked her a direct question.

“From where were those supply chariots coming from, mademoiselle?”

“About half came from the direction of Orléans, while the rest came from Paris. The road between that camp and Orléans was heavily patrolled by the enemy and seemed to constitute their main supply road.”

“I see! We are thus probably looking at the reserve force of the enemy, which is in a good position to block to us the road to Paris. This is indeed useful information. I will have to somewhat change my troop dispositions in light of this.”

“Glad to have been of help, General.” Replied d’Artagnan, allowing Nancy to back off from the map table. Turenne then saluted the King and asked for his permission to leave, which Louis gave at once. With the old general gone, Louis went at once to Nancy.



“Marquess, there are still a couple of hours left before suppertime. Would you be so kind as to help me practice my fencing with you in the meantime?”

“But, wouldn’t Monsieur d’Artagnan be more qualified for that, Your Majesty?”

“Maybe,” said maliciously the young king, “but it would be more agreeable with you.”

The men around her grinned at those words, while Nancy shrugged and gave an apologetic look at d’Artagnan.

“I can’t deny that, I guess. Could you find me two practice swords, Charles?”

“Right away, Nancy.” Said d’Artagnan, amused by all this. As he went away, Louis gallantly took Nancy’s hand and guided her towards the door of his apartments.

“Let’s go to the main hall for the practice: there is ample space there.”

To Nancy’s secret annoyance, that simple sword practice ended up attracting most of the nobles of the court and a goodly amount of the servants as well, with whispered comments flying around the growing crowd of spectators as young Louis faced off Nancy, a sword with a dull blade and flat tip in his right hand. Nancy, dressed in a court gown and wearing a set of jewels, didn’t look much like the swordsman type at this time, which was bound to make her real fencing abilities hit the general psyche even more. She knew that but also knew that she couldn’t pretend being a beginner with a sword, not with all that had happened around her in the last ten months. With Queen Anne, Cardinal Mazarin and d’Artagnan looking on, Nancy started the practice by asking King Louis to make a few attack passes in order to judge his present level of expertise with a sword. While proving more than fair for his age, Louis showed that he was still no duelist yet, thus Nancy concentrated on teaching him a few new passes of average difficulty. To his credit, the young king learned fast and mostly mastered those new moves within half a hour. Nancy then declared a short pause to allow Louis to have a refreshment, herself using the break to go hold her son for a few minutes. All the spectators stayed around in the meantime, since no sensible courtier would walk away from an occasion where he or she could publicly applaud the King while being noticed by others. Nancy couldn’t even tell herself that this was typical of this century, as the art of ass-licking was truly a timeless one.

As they were about to resume the practice, King Louis smiled to her and proposed something in an enthusiastic tone.

“Marquess, how about showing me your best moves?”

“Uh, Your Majesty, I don’t want to insult you but such moves would need to be practiced against an expert opponent in order to be demonstrated properly.”

“Monsieur d’Artagnan could jump in if you want to, Your Majesty.” Proposed Cardinal Mazarin right away, surprising both Nancy and d’Artagnan but firing up young Louis.

“Great idea, Your Eminence! That should make for a splendid fencing demonstration. Here, Monsieur d’Artagnan, take my sword.”

Unable to refuse such a request from his king, d’Artagnan took the practice sword and faced Nancy in the middle of the main hall. Nancy could see in his face that he didn’t know how to take this. She could also guess that Mazarin had some ulterior motive in proposing such a duel. Resigning herself to the possible fallouts from this, Nancy saluted her lover with her sword.

“Give me your best, Charles.”

Seeing d’Artagnan still hesitate, Nancy went to the offensive, advancing on him with a flurry of quick sword passes. D’Artagnan was taken by surprise by her assault and nearly let one thrust pass through his defense. Nancy froze for a moment, her face close to his, and grinned.

“You need to do better than that, my dear Charles, or I will whip up your butt.”

“Nobody whips my butt with a sword!” Replied d’Artagnan, catching on to the fun, before going himself on the offensive. He was not a little surprised to then see Nancy counter all his moves with the skill of a master, something that also made the crowd of spectators and King Louis open their eyes wide.

“Where did you learn to fence like this?” Wondered d’Artagnan, making Nancy smile devilishly.

“My big sister taught me.”

Another, even more intricate exchange of passes and parries followed for a good minute, an eternity in professional fencing, with the movement of their blades so quick that one could barely follow them visually. Still, none of the two opponents appeared to enjoy a clear edge on the other. Mazarin, who was watching the duel very closely, knew for a fact that d’Artagnan was easily one of the best swordsmen in France, if not in Europe. To see a teenage girl equal him was something close to incredible and also said a lot about the level of training of that girl. With all the other skills already shown by Nancy, she had to have been trained hard since her preteen years. For Mazarin that

could mean only one thing: a government-trained elite spy or assassin, or maybe a member of a secret sect or organization. However, Mazarin considered himself an astute judge of men and women and couldn't believe that Nancy was hiding some dark, sinister objective aimed at France. She also didn't fit the profile of a fanatic of any kind. The more he saw of her, the more of a mystery she became to him.

Two more frenzied exchanges went on, with no clear point made on either side, before Nancy and d'Artagnan decided on a common accord to put an end to the duel. King Louis and the other spectators then applauded them enthusiastically, with Louis going to Nancy and taking hold of her left hand.

"Marquess, you must teach me fencing!"

Nancy, breathing a bit fast after her exercise, gave the only answer she could and curtsied to the King.

"As you wish, Your Majesty."

Pleased with himself, Louis then turned around and shouted an order at the servants present.

"LET'S DRINK TO THOSE TWO VALIANT COMBATTANTS! WINE, FOR EVERYONE!"

Happy cheers greeted that order. As the servants present hurried to get cups for all, d'Artagnan approached Nancy and whispered near her ear.

"I didn't suspect that you were that good with a sword, Nancy. You keep surprising me all the time."

Nancy only smiled at that, unwilling to tell him about the souvenirs from her past incarnations. She accepted a towel brought to her by a servant and sponged the sweat on her forehead, then gave him her practice sword and went to get her baby, who was crying in his basket. Young King Louis nearly licked his lips when she denuded her right breast to offer it to her baby.

"Uh, how about coming to my room tonight to tell me more stories about your adventures, Marquess?"

"Could I come for only an hour or two, Your Majesty? I don't want to leave my baby alone too long."

"I can have a maid watch over him during your visit." Shot back Louis, who was at least persistent if not subtle. Nancy, knowing that she was only part of the beginning of a long procession of women in the life of that king, took that in stride.

“I will come at around ten in the evening then, Your Majesty. Would that be convenient for you?”

“Very, Marquess.” Replied happily the boy. Louis then left her, returning towards his mother and Cardinal Mazarin. D’Artagnan took that chance to join back with Nancy. He now had a somber expression on his face that was not hard for Nancy to identify.

“Charles, the King again asked me to come at night to his room. Will you forgive me if I do go?”

Her lover sighed at those words but nodded his head anyway.

“As I said once before, I myself made more than one man cuckold and we are not married to each other. The King is also, well, the King.”

Nancy caressed with one hand his face, trying to console him.

“If it can help, Charles, know that I will always love you truly, even in the event that you marry another woman.”

Seeing a servant pass nearby with a platter full of wine cups, Nancy grabbed two cups and gave one to d’Artagnan before raising her own cup and speaking softly.

“To our eternal love, Charles.”

“To our eternal love.” Replied d’Artagnan, knocking his cup against hers.

**15:09 (Paris Time)**

**Sunday, June 7, 1654**

**Cathedral of Reims, northeast of Paris**

**France**

Nancy, wearing her best court dress and richest jewels, was watching from the front rank of spectators the official crowning of King Louis XIV, who was now nearly seventeen years old. As much as confirming Louis XIV as the sovereign of France, the flamboyant ceremony was meant to celebrate the end of the civil war of the Fronde, which had cost so many lives and nearly ruined the country. The instigators and leaders of the Fronde were now either in jail, dead, exiled or on the run. Unfortunately for France, the Fronde had now given place to a new war, this one against Spain, which was occupying a number of French cities in the north of the country. Worst still, the Prince of Condé, not content to revolt against his king during the Fronde Uprising, had sold himself to the Spaniards, adding treason to insurrection. D’Artagnan, who was now a lieutenant in the King’s Guards Regiment and was about to parade with his unit after

the crowning, would soon be leaving for war against the Spaniards. Nancy, who had spent over two years non-stop in this century, save for a few short breaks back to the Time Patrol main base with her toddler son, had seen and documented in detail the fighting and struggle for power at the side of d'Artagnan and of King Louis, as unofficial mistress of both of them. With her discreet video recordings of this crowning ceremony to cap it, the Time Patrol would soon be able to release an extensive documentary, both in video and in print, of the Fronde Uprising, thanks in great part to Nancy's work. While that documentary would most probably bring her fame in the France of 1956 'B', Nancy was much more taken by the fact that d'Artagnan was going to leave for years of war in the field. She knew that he would survive, being wounded only once during the next months, but she still was deadly concerned for him. She was not however going to be able to follow him, at least for the first year, as she had to leave soon on another mission with the Time Patrol.

Little Charles, now two years and one month-old, spent most of the ceremony in either her arms or sitting across her shoulders, thus being able to see much of it well. While the crowning ceremony bored him, he loved the following military parade, waiving with Nancy as d'Artagnan went by at the head of his mounted company. After the troop review was completed, Nancy went at once to the King, trying to intercept him before he left for his temporary apartments in Reims. She caught him as he was waiting for his carriage and, having open access to him, approached him and curtsied in front of him while holding the hand of little Charles.

"Your Majesty, I have one little favor to ask you on this day of your crowning."

"Speak, my dear Nancy, and you shall have it."

"Your Majesty, I request of you a leave of absence of less than two years, so that I could go visit my birth place in New France."

Louis, who had been in a good mood until now, thought for a second before sighing with regret and taking her hand to make her get back on her feet.

"Those will be long months for me, my friend, but I understand your wish. Further, such a trip would fit most rightfully with your title of Marquess of Saint-Laurent. May you have a safe trip to New France and back."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

Then leaving the King with his courtiers and guards, Nancy went with little Charles to her faithful horse Pegasus, tied along dozens of other horses to one side of the cathedral.

D'Artagnan had already been warned by her of her trip and had given her his goodbyes, so she was able to leave at once, little Charles sitting in front of her in the large saddle. Galloping along the main streets of Reims, she soon left the city and took the road to Paris. A few kilometers down the road she turned left on a small trail as she was going through a forest. Now being out of sight of any possible witness, Nancy activated a hidden switch and made a small control panel and flight control stick emerge from Pegasus' neck. Grabbing the stick, she then punched in the spacetime coordinates for her trip back in time to the Time Patrol main base and spoke to her robotic horse.

“Pegasus, bring us home!”

The horse flew off the ground at once, then disappeared with her and her son in a flash of white light.

## **CHAPTER 12 – MONARCHY, REPUBLIC AND EMPIRE**

**11:08 (Paris Time)**

**Wednesday, February 23, 1848**

**Hôtel de Brinvilliers, 12 Charles-V Street**

**District of Le Marais, Paris**

**France**

“MADAM! MADAM! THE NATIONAL GUARD HAS JOINED THE BARRICADES IN MONTMARTRE!”

Jeanne, who was reading the morning newspaper, raised her head as Leila Benchetrit, her assistant-cook, appeared in the doorway of her private office on the upper floor of her residence. Leila, who had gone to buy fresh bread, entered the office on a sign from Jeanne.

“Where did you hear this, Leila?”

“At the market, madam. Spirits are becoming hot in town and some are talking of going to the Prime Minister’s residence to demonstrate.”

Jeanne/Nancy ‘B’, who already knew in detail what was to come, put down her newspaper and got up from her sofa, her expression somber.

“Tell the other employees that I want to see all of them in the ballroom: I will speak to them.”

“Right away, madam.”

As the Algerian woman walked away quickly, Jeanne pondered the present situation. France was about to live through a revolution that would not only mark the end of the reign of King Louis-Philippe The First and of his so-called ‘July Monarchy’, but would also inflame revolutionary passions across the whole of Europe in the weeks and months to come. While he had tried to reign with moderation, King Louis-Philippe was afflicted with a most unpopular prime minister, Guizot, who was totally opposed to any reform to the unjust current electoral system, on top of showing himself incapable of dealing with the grave economic crisis France was living through, with the poorer citizens suffering the most from the said crisis. The months to come were going to be

politically and socially unstable and she was going to have to act cautiously in order not to put at risk her mission, which was to create and make prosper her future charity foundation. To intervene herself politically in the various crisis to come, unless to bet on a winning horse, would only put her fortune and maybe even her own freedom at risk.

When she entered the huge, eleven by ten meter ballroom of the upper floor, she found assembled the six women and four men that made up her domestic staff. She looked around first at the anxious expressions of her employees, which she had personally selected with care for their honesty and human decency.

"My friends, the next few days could become quite agitated and the streets of Paris will be dangerous, especially now that the army is occupying the streets and that the National Guard seems ready to face it in favor of those asking for reforms. I will thus ask you to stay inside the residence and not to go out until further notice, and this for your own safety. I am ready to offer safe lodging and food to your immediate families, for those of you who are married and have children. However, please hurry and come back before darkness if you want to go get your families. Act quickly but cautiously. Go!"

Her employees dispersed at once, with the exception of Li Mai, her personal assistant, who stood there, unsure what to do. Jeanne walked to her and gave her a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry, Mai: everything will be fine."

"But, what will we do if rioters, or even soldiers, come and attack the residence, Jeanne?"

"We will not give them any pretexts to attack us, Mai."

"But, you are a d'Orléans, Jeanne. Some may be hostile to you just because of your apparent family link with the King."

Jeanne nodded her head slowly at those words. Mai, on top of being a sensitive and likeable teenager, had also proved many times that she was an intelligent girl.

"I will deal with that whenever the problem will show up, Mai. In the meantime, let's go prepare our spare rooms for the families of our people."

The four employees who were married and had children came back to her townhouse just before noon with their loved ones and a few suitcases as the popular agitation increased along the city's streets. Jeanne received them with a warm smile,



showing a particular affection at the sixteen children, whose age varied from nine months to fourteen years.

“Come, my children! I have prepared a large common room for the boys and another one for the girls. Aisha, Nadine, you are the two oldest of the lot. You will thus sleep in the secondary master bedroom, which is empty at the moment.”

The thirteen year-old Algerian and the fourteen year-old Haitian thanked her before being guided to their room by Mai, each carrying a bag containing a few spare clothes. Jeanne took care herself of installing the other children, as well as the four spouses of her employees. Once everyone had been accommodated, Jeanne locked herself up in her private office and, taking out a key she always wore on herself, opened a large, solid oak cabinet, revealing her personal arsenal. Taking out of the cabinet two Colt-Paterson Model 1839 caliber .52 revolving carbines and two Colt DRAGOON caliber .44 revolvers, plus gunpowder, bullets and loading accessories, she took fifteen minutes to carefully load the four weapons. Those would give her a total of 26 ready-to-fire shots, a nearly unthinkable amount of firepower for the time period, but all with perfectly contemporary weapons. Then hiding in various places her loaded weapons, Jeanne next went to the dining room, where she ate lunch with her assembled employees and their families.

The afternoon and early evening were tense, with seditious shouts being heard at intervals from the street and with mixed groups of workers, students and small merchants starting to patrol the streets, armed with improvised weapons and a few rare firearms. Thankfully for Jeanne, nobody seemed to pay particular attention to her residence then. She probably owed that to the fact that she was well known in this district for her generosity and for her respect for the lower social classes, a respect that was most atypical of other French aristocrats. However, at around ten at night, a short but intense firefight could be heard from the direction of the district of Des Capucines. Less than half an hour later, rioters started running up and down the streets, shouting out indignant cries.

“THE SOLDIERS OF THE KING FIRED ON THE PEOPLE AND KILLED 52 MARTYRS! DOWN WITH GUIZOT!”

Those outraged cries rekindled at once the revolutionary fervor, which had quieted down somewhat in the evening. Jeanne, imitated by the other adults in her residence, watched from the upper floor windows of her townhouse as a small crowd of rioters

started building a barricade at the corner of their street, while the bells of churches rang all across Paris.

"My god! This is going to end in a bloodbath." Said Rosette Sans-Soucis, Jeanne's Haitian maid. Jeanne gave her a sober look.

"I truly hope that it won't happen, Rosette. While Prime Minister Guizot has no consideration for the lower classes, King Louis-Philippe is not the kind of man ready to stay in power through massacres."

Jeanne, who had discreetly sent spy probes to various strategic points of Paris to film those historical events for the benefit of the Time Patrol, also filmed the scenes down her street with the help of a pair of micro-cameras hidden in her earrings. She was thus able to film the passage of a funeral procession that passed under her windows around one o'clock in the morning. A huge crowd carrying lit lanterns escorted a cart full of dead people covered with blood. From the clothes worn by the dead, who were mostly men, it was evident that the bodies were those of people of modest condition, something that made Pierre Brunelle, Jeanne's gardener and handyman, grind his teeth.

"The bastards! To shoot at the people like this. I hope that this Guizot bastard will pay for that."

"I believe that his position of power will not survive long after this, Pierre. The King will have no choice now but to disassociate himself from him. Let's go to bed: tomorrow may be a long day."

The day of February 24 in fact proved to be full of news that brought joy to Jeanne's employees and to the insurgents of Paris. With his palace besieged by a huge crowd of rioters, and not wanting to be responsible for another massacre, King Louis-Philippe officially fired his hated prime minister and abdicated before fleeing his palace under a disguise, on his way to exile in England. The King's daughter, the Duchess of Orléans, whom he had named as regent for the benefit of his nine year-old grandson, then went to the Palais-Bourbon, the seat of the National Assembly, to proclaim her regency and thus save the monarchy. However, the republican representatives were not ready to play her game and colluded with the rioters to let the crowd invade the Palais-Bourbon. It was not supper time yet when the news of the proclamation of a provisional republican government circulated around Paris.

Jeanne greeted that news with an obvious satisfaction that surprised her employees. As she was opening a bottle of Champagne to celebrate the republican victory with them and their families, the young Michel d'Angelo, her stable boy, hesitantly asked her what all the others were secretly wondering about.

"You are really happy to see the monarchy fall, madam? But, you are a d'Orléans."

Jeanne answered him with a big smile as she made the bottle cork pop out.

"I was born a Brissac, not a d'Orléans, Michel. Furthermore, I believe in democratic values. The people IS France, whatever the aristocrats and big bourgeois may think. Come on, let's drink together for the people and for France!"

"FOR THE PEOPLE AND FRANCE!" Shouted in unison the men and women while raising their glasses of Champagne.

The weeks to follow were turbulent ones, as much in the rest of Europe as in France. Popular insurrections and riots shook in succession Vienna, Venice, Berlin, Milan, Munich and Prague, while the provisional French government publicly proclaimed the abolition of the death penalty and of slavery, the creation of national workshops in order to combat the widespread unemployment and the adoption of universal male suffrage. Jeanne didn't waste her time during those weeks. Operating anonymously through a Paris stockbroker and using the troubled political situation across France and Europe, she speculated actively on the stock markets while using her historical knowledge from the future, buying stocks from companies that were going through temporary lows and were being dumped by panicked owners. On top of the Paris stock market, she also speculated on the London stock market, not wanting to put all of her precious eggs in the same basket. By May 4, the day of the official proclamation of the Second Republic in France after the national elections held on April 23, her initial fortune had ballooned to nearly thirty million francs<sup>23</sup>, split nearly evenly between her accounts at the Bank of France and at the Midlands Bank of London. The proclamation of the Second Republic did not stop her financial speculations, but Jeanne did slow down her stock market activities in prediction of other important events due in June. Those events were preceded on May 15 by a big popular demonstration meant to support the Polish

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<sup>23</sup> In 1848, thirty million French francs was worth roughly 1.2 million British sterling pounds of the time, or six million American dollars of 1848.

insurgents fighting to throw off the Imperial Russia's hold on their country. The French National Assembly, composed in majority of right-wing conservatives and hidden monarchists, then imposed its views on the more socialist Executive Committee, which supposedly governed France but was in reality too weak to oppose the National Assembly. Many moderate republican officials were then replaced or even accused and imprisoned following the failed demonstration of May 15. The repercussions of this turn to the right by the government did not take long to make themselves felt around Jeanne.

**10:18 (Paris Time)**

**Thursday, June 22, 1848**

**Hôtel de Brinvilliers**

**12 Charles-V Street, district of Le Marais**

**Paris**

Jeanne, who was starting to be worried about Mai and her two missing maids, was partly relieved on seeing through the window of her private study her young Chinese personal assistant come back at a quick pace and enter through the carriage gate. Leila Benchetrit and Rosette Sans-Soucis were however still missing. Going quickly down the grand staircase of her residence, Jeanne met Mai as she was about to go up the stairs.

"Do you have news about Leila and Rosette, Mai?"

"Yes, Jeanne! Unfortunately, they are not good. Their husbands, who were officially working at the national workshops closed yesterday by the government, will now have to leave for the provinces, like all the other unemployed men over the age of 25. Leila and Rosette are desperate and don't know what to do anymore. They are asking for your help concerning their husbands."

"And they will have it!" Replied firmly Jeanne. "Let's take my personal cart to go see them."

Going out in the inner courtyard of the townhouse and walking to the stables, Jeanne gave an urgent order to Michel d'Angelo, who was cleaning the stalls of Jeanne's three horses.

"MICHEL, HOOK QUICKLY PEGASUS TO MY PERSONAL CART: I HAVE TO GO OUT AT ONCE."

"RIGHT AWAY, MADAM!"

Not staying inactive herself, Jeanne helped Michel by pushing out of its garage the small four-wheeled cart that she used for her informal trips in and around Paris. Six minutes later she was rolling out with Mai, turning on Saint-Paul Street and driving towards Saint-Antoine Street as fast as she could without risking to hit the numerous pedestrians following the narrow streets. Jeanne arrived soon at an old and decrepit apartment building where Rosette Sans-Soucis and her family were living. Telling Mai to stay in the cart, Jeanne ran up the narrow, dirty stairs of the building, finally knocking on a door of the second floor.

"ROSETTE, IT'S ME, JEANNE. OPEN UP!"

The worried face of her Haitian maid appeared a few seconds later as she opened her door.

"Thank you from the bottom of my heart for coming, madam. To be frank, I don't know what to do right now."

Jeanne gave a quick look at Thomas, Rosette's husband, who was sitting in a corner on a rickety chair and who was holding his head in despair.

"What is happening exactly, Rosette?"

"It's that damn governmental decree, madam." Exclaimed Rosette on an indignant tone. "Not content with closing the national workshops and thus throwing my husband and tens of thousands of other workers back into unemployment, the government has ordered that all the unemployed men over the age of 25 are to move to worksites in various provinces. If my husband Thomas obey that edict, I will be separated from him, maybe for good."

"Has he received an official notice about that?"

"Not directly, madam, but the decree published in the newspapers orders the unemployed to show up tomorrow morning at their old workshops, from which chariots will carry them to provincial worksites. The youngest ones will be brought to army barracks to be enrolled there. Can you help us, madam?"

Rosette's pleading tone moved Jeanne, who already knew how much misery and even blood that closure of the national workshops would bring. She however had an idea in mind that could save Thomas. She thus looked at the dejected black man and spoke gently to him.

"Thomas, when did you show up for the last time at your workshop?"

"The day before yesterday, madam." Answered Thomas in his Creole-accented French.

"Thus on the twentieth, one day before the publication of the decree announcing the closure of the national workshops. Excellent! Thomas, you will say to anyone asking you that you were hired by me on a permanent basis on the evening of the twentieth, and that you are thus not touched by the decree. As a precaution, I will ask you to come lodge with your whole family in my residence, until I can make all this official. By the way, you will really work for me, at my standard daily salary of three francs per day."

"You...you would do this for me, madam?" Asked Thomas, not believing his luck.

"I would do it for any decent person in need, Thomas. Rosette, pack quickly a suitcase for your husband: he will leave with me. Then, start packing more bags for the rest of your family, so that I can pick you up in a couple of hours and bring you to my residence for a few days: I anticipate that some difficult days are coming."

"Thank you, Jeanne! Thank you for everything! You are too good." Said Rosette, tears in her eyes, prompting Jeanne in going to her to hug her.

"Nobody can be too good, Rosette: only too mean."

Ten minutes later, and with Thomas in the back of her cart with an old suitcase, Jeanne took the reins and drove off, this time in the direction of the home of the Benchetrit. There, she found the same situation as that at the Sans-Soucis and applied the same solution, retroactively hiring permanently Omar Benchetrit and telling Leila to start packing her family things. With both Thomas and Omar in the back of her cart, Jeanne then went to see a notary that she knew well and who had socialist views, asking him to produce hiring contracts with retroactive dates for Omar and Thomas. A discreet bonus of 500 francs helped erase the few professional scruples of the notary, who signed the contracts as a witness. On her return trip, Jeanne briefly stopped at the homes of the two men, to start hauling their families' bags to her residence. Two more return trips were needed to pick up their wives and children and the rest of their limited belongings, with Luc Rémillard accompanying Jeanne's cart in her heavy haul chariot. By the time that the families of all her employees were safely installed in her residence, the popular agitation had grown to alarming levels.

Supper that night was a somber affair, with all realizing how difficult the next few days could become. Jeanne did her best to calm the nerves of her employees and of their families by singing and playing the piano and the guitar for them. She hid her own anxiety, knowing thanks to historical hindsight how bloody the next few days were going to be in Paris. Helping in late evening the mothers to put their children to bed for the night, Jeanne thought on looking at the sixteen boys and girls that simply doing this made all her efforts expended in this mission worthy. The smiles of gratitude from her employees, which had nothing to do with simple servility, also warmed her heart. Satisfied with herself, Jeanne/Nancy went to take a good hot bath and then slipped in her bed, falling asleep quickly.

The first shots, coming from the poor districts on the Left Shore, echoed around ten o'clock the next morning. Those isolated shots quickly became heavy exchanges of gunfire as the workers of Paris built barricades all across the city and as the army went on to brutally dismantle them and disperse the rioters. Contrary to the February Revolution, the government did not bow to the rioters and the National Guard stayed on the government's side. By the evening of June 23, Paris had turned into a battlefield. The next day, June 24, proved even worse, prompting Jeanne in keeping her guests far from the façade's windows during the day, fearing lost bullets. On June 25, the fighting closed in on her district in the morning. Jeanne was able to film in that afternoon the brief firefight that opposed a full company of infantry to a group of rioters holding a barricade erected at the corner of Charles-V and Sain-Paul Streets. The rioters, poorly armed, still caused a few casualties to the soldiers before dispersing in disorder. Jeanne ground her teeth together but kept filming discreetly as soldiers rounded up with much use of rifle butt strokes a dozen disarmed rioters and made them stand against a wall before summarily executing them. She suddenly became alarmed when about fifty soldiers started coming slowly down her street, bayonets fixed, while knocking on doors and then entering houses to search them. A poor man who made the mistake of protesting too vigorously the searching of his house was simply shot on his doorstep.

Taking a quick decision, Jeanne left the window and walked out of her private study to make a quick tour of her residence, ordering her staff and their families to assemble in the ballroom and to stay there. She then took with her Luc Rémillard and, after making sure he had no weapons on him, went down with him in the tunnel formed

by the carriage gate of her residence. Once in front of the solidly locked double doors of the gate, she looked gravely at the ex-legionnaire, a tough, solid man of 32 who had left the Foreign Legion because of a wound to his left arm.

"Listen to me carefully, Luc, and don't protest. At my signal, you will unlock the pedestrian door and will let me go out, then will immediately close and lock back the door. You will open it again when I will give three widely spaced knocks. If soldiers then follow me inside, do not oppose any resistance and do not object to their presence. The life of all of our people here is at risk."

Rémillard in turn looked at her with worry. Jeanne was presently wearing a splendid aristocrat's dress, plus a set of jewels that was worth a fortune.

"But, you risk being killed by going out like this, madam."

"I am the least at risk here, Luc. Trust me: I know what I am doing."

Then getting close to the pedestrian door embedded into the left carriage door of the gate, she listened for a moment before signaling Rémillard.

"Now, Luc!"

While mortally worried for her, the man obeyed her and quickly pulled the three heavy bolts locking the thick wood pedestrian door, then pulling the door opened to let Jeanne pass. She quickly stepped outside in the street, letting her coach driver and security guard close and lock the door behind her. A group of soldier walking down the street towards her residence and being less than fifteen paces from Jeanne raised their muskets at once on seeing her.

"DON'T MOVE! HANDS IN THE AIR!"

Her heart beating furiously and hoping to hell that the soldiers would not simply shoot her without questions, Jeanne slowly raised her hands up in the air while speaking in a firm voice.

"I am Lady Jeanne d'Orléans. I want to speak with your commanding officer."

The soldiers looked at each other in indecision, with one of them finally talking to his NCO.

"Shit, she's an aristocrat! What do we do, Sergeant?"

"Uh, I think that we better let the lieutenant decide. LIEUTENANT!"

A young officer whose saber was stained with blood, approached at a quick step on hearing the call.

"What is it, Sergeant? Who is this woman?"



"She says that she is an aristocrat, Lieutenant. She came out of that carriage door."

"This is my residence, Lieutenant." Offered Jeanne, then taking a chance. "I am Lady Jeanne d'Orléans and I came out to ask your soldiers to show restraint if they have to search my residence. I can assure you that I am alone with my servants and their families and that you will find no rioters inside."

The lieutenant approached Jeanne and examined her visually from head to toe, noting her rich dress and jewels. Impressed by her appearance and beauty, he finally bowed politely to her.

"Searching your residence will not be necessary, Lady Jeanne. You may now return inside. Have a good evening, madam."

"Thank you and good evening to you too, Lieutenant."

Going back to the carriage gate, Jeanne knocked three times on the pedestrian door, slipping inside as soon as Rémillard opened it. She sighed with relief as the man pushed back in place the heavy bolts of the door.

"Oof! That was tense! Thankfully, that young lieutenant proved to be polite...and reasonable."

Rémillard looked at her with something approaching adoration.

"Madam, your bravery would be worthy of a legionnaire."

"Bof! Some would call this simply a typical display of aristocratic arrogance."

Replied Jeanne, smiling.

The end of the insurrection that would be known in the future as 'The days of June' was marked the next day, June 26, by the fall of the last barricades in the suburbs of Saint-Antoine, which bordered the district of Le Marais, where Jeanne lived. Despite the end of the fighting, Jeanne insisted that her employees and their families stay inside her residence for another few days, alluding to the forcible searches and police sweeps that would probably follow. The next days proved her right and brought many bitter news to the poorer people of Paris. A number of newspapers considered to be left-leaning were closed by the government and the rights of assembly were severely curtailed. To the 4,000 civilians killed during the insurrection had to be added 1,500 other persons summarily shot without trial, while 25,000 more people were arrested in the days and weeks to follow. Of those 25,000 persons arrested, 11,000 were eventually condemned to long prison terms or were deported to Algeria. On the side of

the government forces, the losses amounted to 1,600 killed. All this brought a harsh turn to the right by the government, which was already too right-leaning to the taste of the Parisian workers. Feeling like a vulture for profiting financially from such a tragedy, Jeanne kept to her mission profile and bought at bargain prices millions of francs worth of shares at the Paris stock market, knowing that the societies whose shares she was buying and that had brutally dropped in value due to the insurrection would eventually regain their true value. As a consequence, her personal fortune ballooned again, to reach a total of over 49 million francs by August of 1848. That in turn provided her with a steady annual revenue from interests and dividends of over two millions francs. Jeanne was now in a good financial position to create her charitable foundation.

**16:55 (Paris Time)**

**Wednesday, September 20, 1848**

**Charles-V Street, district of Le Marais**

**Paris**

As their carriage turned into the Charles-V Street, Alexandre Dumas The Younger looked quickly outside through the window of his door to examine the façades along the short, narrow street. He then looked at his father, sitting to his right, asking him a question with a slight smile on his lips.

“Do you know well that Lady Jeanne d’Orléans, Father?”

Alexandre Dumas The Elder, successful writer, author of such famous novels as ‘THE THREE MUSKETEERS’ and ‘THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO’ and an incorrigible skirt chaser, smiled at the insinuation in the question from his son.

“Not as well as I would like, which is unfortunate for me: she is a decidedly appetizing young woman. She invited me once already in the last months, in the company of other writers and artists. While very young, she is remarkably well educated and has a bright intelligence. She is rich, but lives rather modestly for her means and supports a number of charitable works.”

“She is thus a person I should like.” Said the third passenger of the carriage, a frail but pretty woman in her forties. Alexandre Dumas The Elder nodded his head and smiled to his ex-mistress, with which he was still in very good terms and which he was escorting to this evening reception.

"I believe so, my sweet Mélanie, even though Jeanne d'Orléans definitely has an adventurous side to her."

"Oh? What do you mean, Father?" Asked his son, attracting a malicious smile on the face of the writer.

"You will soon see, Son."

The carriage then slowed down, to stop in front of Number 12, Charles-V Street. Alexandre Dumas The Elder stepped out first and helped Mélanie Waldor come out before going to pay the driver of the rented carriage. As his son was also coming down, another carriage turned into the street and stopped behind their own carriage. Intrigued, Alexandre The Elder watched a tall, well dressed young man come out of the newly arrived carriage, followed by a young woman wearing an elegant evening dress. As the two carriages were rolling away, the two groups found themselves together in front of the carriage gate of Number 12. Alexandre The Elder saluted the young couple with his top hat.

"Let me present myself: Alexandre Dumas The Elder. This is my son, Alexandre The Younger, and Miss Mélanie Waldor, a good friend of mine. I presume that you were also invited to this reception given by Lady Jeanne d'Orléans?"

"Effectively, Monsieur Dumas." Replied the young man in a French with a strong American accent. "I am Doctor Thomas Evans, dentist, and this is my wife Agnes. Uh, you wouldn't happen by chance to be the famous writer Alexandre Dumas, author of 'THE THREE MUSKETEERS'?"

"In person!" Replied proudly the writer. A pedestrian door then opened in one of the carriage doors, pulled from the inside by a man dressed in a valet uniform.

"If you may come in, ladies and gentlemen. Lady Jeanne is expecting you."

The five guests entered at once by the pedestrian door, then were guided to an entrance door on the left side of the tunnel leading to the inner courtyard through the façade section. To the surprise of the guests, a young and beautiful oriental teenager wearing a magnificent Chinese embroidered silk dress greeted them with a deep bow inside a wide vestibule.

"If you may follow me to the lounge, Lady Jeanne is waiting for you there with the guests that have already arrived."

As Alexandre The Younger climbed the stairs of the grand staircase behind the Chinese girl, he bent sideways to whisper to his father.

"She is really cute, that young Chinese."

"She certainly can make a man get an appetite, Son. She is the personal servant of Lady Jeanne, who can speak Chinese, by the way."

Alexandre The Younger opened his eyes wide, not a little impressed.

"Really? The people who can do so in Paris are rare indeed."

"And it's not her sole talent, I assure you."

Having climbed to the upper level, the group passed a double door and entered a very comfortably furnished lounge that featured a large fireplace and two tall windows giving a view of the inner courtyard of the townhouse. The lounge was furnished in First Empire style and measured about seven meters by five meters. Thomas and Agnes Evans fixed at once with curiosity the tall young woman, nearly a teenager, who then got up from one of the sofas. She was as tall as Thomas and looked very athletic, with tanned skin and long silky black hair framing a pretty face with gleaming green eyes. Her floating, 1810 style dress, let her muscular shoulders uncovered and, while out of fashion, appeared very comfortable, contrary to the dress with crinoline cage that the American was wearing and which was both heavy and cumbersome. Agnes Evans opened wide her eyes on seeing the fabulous set of jewels worn by the young woman, whispering to her husband in English.

"She is rich, no doubt about that."

Jeanne went to them, while a man and a woman in their forties got up from their sofa.

"Welcome to my house, my friends. For those who don't know me yet, I am Lady Jeanne d'Orléans. However, call me simply Jeanne. Already present are Monsieur Victor Hugo and the Baroness of Dudevant, better known under her pen name of George Sand."

The newcomers presented themselves in turn, then sat in the sofas forming a rectangle in a corner of the lounge. A butler then showed up with a tray supporting cups of Champagne, while a black servant went around with a plate of appetizers. With all her guests now served, Jeanne smiled to Thomas and Agnes Evans, speaking in perfect English to them.

"Do you feel comfortable enough to converse in French, Mister and Misses Evans?"

"Be reassured, Lady Jeanne." Replied in French Thomas. "Learning French as a second language is common in the good society of Philadelphia. We will manage."

“Excellent! However, do not hesitate to ask if you need something translated in English. With all the cultural luminaries present here tonight, the conversation will be flying quite high, especially with a member of the French Academy present among us.”

Victor Hugo smiled at that barb thrown at him.

“Do not worry, my dear Jeanne: I will not act like a literary critique tonight.”

“No?” Replied with a malicious smile Alexandre Dumas The Elder. “Your Esmeralda<sup>24</sup> would have loved to meet my dashing d’Artagnan.”

“As far as my Esmeralda is concerned, I believe that our hostess would have been perfect to play her role, Monsieur Dumas.”

Alexandre The Younger, who had been discreetly admiring a large painting hanging from a wall facing him, pointed the artwork with one index.

“Talking of our hostess, is this you in this nude portrait, Lady Jeanne?”

“It is me indeed.” Recognized Jeanne, smiling, making Thomas Evans and Alexandre The Younger pay a detailed attention to the painting. “I asked the painter who did it, a disciple of the method of the famous master Mathieu Le Nain, to show me as I am in real life, and not according to the old beauty canons of the Renaissance masters. I never understood why men of earlier centuries preferred overweight women who were as white as cadavers.”

“Because it was the signs that you were a rich aristocrat, Jeanne.” Replied Victor Hugo, attracting an unconvinced expression on the face of his hostess.

“Hum. Nobility and beauty, be they corporal or moral, are not the same in my mind. I always loved to live in the wide open spaces and to exercise physically. I don’t think that I have anything to envy in all those livid fat women we see in museum portraits.”

Agnes Evans had to give a discreet elbow in the ribs to her husband, who was admiring a bit too much to her taste the nude portrait of Jeanne d’Orléans. She then spoke to their hostess.

“Lady Jeanne, from the decoration of your residence, you seem to like old things...”

“Except in love.” Interrupted Jeanne with a smile, making her guests burst out in laughter. “I am sorry to have interrupted you like this, Agnes, but I couldn’t resist. Yes, I

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<sup>24</sup> Esmeralda : Name of the main character in the famous novel ‘THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE-DAME’, written by Victor Hugo.

do have a taste for history, which I study diligently. Take this residence, for example. I was lucky enough to be able to buy it a year ago. It was built in the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century and was the residence of the Marquess of Brinvilliers, who was executed in 1676 for poisoning a number of people. Unfortunately, her residence was then neglected along the years and I found it in a rather pitiful state, even though its structure was perfectly sound. Instead of having it renovated on the lines of a single style, I decided to furnish each main room to a different style and period. I also possess a varied historical wardrobe, as you can see tonight. I frankly find today's female fashion both horrible and uncomfortable, especially its crinoline cages and corsets. You should try once an antique Greek dress: it is very comfortable and also quite elegant. But enough about history: let's talk a bit about the present. Mister Evans, how is your dental practice doing in Paris?"

"Fairly well I must say, Jeanne." Replied Thomas. "We arrived in Paris last November and, while my appointments agenda is still not full, I have enough customers already to be able to live comfortably."

"So, you would still have some place left in your agenda for new customers?"

"Are you in need of dental care, Jeanne?"

Jeanne smiled widely, showing perfect teeth.

"Me, no! I was looking for a dentist using the latest techniques, who would be ready to examine and treat the young occupants of a Paris orphanage that I am helping financially. Doctor Brewster, whom I contacted at first, was already too busy but he gave me your name and address. I am of course ready to pay for your services in full if you accept to care for these orphans."

Thomas nodded his head at that: he now understood why he had received an invitation from a perfect stranger.

"To help your orphans this way would please me most, Jeanne. You can count on my services."

"Thank you very much, Thomas. We could further discuss this in detail later tonight, if you wish so."

Jeanne then looked at Alexandre Dumas The Elder.

"My dear Alexandre, when could we hope to see the last parts of your last novel, 'THE VISCOUNT OF BRAGELONNE'?"

The writer smiled with pride as the other guests listened on intently, apparently all interested by his answer.

"Well, the second part, titled 'LOUISE DE LA VALLIÈRE', should be published next month. As for the third part, 'THE MAN WITH THE IRON MASK', I should be able to finish it in about a year."

"Decidedly, you make us endure a cruel wait, my friend."

Agnes Evans then had a question for the writer.

"Monsieur Dumas, I loved your novel 'THE THREE MUSKETEERS', but I have a question about one of the characters in your novel, Milady de Winter. Is her character based on a person that really lived in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century?"

"Aaah, the beautiful and sinister Milady de Winter." Said Dumas in a thoughtful tone. "In truth, I sketched that character along fictitious lines when I wrote my novel. However, one of my historical research assistants has since found a few obscure references in the archives on King Louis XIV concerning a mysterious Marquise de Saint-Laurent, who seemed to have been some sort of a secret agent for Cardinal Mazarin. According to some, the Cardinal called her 'Milady' and there are also allusions that she had been marked with a red hot iron, like my Milady. Curiously, other vague notations pretended that this marquess was a lover of d'Artagnan and even of King Louis XIV. The historical informations on that woman are very limited and fragmentary, but I now think that the character of 'Milady' in my novel had after all some historical roots. That Marquise de Saint-Laurent must have been a fascinating woman." Jeanne, who had tensed up on hearing the name 'Marquise de Saint-Laurent', forced herself to keep a neutral expression.

"Your assistant didn't find more information about that mysterious marquess, Alexandre?"

"Unfortunately no, my dear. This Milady seemed to have purposely stayed as discreet as possible during her stay in the court of King Louis XIV, something that would be normal for a spy employed by Cardinal Mazarin. Actually, I would picture her like you, Jeanne: you are a young woman out of the ordinary, if I could go with the little you told me of your life."

"Oh, I would love to hear your story, Jeanne!" Said at once Agnes with enthusiasm, bringing a forced smile to Jeanne's lips.

"Oh, I am not so extraordinary, really, except for my athletic physique. I was born a Brissac and am the nineteen year-old daughter of a couple of ruined aristocrats who took a ship to the Guadeloupe over two years ago with the hope of rebuilding their fortune there. Unfortunately, pirates intercepted and took our ship in the Caribbean Sea,

killing my parents and taking me prisoner. The pirate ship then sank in a storm off the Guadeloupe but I was able to swim to the coast. That is when I met my late husband, Sire Pierre d'Orléans, who possessed a large sugar cane plantation."

While speaking, Jeanne showed a small portrait hooked to a wall of the lounge. It showed a solidly-built, handsome man in his early thirties.

"Pierre d'Orléans was a man the kind of which we see too rarely: generous, intelligent, strong but also kind and gentle. We quickly fell mutually in love and I married him in 1846. Unfortunately, he died a few months later of a tropical fever, leaving me his plantation and fortune. I then decided to return to France and sold the plantation. Since then, I have been using my newfound fortune to help others by supporting charity works. Well, that's me in a few words."

"Words that are too brief to properly tell a story as fascinating as yours, Jeanne." Replied Alexandre Dumas The Younger. "How long were you prisoner of those pirates?"

"Three long weeks. To be frank, I would rather not talk about that episode of my life."

Alexandre The Elder gave a warning look to his son, who then held his next question. The other guests easily guessed what kind of treatment Jeanne, a beautiful teenager, could have endured from these pirates and they had the good taste not to ask about that subject. The Baroness of Dudevant was the one to ask the next question after taking a sip of her Champagne.

"And how do you use your time, apart from supporting charity works, Jeanne?"

"I manage my fortune, mostly. I keep a close eye on the economic and political situation, in order to better invest my money and to make it fructify. I also train physically every day, in order to stay in top shape. I must say that I am a born athlete."

"You certainly seems to be in perfect health, Jeanne." Said Thomas Evans, making her nod her head.

"I am! Unfortunately, today's women's fashion is very restrictive for any woman trying to practice sports in public. I thus transformed a room on the ground floor into a small private gymnasium, so that I could exercise in private."

"You said that you follow closely the political situation, Jeanne." Said Victor Hugo, who was a member of the National Assembly. "What do you think of the events of this year?"



"That way too much blood has been spilled to date, Victor. The small people, who live in scandalous poverty and work for a pittance, have legitimate demands, demands that too many rich or well-off people dismiss while getting fat on their backs. Do not however think that I am engaged in politics: I simply am a humanist who detests seeing people being exploited and treated unjustly."

"Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, who has political opinions quite similar to you on that subject, was elected to the National Assembly a few days ago. I wonder if he will leave his refuge in England this time and return to take his seat."

"I think so, Victor. He is said to be very popular with the majority of the people and he has the support of the Republicans. Especially, he is not threatened anymore with arrest if he returns to France."

"His return will certainly please the countless mistresses and lovers he left behind in France." Said Mélanie Waldor, a slight smile on her face. "It is said that he even made two kids with the daughter of the commander of the Fort of Ham, where he was jailed until his escape in 1846."

Many guests laughed with Jeanne at Mélanie's remark, while Thomas Evans shook his head with incredulity.

"I must say that the way Frenchmen collect mistresses, even when they are married, is making many talk in the United States. Do the French women really accept so easily such rivals around their husbands?"

"Aaah, but where would be poetry and theatre plays without all these spicy stories, Doctor Evans?" Replied humorously Alexandre Dumas The Younger. "France has a long and proud tradition of making its people cuckold."

The whole group then burst into loud laughter at this declaration. Alexandre The Younger eyed Jeanne, young and desirable in her dress with large cleavage.

"And you, my beautiful Jeanne? You are young, rich and beautiful. You are thus a prime candidate to become the mistress of many men of substance in Paris. Are you planning to remarry soon?"

"To get married, no! To continue dating men, most probably!" Declared Jeanne while grinning, attracting more laughs. She however became serious before continuing.

"Please understand something, Alexandre: I came back to France so that I could use my fortune to help the people in need. To marry would legally give control of my fortune to a husband who would then be free to spend it according to his own whims, which would probably not be the same as mine. Remember that in France, as well as in

England, a married woman belongs to her husband and that she has no legal rights to possess her own things without the permission of her husband. On the other hand, an adventure or two with dashing young men won't hurt my fortune."

More laughs came out when Agnes Evans, red with embarrassment, fanned herself with one hand on hearing Jeanne.

"Dear god! Should I keep my husband under key during our stay in France?"

Jeanne made a face while making a show of eying Thomas Evans from head to toe.

"Hum, that may be a good idea, my dear Agnes."

The stunned expression of the American dentist, along with the scandalized look of his wife, made the French present burst out in laughter again. Jeanne then used the fact that the atmosphere was now fully relaxed to invite her guests to proceed to the dining room.

After a meal featuring exotic Chinese, Algerian and Creole dishes, Jeanne led her guests on a guided tour of her residence, which finally ended in the huge ballroom, where a piano sat near a display case containing an assortment of musical instruments. Sitting at the piano, Jeanne then played a couple of melodies while singing along, impressing and pleasing her guests with her musical talents. The quality of her piano playing particularly surprised the Baroness of Dudevant, who had been until recently the mistress of Frederic Chopin.

"My god, Jeanne, have you taken piano lessons from Monsieur Chopin?"

Jeanne shook her head as she got up from the piano stool to go grab a guitar.

"Not at all, my dear. I learned to play the piano at a young age, before going to the Guadeloupe. I also have a gift for guitar playing, an instrument that is said to be very popular in the United States."

She proved her gift with more singing while playing her guitar, dancing along with her tunes. Unknown to her guests, the repertoire she played included a number of musical pieces and songs from future times, but adapted to earlier centuries. The guests, who had already been surprised by the extent of Jeanne's technological knowledge, demonstrated when she had shown them her steam engine and the sanitary plumbing facilities installed in her residence, could only marvel at the range of her talents.

The reception came to an end at around ten o'clock at night, with Jeanne's guests leaving by rental carriage or, in the case of the Baroness of Dudevant, who lived

outside of Paris, aboard Jeanne's saloon carriage, driven by the loyal Luc Rémillard. Victor Hugo, who was the last to leave, kissed Jeanne's hand as he was about to step out.

"Thank you again for having invited me, Jeanne. The evening was most entertaining. I would love to be able to return the favor in the coming days."

"Thank you for the thought, my dear Victor. I however have to leave for England tomorrow, to go take care of my investments there and also to inspect a few orphanages that I am planning to support. I will however advise you once back in Paris."

The playwright gave her an admiring, fond look then.

"Jeanne, if all the rich people could be as generous and kind as you, the little people would be really happy. Good night my dear."

"And good night to you, Victor."

Going out in the street with the playwright and author, Jeanne watched as Victor Hugo climbed into the carriage that had waited for him and waved her hand as it started rolling away. Going back inside, she thought about her trip to England tomorrow. On top of the goals she had described to Victor Hugo, she had something else to do, something that could assure her of some very high level support in the future for her charitable organization.

## **12:16 (London Time)**

**Saturday, September 23, 1848**

**Dining room of the Empire Hotel**

**Port of Dover, England**

Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, accompanied by his current mistress, Harriet Howard, and by their three young boys, was about to select a table in the dining room of their hotel when Harriet discreetly pulled his left arm sleeve to attract his attention.

"Louis, I already met before the young woman sitting alone at the table near the windows to our left. Let me just speak with her quickly."

Louis looked in the direction she indicated and raised an eyebrow in immediate interest at the beautiful young woman sitting at a corner table. From what he could see of her clothes, the girl seemed richly dressed and also wore expensive jewels.

"And who is she exactly, Harriet?"

"Her name is Jeanne d'Orléans. She is a rich philanthropist whom I met at the Bank of Midlands yesterday. We then had a cup of tea together and talked a bit."

Louis tensed up at the mention of the girl's name: he owed his years of jail time and exile to the government of King Louis-Philippe, himself in exile in England since last February. He was thus understandably reticent when Harriet came back to him to say that the said Jeanne d'Orléans was inviting them to her table.

"Uh, she does not have family links to King Louis-Philippe, I hope?"

"Not at all!" Replied his English mistress, a young actress of great beauty who had inherited a fortune left to her by her previous lover and who was financially supporting Louis. "She was born a Brissac and her late husband, whom she married in the Guadeloupe, never set foot in France. Come, Louis! You too, my little ones!"

Taking by the hand the two youngest boys, Harriet led them to Jeanne's table, followed by Louis and the third boy. Jeanne got up from her chair to greet them, revealing the fact that she wore a skirt that only went down to her calves, rather than down to the floor, as current fashion dictated. She however wore a pair of knee-length boots made of shiny black leather that completed her expensive but unorthodox outfit. Louis, a man of small stature standing a mere 166 centimeters, looked up with surprise at Jeanne's 183 centimeters, with shoulders wider than his own shoulders. She had an eminently feminine body, if one overlooked her muscles and tanned skin. Louis however regained quickly his composure and saluted her with his top hat.

"Let me present myself, miss: Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, at your service."

"And I am Jeanne d'Orléans. Pleased to meet you, Monsieur Bonaparte. And what are the names of those three cute boys, if I may ask?"

While keeping to himself the fact that all three boys were illegitimate and that the oldest one was from Harriet's previous lover, Louis proudly presented the children to Jeanne, who had bent over to smile to them.

"With pleasure, Lady Jeanne. The oldest, Martin, is six. You then have Alexandre Louis Eugène, five, and Louis Ernest Alexandre, who is three."

"Hello, little ones!" Said Jeanne, attracting timid responses from the boys, with Martin's one made in English. Straightening up, Jeanne pointed her table to Louis and Harriet.

"Please, have a seat! It would please me to be able to eat with you."

"You are too kind, Lady Jeanne."

"Please, simply call me Jeanne."

"In that case, just call me Louis."

"Deal!"

Once they were all sitting, and with their orders taken by a waiter, Jeanne smiled to Louis.

"I suppose that you are taking the ferry for Calais that is departing this afternoon, Louis?"

"Exact, Jeanne. Me and Harriet are moving to Paris, now that I have been elected to the National Assembly and that it is finally possible for me to take my seat."

"And you have a residence waiting for you in Paris, I presume?"

"Uh, not really. We were planning to take a suite at the Westminster Hotel until we could find an adequate house to buy."

Jeanne immediately shook her index at those words.

"Forget the hotel for you, my friends. I am offering the hospitality of my own residence on Charles-V Street, in Le Marais, and this for as long as it takes you to find a permanent place."

"That is most generous on your part, Jeanne, and I sincerely thank you for your offer, but do you have enough place for all of us without having to tighten up?"

"I have ample room in the Hôtel de Brinvilliers, Louis."

"The Hôtel de Brinvilliers? Isn't that the old residence of the infamous Marquise de Brinvilliers, the poisoner?"

"Effectively!" Replied Jeanne, smiling. "But don't worry: you will be able to eat in my home without choking, unless you try to swallow too big a piece."

Jeanne's joke made Harriet giggle, while Louis fixed with wide eyes Jeanne's chest, which she had pushed up with her arms while speaking.

## **22:57 (Paris Time) / 21:57 (London Time)**

### **Port of Calais, France**

The group formed by Jeanne, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, Harriet Howard and the three boys walked down the walkway to the quay with sighs of relief at leaving the small steam ship that had brought them and twenty other passengers across the stormy waters of The Channel. Louis-Napoléon, who had suffered badly from seasickness during the trip, nearly kissed the quay after stepping on it.

"Thank you, God! I am decidedly not destined to be a sailor."

He then looked around him to orient himself in the dark, the quay being poorly lit by a few rare oil lamps.

"You said that your carriage would be waiting for you at the port, Jeanne?"

"Correct, Louis. In fact, I can now see my carriage coming up at the entrance to the quay."

Louis-Napoléon nodded his head with approval when the big two-horse carriage stopped in front of their group. It had four doors, was painted a lustrous royal blue and gold and its four wheels had steel coil spring independent suspensions and rubber rims.

"A German-style saloon carriage? You certainly offer yourself the best there is, Jeanne."

"I actually had it built to my own specifications, my dear Louis. Let's install the boys first, so that they could sleep: the poor kids are about to drop. LUC, I WILL TAKE CARE OF MY GUESTS. LOAD THE LUGGAGE IN THE MEANTIME."

"RIGHT AWAY, MADAM!"

As Luc Rémillard climbed down from his sheltered driver's bench to start loading the dozen or so suitcases and chests of the group in the rear trunk of the big carriage, Jeanne climbed in the passenger cabin. Watched by the curious eyes of Louis and Harriet, she removed two safety pegs before sliding out from the rear section a sort of internal platform that covered the baggage trunk, extending it over the rear seats and anchoring it to the top of the middle side jumpseats. She then took out from a storage box situated under the rear seats a rolled, thin mattress, a few wool blankets and three pillows, laying them out on the extended rear platform.

"Here you are! By temporarily sacrificing the rear seats, this system of retracting bed allows two adults to sleep comfortably during long trips. Come on, boys! Come up and get into bed!"

The three boys eagerly obeyed her, climbing aboard with the help of Louis, to then undress before slipping with delight under the blankets. Harriet kissed the three boys on the forehead once they were installed.

"Sleep well, my little ones."

Louis was further surprised by the conception of the carriage when he sat in one of the two cushioned forward seats, which faced aft, finding them to be uncommonly comfortable. The seat cushions were made of royal blue velvet and seemed to contain

springs inside their padding. The seats were also equipped with padded armrests and head-high padded back cushions.

"My god, I love this carriage design! I should order a similar one."

"Wait, you haven't seen everything yet, Louis." Replied Jeanne. "The front and rear seats are reclinable, on top of being fixed to spring suspensions of their own. You and Harriet will be able to sleep on the way, like your children."

"Reclinable? How?"

"Press your back against your seat and push, while raising this little lever under your right side armrest. To put it back straight, you will then only need to squeeze the lever again while taking your back off the seat."

Jeanne smiled to herself as Louis and Harriet tried their reclining seats, a concept from the future that however needed only a primitive technology well within the capabilities of this time. She then climbed down from the cabin to help Luc finish loading their pieces of luggage. Once that was finished, she climbed back in the cabin and sat on one of the central, forward-facing seats. Harriet, who had reclined her seat, sighed with contentment when the carriage started rolling, the noise of the wheels of the pavement muffled by the rubber rims.

"Louis was right: we should get a carriage like this one. What a contrast with that horrible ferry boat."

"I must say that the passenger facilities on our ferry were rather minimal." Said Jeanne, attracting an indignant reply from Louis.

"Minimal? How about non existant? In truth, that crossing exhausted me, on top of making me sick."

"Then, feel free to catch some sleep, Louis. You too, Harriet. I will wake you up once we will be at my place."

"You are decidedly too good, Jeanne." Said Harriet, making Jeanne shrug.

"It is in my nature to help others, Harriet."

Giving up to her fatigue, Harriet then let herself go to sleep in her padded, reclined seat, soon imitated by Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte. Now the lone one awake in the cabin, Jeanne fixed for a long moment the small man, thinking about all the events that were going to happen around the future French emperor in the coming months and years. A few discreet but well-informed counsels given at key moments by her to Louis would probably be sufficient to avoid many tragedies and much human suffering during the 23 years to come. However, Jeanne/Nancy understood too well the consequences of

giving such counsels to Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, or to anyone else from this time period. Trying to avoid future tragedies would only create new ones, on top of completely screwing up known history and preventing her own future origin from happening. That would also prevent the formation of the Time Patrol and would leave her a person that would never be born. Human history was drenched with blood and tears but she could not change in any significant way the history of this period. All that she could do was to do acts of charity to help a few hundred poor people that would stay anonymous in history. In that, the friendship and support of the future emperor could only help her in her projects. Later, in about a hundred years, her charitable foundation would then be able to help in its full capacity those of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that deserved it, especially in Timeline 'B'.



## **CHAPTER 13 – NOT SO SWEET HOME**

**11:02 (Washington Time)**

**Friday, July 01, 1955 'C'**

**Langley Air Force Base**

**Virginia, United States**

The ground technicians working on the F-83A fighter-bombers of the 27<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron/1<sup>st</sup> Fighter Wing parked along the main apron all looked up when one of them shouted in excitement.

“HEY, LOOK AT THAT F-83! IT IS PAINTED LIKE AN HAWK!”

The technicians effectively saw a F-83 fighter-bomber about to land that was wearing a very peculiar paint scheme made mostly of shades of brown and gray meant to imitate the coat of an hawk. The total effect was actually attractive to the eye while still being restrained in terms of military appearance. The F-83 was also sporting two big external drop tanks. The commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Fighter Wing raced past the technicians in his chauffeured staff car as the F-83's wheels touched down on the runway in a smooth landing, prompting a comment from one of the technicians.

“Hell, looks like that pilot is either a V.I.P. or is bringing someone mighty important for the boss to hurry up like this.”

“Yeah!” Said another technician. “Does anyone know what base or wing the tail code ‘EU 001’ stands for anyway?”

A graying master sergeant that had been scratching his head suddenly opened wide his eyes and mouth.

“Of course! EU 001, a paint job like an hawk: that must be ‘Lady Hawk’, Major General Dows, the commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Air Force in Germany. Hell, you can't get much hotter than her as a fighter pilot.”

“That's a fact, Sarge!” Replied enthusiastically a young mechanic. “I still have a picture of her in her tiny bathing suit taped to the inside of my locker. What a babe!”

The master sergeant winced while looking critically at the young man.

“Nice way to describe a major general, Thompson. Do you intend to ask her to autograph that picture while you are at it? I sure hope that you won’t be dumb enough to try that.”

“Uh, right, Sarge.” Said the now contrite mechanic, attracting the laughter of the other airmen around him. He then watched on with the others as the newly arriving F-83 stopped in front of a hangar and was then pulled inside it by an aircraft tractor. Fifteen minutes later, the wing commander’s staff car emerged from that hangar, sporting the red plate of a two-star general on its bumper, and drove towards the base headquarters building.

After having lunch with the commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Fighter Wing, who was due soon to pass on his command to none other than freshly promoted Brigadier General Gertrude Meserve, Ingrid got driven to the Base Movement Section. There, she took delivery of her 1953 Porsche 550 SPYDER, which had been shipped by military air cargo from Germany in advance of her arrival in the United States. To her relief, the car’s paint had not been scratched and nothing had been stolen inside her red convertible sport car. While transferring the three pieces of luggage she had brought from Stuttgart into the trunk of her Porsche, Ingrid suddenly changed her mind and kept with her one suitcase, going to the female washrooms of the BMS building. There, she took a quick shower and changed out of her wrinkled flight suit, putting on one of her favorite outfits, a pastel blue Ao Dai traditional Vietnamese dress adorned with a large embroidered hawk on its front. Taking the time as well to comb her hair carefully and to put on some makeup and perfume, she then packed away her flight suit and left the washrooms. She was secretly satisfied to see that her new appearance caught the eyes of the men she met on her way out of the BMS building: at least she was still able to be a sexy girl, major general or not. Putting first her suitcase back in the front trunk of her car, Ingrid then took place behind the wheel and started the engine. The 4-cylinder, 1.5 liter mid-mounted engine came to life at once on turning the ignition key, roaring with its 110 horsepower output. Making heads turn on her passage, she then drove out of the storage compound and down the main street of the base towards the main gate. Once out of the base, Ingrid took Highway 17 leading to Washington, close to 320 kilometers away.

**16:38 (Washington Time)**  
**Arlington County, Virginia**

Having entered Arlington County on Highway 1, Ingrid started looking for a half-decent motel or hotel that had vacant rooms as she approached the Washington National Airport: the commercial passenger jet aircraft carrying Hien and Sarah was not due to arrive from Europe for at least three more hours and she could use the time to find some accommodations in advance. She quickly encountered a string of motels that obviously catered to the travelers using the airport and, selecting the most decent-looking one, drove in the outer parking lot of the 'National Airport Inn', which featured a small restaurant, a souvenir shop and a Laundromat, apart from its forty or so rooms. Parking and locking her car and bringing only her purse with her, Ingrid went to the small reception office of the motel, finding there a graying man in his fifties who was watching a small television set behind the service counter. The man got up from his chair at once and smiled to her. His smile didn't however hide the fleeting expression of surprise and curiosity on his face as he detailed her Ao Dai Vietnamese outfit.

"What may I do for you, young lady?"

"I would like to rent a room with two large beds, if you have one left available."

The man's smile faded somewhat then but his voice stayed polite.

"Are you expecting roommates, miss?" He asked, probably thinking that Ingrid was a college girl intent on having an intimate party with other teenagers in his motel. Ingrid kept her own smile on while taking out her driver's license.

"I am expecting my daughter and her nanny on the flight from Paris this evening. By the way, I am 31 years old. Here is my driver's license. Your rooms do have complete bathrooms, I hope."

"They all have, miss." Said the receptionist after quickly looking at the license and giving it back to Ingrid. "Excuse me for my initial mistake: you look very young for your age. Is your husband due in this evening as well?"

"I am a widow and a single mother, mister." Said Ingrid in a neutral tone. "Do you have a room available for me?"

"Uh, yes I do, miss!" Answered the receptionist after a short hesitation: that girl was definitely out of the average mold, apart from being most beautiful. "It goes for six fifty per night. Will that do for you?"

"If I find the room adequate, yes. I will probably need it for a week or two while I search for a decent house or apartment in this area. Could I go see that room now?"

"Sure!" Replied the man, grabbing a key from a key press and then walking out from behind the counter.

The receptionist spoke again as he walked with Ingrid across the inner courtyard of his motel, on which the rooms opened.

"Moving to a new job or coming to study, miss?"

"New job. I'm in the Air Force and just got posted back from overseas. I'm probably going to work in the Pentagon."

"Ah, yes! That place is like a city by itself, it's so huge. You work in administration I suppose, miss?"

Ingrid couldn't help smile at the mental picture of herself spending her days typing notes and letters: one week of that would be enough to drive her mad with boredom.

"Not exactly, mister: I'm a fighter pilot but I have been posted to a desk."

The receptionist gave her a surprised look but didn't comment on that and continued walking with her. He soon arrived at the entrance door of Room 36 and, unlocking it, invited Ingrid inside.

"I hope that the room will be to your satisfaction, miss."

Ingrid entered and surveyed quickly the room and its adjacent bathroom, finding both clean and comfortable. She then faced back the expectant receptionist.

"This will be more than adequate. I will take the room."

"Then let's go back to the reception office, so that I can give you a second key for your nanny and make you sign the guest registry."

Returning with the receptionist to his front office, Ingrid paid one week in advance and signed the guest registry before collecting the second room key and going out to her car. She drove her Porsche inside the inner courtyard of the motel and parked it in front of her room, then carried her luggage inside. Ingrid next took the time to take out and suspend her various uniforms and dresses in the room's closet, so that they wouldn't get all wrinkled. That was when she noticed the steam iron and ironing board stored inside the closet: those could come handy in the next few days. Unpacking as well the rest of her things and putting her now empty suitcases and kit bag under one of the beds, Ingrid finally left her room, locking it and making sure that her car was also secure, with its

convertible top deployed and side windows up, before walking across the courtyard to go to the small restaurant that was attached to the motel.

She found the restaurant, which was more like a diner, nearly full of customers. She thus took place on one of the few stools still available along the counter as many in the restaurant stared at her and her Vietnamese dress. The waitress, a slightly overweight woman in her late thirties, came to her at once with a cup and a pot of steaming coffee.

“Coffee, miss?”

“Yes, please.” Said Ingrid tiredly while rubbing her eyes. “I have flown through quite a few time zones today.”

The waitress smiled to her as she poured her a cup of coffee.

“Most of our customers are like that, miss. Would you like to see the menu?”

“Please! Do you also have local newspapers? I have been out of touch with national news for a while.”

“Sure!” Replied the waitress, bending under the counter and fetching both a menu and a copy of the day’s edition of the Washington Post before giving both to Ingrid. The latter took the time to put sugar and cream in her coffee and to mix it before looking at the menu. It was typical of a U.S. diner’s menu, limited in choice and heavy on fat. Ingrid sighed, sorely missing Vietnamese cuisine. Her coffee also made her frown, being near tasteless compared to Arabic coffee or European Espresso coffee. She was however in the United States now and would have to adapt to the local fare. At least it was not as bad as British food, which she loathed as much as Nancy did. She was definitely going to need to find some good ethnic restaurants around Arlington soon. Finally deciding on a steak with mashed potatoes and vegetables, Ingrid gave her order to the waitress, then opened the newspaper and started reading it. Much of the newspaper was devoted to local political and criminal news, plus sports news. On page six she suddenly saw her own picture, an official one showing her in full dress uniform with medals, under a small font title.

“National heroine posted to Washington.” She read to herself. The short article attached to the picture was announcing her transfer to the Pentagon, apart from giving a brief resume of her career and accomplishments, along with her list of medals. Ingrid couldn’t help feel proud of herself then, even though she was not what someone would call a vain person: she had come a long way since when she was a simple German

Luftwaffe auxiliary held as a prisoner of war by the British in 1941. She smiled at the waitress as the latter was bringing her food to her.

“Would you mind if I hold on to this copy, miss?”

“I will have to charge you an extra nickel, miss. I’m sorry but it is the restaurant’s rule.”

“No problem, miss.” Replied Ingrid, dropping a five cent coin on the counter. She then attacked her steak with gusto, being quite famished by now.

Forty minutes later, having finished her meal and paid for it, Ingrid left the restaurant with the newspaper she had bought and went to her parked car inside the motel’s courtyard. Getting in the driver’s seat and starting the engine, she backed out of her spot and drove out of the courtyard, heading towards the nearby Washington National Airport. The drive took a mere few minutes, since her motel was in direct sight of the airport, and she soon parked in the short term parking lot facing the main passenger terminal. With her purse’s carrying strap slung securely across her chest to discourage pickpockets and purse snatchers, Ingrid walked into the arrival hall of the passenger terminal and went at once to the arrival information board to check on the status of Sarah’s and Hien’s flight. It was still scheduled to arrive in a bit less than two hours, so she went to a bookstore that also sold magazines and newspapers and gazed through the shelves, taking her time. A local magazine specializing in the Washington area housing market attracted her attention after a few minutes. Grabbing it and leafing through it, Ingrid saw that it would give her many precious clues and starting points for her incoming search for a place to live, so she bought it and, sitting on a bench in the hall, started reading it with intense curiosity. She had read carefully through most of it, flagging a few pages of particular interest to her, when a loudspeaker announced the arrival of the plane carrying Sarah and Hien. Stuffing the folded magazine inside her large purse, Ingrid went to the double doors that led to the arrival gates and waited anxiously with other expectant people behind the low crowd barrier.

Ingrid’s hearth jumped with joy when Sarah emerged from the arrival processing area behind a dozen other passengers, pushing a baggage cart on which little Hien was sitting on top of their luggage, besides the travel cage containing her beloved young Dalmatian dog, Miniflick.

“HIEN, SARAH, I’M HERE!”

“MOMMY!” Shouted back Hien, who then jumped off the cart and ran to her, to be welcomed into Ingrid’s open arms. They exchanged kisses as a smiling Sarah stopped the cart besides them.

“She was a real angel during the trip. I couldn’t have asked for a nicer little girl.”

“That’s my girl alright!” Replied Ingrid, then giving a last kiss to Hien before getting up from her crouching position. “Did you have any problems with the Immigration on arrival, Sarah?”

“None! They looked carefully at my green card and at our passports but they found everything in order and stayed polite all the time with us. Miniflick was also cleared in without a problem.”

“Good! I was somewhat afraid that you would hit some redneck then. Are you hungry, Hien?”

The little girl shook her head.

“I’m just tired of sitting, Mommy. Do we have a home here?”

“Not yet, Hien, but finding one will be our first priority during my vacation. Then we will enroll you in a nice school, where you will be able to learn and play with other children. Let’s go to my car now.”

Going to the parking lot with their luggage cart, the trio loaded the suitcases and bags into the trunk of the Porsche 550 and, after Sarah had brought back the cart to an assigned collecting point, took place in the sports car. The Porsche having only two seats, that forced Sarah to sit Hien in her lap, with Miniflick sitting in turn in Hien’s lap and with its leash firmly held by Sarah, prompting a remark from Ingrid as she started the engine.

“Maybe I should have bought a more family-oriented car.”

“Don’t worry about that now, Ingrid. It will do just fine for the time being. It is one nice-looking car you have, after all.”

“I have to say that I am quite proud of it. So, what do we do first?”

“What about dropping our luggage at our hotel or motel and then drive around the area to acquaint ourselves with our new hometown?”

“A good idea. We however have to see first what the real boss says about that. What do you say, Hien?”

“We do as Sarah said.” Pronounced without hesitation the Vietnamese girl, making Ingrid giggle.

“Then, first stop: the National Airport Inn.” Said Ingrid, engaging the rear gear and backing out of her parking spot.

Going to the motel and unloading their luggage in their room took less than ten minutes. After giving the second room key to Sarah, Ingrid then took out the house market magazine she had bought at the airport and showed Sarah the few interesting prospects she had noted down already.

“I noted those four houses and five rented apartments as possible homes for us. Maybe we could drive by them this evening to have an idea of what kind of neighborhood they are situated in?”

“I agree. We may not be able to visit at this late hour but a friendly and safe neighborhood is definitely a must for Hien. I’ll do the map navigation.”

“Suit yourself!” Replied Ingrid, giving the magazine with its map to Sarah. The trio, Miniflick in leash, then returned to her car. She carefully locked their motel room before getting in the Porsche and driving out of the motel courtyard, now illuminated by a few spotlights in the evening darkness.

Their first stop was in front of a brick house on sale in the Virginia Highlands neighborhood of Arlington, close to the Pentagon. The place looked promising but no lights were visible in the house at the time. Sarah scribbled a few notes by the side of the sales advertising notice in the housing market magazine, then pointed West.

“The next place is in Arlington Village, across the highway 395 and close to Fort Myers, on 9<sup>th</sup> Street South.”

“I believe that I remember that area from my stay in 1948. We’re on our way!” As they drove towards Arlington Village, Hien pointed out the huge mass of the Pentagon, about one kilometer away and illuminated by hundreds of lit windows.

“What is that, Mommy? It is so big.”

“That, Hien, is where I will be probably working out of after my three weeks of leave. It is called the Pentagon and is the headquarters for the American Defense Department.”

“Could I visit it, Mommy?”

“I believe that there are guided tours of the building given. I will get some information on them tomorrow, I promise.”



Satisfied with that answer, Hien kept quiet in Sarah's lap until they stopped in front of an apartment building on 9<sup>th</sup> Street South.

"Here we are!" Announced Ingrid. "I see lights in both ground floor apartments. Shall we go see if the superintendent will let us visit at this time of the evening?"

"We might as well now that we are here." Replied Sarah. "It will also let Hien walk a bit."

Ingrid nodded and shut the engine, then stepped out of her car with Sarah and Hien. Sarah however kept Miniflick in her arms once out of the car. There was quite a lot of traffic along the street they were in, both pedestrian and vehicular, and the area seemed to be a middle income neighborhood. Quite a few young men in uniform were visible as well, strolling mostly in small groups along the sidewalks. One such group crossed path with the trio as it stood in front of the apartment building, examining the façade, with one young soldier whistling admiringly at Ingrid.

"Hey, babe, doing anything tonight?"

Ingrid grinned to him, not offended one bit by the unwanted invitation.

"I'm sorry, Corporal, but I'm on a house hunting trip right now for me, my daughter and my nanny."

"Oh!" Said the soldier, a bit put off by that. His two comrades joked about his failed attempt as they walked away, making Sarah smile.

"Well, you still can attract the eyes of young men, Ingrid, something always pleasing for a woman."

"Why wouldn't I attract their eyes?" Replied maliciously Ingrid. "I still have a young, sexy body and a perverted mind."

"I know! After all, I am your guardian angel, remember?" Said Sarah with a smile before leading Hien by the hand towards the entrance of the apartment building. A sign at the entrance told them that inquiries about renting an apartment were to be directed to the superintendent in apartment number one, so they entered and went to the said door, with Ingrid knocking three times on it. A fat man in trousers and undershirt answered the door, eyeing the two young women and the little Asian girl with a mix of curiosity and suspicion.

"Yes?"

"We saw the advertising for a three-bedroom apartment and we were hoping that we could visit. I know that the hour is late but we just arrived by plane from overseas this evening."

“Is your husband still overseas, miss?”

“I am actually a widow and a single mother, mister. This is my daughter’s nanny.”

“Daughter? Nanny?” Said the man, apparently slow to understand. “How old are you, miss?”

“I am 31. I know that I look younger than that but...”

The man interrupted her as he now looked at her dubiously.

“Thirty-one, you say? I’m sorry, miss, but we only accept normal families in this building. Good night!”

He then slammed the door in Ingrid’s face, making her clench her teeth with anger, while Miniflick growled at the now closed door.

“What the hell did he mean, normal families?”

“Let’s go: this place is obviously not suited to us.” Said Sarah somberly. She then nudged Ingrid, who was still pissed, towards the exit. Once they were back on the sidewalk she faced Ingrid and spoke in a low voice.

“I saw in his mind what he was thinking: the man took us for a couple of young lesbians.”

“What is a lesbian, Sarah?” Cut in Hien innocently while looking up at her. Sarah looked at Ingrid, who then crouched in front of her stepdaughter.

“A lesbian is a woman who loves other women instead of men. Another term for that is ‘homosexual’ and that one also applies to men who love men instead of women.”

“Is it bad to be a lesbian, Mommy?” Asked Hien in her little voice, presenting a dilemma to Ingrid then. The little girl was obviously still way too young to understand about sexuality but Ingrid didn’t want either to lie to her or to confuse her with an evasive answer.

“Most people consider it abnormal to be a lesbian or a homosexual, Hien. Many will even react angrily at them and call them bad names. There are even laws against them in many places. Being a lesbian or a homosexual is however a personal trait, Hien, and should be the sole business of the person involved. While considered different by others, they can still be as much good people as the so-called normal people. They may be different but they are not bad because of it, the same way you are physically different from most American children but are still as valuable and worthy as them. This is however a topic that you should not discuss with other persons apart from us: many people would react badly to you talking about that.”

“Why?” Asked quietly Hien while staring at Ingrid with her big brown eyes. Ingrid smiled gently to her while caressing her face with both hands.

“Because people often have a hard time accepting other people that are different or appear to be so, Hien. This is very much so in the United States, especially against black people.”

“Then why did we come to live here, Mommy?”  
Ingrid, struck by the truth in those words, could only look up at Sarah, who was nodding her head gravely.

“Oh, the wisdom of innocence. I think that we should limit ourselves to houses instead of apartments, Ingrid: we won’t be as bothered if in a house of our own.”

“I think that you’re right, Sarah. Let’s go!”

Getting back in the Porsche, the two women and one girl then resumed their tour, but limiting this time their visits to detached houses available for sale. That limited a lot the choice, with only two more houses to visit. The last one, a bungalow with garage situated near Fort Scott Park in Aurora Hills, less than three kilometers south of the Pentagon, looked particularly promising. Its rear courtyard was fenced in by a white wooden palisade surrounding a ground lot of very respectable size that also included two grown trees, while a public playground sat in nearby Fort Scott Park. The sight of the swing sets and slides was enough to excite Hien despite her obvious fatigue.

“Could we stop and play a bit there, Mommy?”

“Hell, why not?” Said Ingrid, who then parked on the street in front of the playground. Hien ran to the slides as soon as Sarah let her out of the car, closely followed by her dog, and was happily sliding down one of them as Ingrid and Sarah joined her in the playground. Ingrid looked around her, examining the neighborhood as Sarah helped Hien by pushing her swing and making her squeal with joy. The area seemed peaceful enough, even though there was some noise from both the nearby Jefferson-Davis Highway and the Washington National Airport. It also looked to be upper middle class and both the park and the streets appeared well maintained and clean. A police patrol car appeared after ten minutes, slowing down briefly to look at them before continuing its patrol. When the time came to bring the tired girl to the motel, Ingrid had made her mind to investigate the nearby house on sale as her first priority. Being all but numbed by their long flights, Ingrid and Hien went to sleep quickly once back at the motel, with Ingrid happily hugging her little daughter while sleeping besides

her. As for Sarah, since an angel never needed to sleep, except to keep the appearance of being human, she simply sat in an easy chair in the dark, as vigilant as ever. As for Miniflick, he elected to sleep on the bed, at the feet of Hien, his favorite position.

**10:48 (Washington Time)**

**Saturday, July 2, 1955 'C'**

**South Grove Street, Aurora Hills**

**Arlington, Virginia**

Ingrid didn't miss the expression of bewilderment that appeared for a moment on the face of the real estate agent waiting besides his car in the driveway of the bungalow when he saw her, Sarah and Hien get out of the Porsche with Miniflick. He had probably expected a respectable middle aged couple instead of two young women and a small Asian girl with a dog. The man, wearing a brown suit and tie, nonetheless greeted her politely and with professional enthusiasm, shaking hands with both Ingrid and Sarah while Miniflick sniffed his shoes.

"Good morning, ladies! I'm Nathan Hodges, real estate agent from McAllister Estate Services. Which one of you is the prospective buyer, if I may ask?"

"I am!" Said Ingrid at once. "My name is Ingrid Dows and this is Sarah Ur, nanny for my little daughter Hien. I am in the Air Force and have just been transferred to the Pentagon after serving overseas. I served in California before but most of my recent service time has been spent overseas, so I'm unfamiliar with the housing market in the continental United States. In fact, I never owned a house before, having lived out of base officers quarters during my whole career."

Which could not have been a long one, thought the real estate agent while examining her beautiful but also very young face. Raising a clipboard on which forms were attached, he smiled to Ingrid, ready to write down information about her.

"Well, there is a first for everything, Miss Dows. Do you mind if I ask first a few questions so that a credit check could be done quickly once you decide if you want to buy this house?"

"Not at all, Mister Hodges. Shoot!"

"Thank you, miss. First, may I have your full name and marital status?"

“My actual name is Ingrid Maria Louise Dows, born Weiss. I am widowed. My husband was killed by the Japanese in the Philippines in 1942.”

Dismay showed on the agent’s face then.

“Uh, what is your date of birth, miss?”

Ingrid answered by giving him her official birth date as written in her military personnel file, which put her as two years older than what she really was biologically.

“I was born on September 7, 1923, in Berlin, Germany. I am 31 years old right now. I know that I have a baby face but I can explain that. Here are my driver’s license and my military identity card.”

Hodges examined carefully both cards and noted down some information on his forms, then gave her back her cards before asking another question.

“What is your military specialty, miss, along with your rank?”

“I am a fighter pilot, with the rank of major general, mister.”

“Uh, you’re not by any chance...” Started to ask the stunned man.

“Yes, I am THE General Dows who kicked the shit out of the Soviets in Europe two years ago, Mister Hodges.”

From polite but hesitant, Hodges then became downright enthusiastic about this prospective sale, scribbling a note on his form before looking back at Ingrid.

“It is truly an honor to meet you, General! You know that the listed price for this house, including the ground lot, is 19,800 dollars? Is this within your desired price range? I know a few less expensive houses if you prefer.”

Ingrid thought that over for a short moment. The price quoted by Hodges represented about six years of salary for the average American worker these days and would be a bit stiff for most young professionals. She however had spent very little of her respectable pay during her military career, having been fighting in a succession of wars for so many years. She also had barely touched the money from the royalties earned by her two books, both bestsellers. Besides, the house she was now looking at truly interested her.

“It is within my price range, mister. My bank account balance stands at a bit over 46,000 dollars at the moment. You just need to convince me that this is the house I want, mister.”

Not believing his luck and forgetting about his first, negative impression, Hodges wrote down quickly the information about her bank balance, then unlocked the front door and opened it, inviting her in.

“After you, ladies!”

The first impression she got of the inside was most favorable to Ingrid, the house having been built to quite luxurious standards, with lots of varnished wood and brass used. The large ground floor lounge had a big stone chimney and tall windows that let in lots of sunshine, while the kitchen was modern and functional...for 1955. There was also a spacious study, a washroom and a large laundry room on the ground floor, plus a number of storage closets. After making them visit those rooms, Nathan Hodges then led them upstairs, where they saw three bedrooms, one of them very large, plus a fully equipped and tile-covered bathroom. Hien got particularly excited when Hodges pulled down the hidden staircase leading up into the attic, with its house-wide open space and two dormer windows giving a view of the nearby park through the high-pitched roof. Ingrid watched with amusement Hien run twice from one end of the attic to the other, chased by Miniflick, before calling her so that they could go back down. Once back on the ground floor, Hodges led them through a door in the laundry room that gave access to the garage. Apart from being roomy and having a built-in work bench at one end, the garage also gave access to a spacious storage room the size of a normal bedroom. A rear door in turn connected the storage room and garage to the big, grassy courtyard. Ingrid surveyed the deep lot with approving eyes, then faced the real estate agent.

“Up to now, this is very promising, Mister Hodges. What can you tell me about the nearby facilities? Is there an elementary school in the neighborhood?”

“There certainly is one, General: the Oakridge Elementary School is about a mile away, on 24<sup>th</sup> Street South. It opened only two years ago and is very modern. In terms of shopping and restaurants, you will find about everything you need along 23<sup>rd</sup> Street South, which runs four blocks away to the North, or along South Eads Street, which runs parallel to the Jefferson-Davis Highway.”

“Perfect! I will take this house.”

Hodges couldn't help smile widely at those words: the sales commission he was going to get for this deal was substantial. Flipping through the forms on his clipboard, he pulled out one and presented it to Ingrid.

“Then, if you would be so kind to fill the top part of this form, we could then discuss the terms of the mortgage, miss.”

“No need for a mortgage, mister: I am paying cash. I will just need to go to a local branch of my bank on Monday to have a certified check made for the selling price of the house.”

“In that case, this deal should be closed quite quickly, miss.” Said the delighted agent. Hodges and Ingrid then spent another half hour filling and signing various forms and declarations, at the end of which the real estate agent led them out and locked the house. They all shook hands again before going their own way, their next meeting due on Monday afternoon to sign the house keys away in exchange for a certified check.

Happy with her deal, Ingrid drove Sarah and Hien to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Street South, to visually inspect the choice of restaurants there. A variety of restaurants, as well as of other types of stores, were effectively to be found along that street, as promised by Hodges. Finding a Chinese restaurant that looked quite decent, Ingrid parked in front of it and went inside with Sarah and Hien for lunch. They however left Miniflick inside the car, since dogs were not allowed in restaurants. To their pleased surprise, that restaurant also served a few Vietnamese and Thai specialties on top of its extensive list of Cantonese dishes. The waiter, as well as the owner and his wife, was soon scratching his heads at seeing two non-oriental women, one of them wearing a Vietnamese Ao Dai, enjoy their meal while expertly using their chop sticks and speaking Vietnamese with the little oriental girl that was with them. The other Caucasian customers were as surprised by this and started whispering about Ingrid and her group. Ingrid didn't let that spoil her pleasure and finished her meal without looking at the other customers. An hour after entering the restaurant, the trio left, their bellies quite full, except for Sarah of course, who had only made a show of eating. Hien gave Ingrid a questioning look as they were taking place back in the Porsche.

“What are we going to do now, Mommy?”

“Well, since we can't start buying furniture before the house sale is finalized, what about going to see what your future school looks like?”

“YES!” Nearly shouted Hien at that, making Sarah grin.

“What wouldn't you do to make that little angel happy, Ingrid?”

“Nothing!” Answered Ingrid before driving out of her parking spot.

**09:17 (Washington Time)**

**Tuesday, July 5, 1955 'C'**

**Information Center, Arlington Public Schools**

**1426 North Quincy Street, Arlington**

Ingrid showed up with Hien at the Arlington School Information Center dressed in a very modern but sober gray female suit with trousers and jacket, while Hien wore a simple pink dress. The administrator that received them in her small office smiled to Hien, then got up from behind her desk to shake Ingrid's hand.

"Hello! I'm Susan Carruters. What may I do for you?"

"My name is Ingrid Dows and this is my adopted daughter Hien. She turned eight last May and I would like to register her into Oakridge Elementary School for the coming school year. She already went through her two first years of elementary school at the school for military dependants in Stuttgart, Germany."

"Then please sit down, Misses Dows. It shouldn't take long."

Susan Carruters took a multi-carbon copy form out of a drawer after sitting back in her chair, then smiled again at Hien.

"Your daughter is very cute, Misses Dows."

"Thank you, miss. I adopted her in Vietnam when she was five, while I was serving in Da Nang. I have just been posted back from overseas and bought a house yesterday near Fort Scott Park."

"Ah, quite a nice neighborhood indeed! Are you in the Army?"

"Air Force, miss." Corrected politely Ingrid. "I have been transferred to a desk job in Washington. About Hien, while her native tongue is Vietnamese, she is fluent in French, English and German."

"Four languages at eight? That's impressive!" Exclaimed the secretary while eyeing Hien. "Let's see how you answer my questions, Hien. Do you know your original family name?"

"My full name is Pham Ti Hien, miss." Replied Hien in her little voice. "In Vietnam, the family name comes first. My parents were killed in the war there when I was four. French nuns then cared for me until Ingrid met me and adopted me."

The secretary nodded her head, suitably impressed by the quality of Hien's English. That was actually something Ingrid was most proud of, as she had insisted with Sarah that Hien learn English normally, without her supernatural assistance.

"And what is your date and place of birth, Hien?"

Hien did look a bit lost then, glancing at Ingrid, who smiled to Carruters.

"Please excuse her on this, miss: the Vietnamese use a different calendar system from ours. She was born on May 13, 1947. Hien, you can tell Miss Carruters where you were born, right?"



“Yes, in Hue.”

“That’s spelled H...u...e.” Volunteered Ingrid, helping Carruters as the latter filled the registration form. She then handed her the certificate of adoption for Hien, along with its certified translated copy, plus Hien’s American passport and her school certificates for her two elementary years in Stuttgart. Next, she gave Carruters her military identity card. The secretary noted the information she needed from them, then gave them back to Ingrid, who gave her next her house sale contract so that Carruters could note her new address in Arlington County.

“Do you have a telephone number yet, Misses Dows?”

“I do, in fact. Here it is. By the way, you may call me simply miss: I am widowed.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that, miss. Did your husband die recently?”

“He was killed by the Japanese in the Philippines in 1942, miss.” Said somberly Ingrid. “We were in fact going to visit his tomb in Arlington National Cemetery after this.” The secretary only then caught on her date of birth, which she had written without thinking about it.

“You...you are 31 years old, miss? You certainly don’t look your age.”

Hien was about to say something about that but Ingrid urged her not to with a discreet gesture before speaking to the secretary with an apologetic smile.

“I do look baby-faced for my age, I agree. I however keep highly fit physically and keep to a healthy diet.”

“I have to say that I envy you, miss.” Replied the secretary, only half-convinced and having the nagging feeling of having seen her face somewhere before. “Uh, from your address, I see that you are just over a mile from Oakridge Elementary. Your little girl thus qualifies for school bus transportation. Do you wish her to take the bus or will you be driving her to school, miss?”

Ingrid then looked at Hien, whose face had lit up at the mention of ‘school bus’.

“What would you like, Hien?” She asked in English.

“I want to take the bus, Mommy!”

“Then the bus it will be. Sarah will escort you to the bus stop and will wait there for you in the afternoon.”

“May I ask who is this Sarah, miss?” Asked the secretary, curious. Hien took on her to answer that.

“She’s my nanny, miss.”

“Oh, I see! Then I will book you on the bus run to Oakridge Elementary.”

The secretary filled some extra paperwork, then gave a small map and pamphlet to Ingrid.

“This is a map of the bus run and the hours for pickup, miss, along with the regulations concerning behavior during bus rides. The certificate of registration at Oakridge Elementary School, along with various information about school schedules, regulations and requirements will be sent to you by mail in the coming week. Welcome to Arlington, miss. I am sure that your cute daughter will love it at Oakridge Elementary.”

“Thank you very much, Miss Carruters.” Replied Ingrid warmly while shaking hands with the secretary. Hien insisted as well to shake hands with the latter, making her grin. Ingrid then left with Hien, returning to her parked sports car. The obvious joy of Hien about being accepted in school made Ingrid smile to her as they sat in her Porsche.

“You really look happy about this, Hien. Is it because you are eager to learn or because you want to meet other children?”

“I want friends to play with, Mommy.” Replied without hesitation the little girl, making Ingrid nod to that.

“I understand you, Hien: I still can remember my childhood friends and sometimes wonder what happened to them.”

Ingrid put on her sunglasses, very modern reflexive affairs that had been imported from 2012 by Nancy as a gift to her, before starting the car's engine and driving out of her parking spot.

Using Arlington Boulevard, then the Jefferson Davis Highway, they were at the main entrance of the Arlington National Cemetery in less than ten minutes. Turning into the visitors' parking lot and taking a car spot, Ingrid got out with Hien and carefully locked her car before leading her daughter by the hand towards the visitors center, which lay just outside the Memorial Gate of the cemetery. From numerous past visits, Ingrid knew that she could buy flowers for Ken's grave at the gift shop inside the center. She also wanted to check the graves registry book in the center to see if some of her comrades who had died in Indochina and Europe were buried in Arlington. As she entered the Visitors Center with Hien, her combination of youthful beauty and ultra-modern fashion made all men present inside stop what they were doing and stare at her, some being less discreet than others about it. By now well accustomed to the effect she created around herself, Ingrid went calmly with Hien to the graves registry book and

waited behind the graying woman who was consulting the registry at the time. The woman gave her place after a minute and left, letting Ingrid consult the registry for a few select names. Her heart accelerated when she saw the name of Nurse Eunice Hatchitt, who was buried in the nurses' section of the cemetery. Now hopeful to find more names she knew, she quickly noted in a pocket notepad Hatchitt's grave location and number, then searched the registry further. Tears came to her eyes when she found Jack Vicenza's name in it: Jack Vicenza had served with her from 1942 to 1953, when he had been killed in the treacherous British commando raid on Ramat David. Noting down as well his grave's location and number, Ingrid then led Hien towards the gift shop, where she bought three bouquets of flowers. Leaving the Visitors Center with her flowers in her arms, she started walking down Roosevelt Drive with Hien. Hien looked left and right at the long, successive rows of white grave markers they were passing, then looked up at Ingrid with sad eyes.

"Did they all die in wars, Mommy? There are so many of them."

"Most of them did, my sweet Hien." Replied Ingrid in a sober tone. "The greatest heroes of the United States are buried here."

That made Hien lower her head as she started sobbing. Ingrid stopped immediately and crouched down to face her, her hands wiping gently the tears now running down the girl's cheeks.

"You don't need to cry, Hien: everyone has to die one day and being buried here is an honor."

"I didn't cry for them, Mommy. I was just thinking back at my parents: they didn't even get graves of their own when they were killed in Vietnam."

Ingrid was silent for a moment after those words: being buried close to the bones of your ancestors was something very important to any Vietnamese. Being buried in a mass grave far from your village or town of origin was thus truly a sad thing in Vietnam, prompting later reburial as much as humanly possible. Hien's original parents had however been dismembered by a terrorist bomb, along with dozens of other, and had been hastily buried by the French in an anonymous mass grave, thus making impossible their reburial in a more proper resting place. Gently hugging Hien, Ingrid let her quiet her sobs while whispering soothing words in her ear. Hien finally looked into Ingrid's eyes with immense sadness.

"Will they bury you here when you die, Mommy?"

Ingrid nodded slowly once, a big lump in her throat.

“As a recipient of the Medal of Honor, I gained the automatic right to be buried here, Hien. I wish for no other final resting place. I however do not intend to die for many more years, Hien, so don't be sad now: we still have too much of life to enjoy together. Come, let's visit the graves of my friends and of my late husband.”

They ended up spending a good two hours inside the cemetery, praying and meditating over the graves of Ken Dows, Jack Vicenza, Eunice Hatchitt and of four other old comrades also buried in Arlington. By then it was noon, prompting Hien to plea to Ingrid as they got back in their car.

“Mommy, could we go eat now? I'm hungry!”

“Sure, Hien! After lunch, we will go visit the Pentagon.”

Hien glanced at the nearby Pentagon, the mass of which blocked part of the horizon to the Southeast, then grinned back at Ingrid while jumping up and down excitedly.

“Yes! Thank you, Mommy!”

“It will be my pleasure, Hien. Now, let's find a restaurant to go eat into.”

Taking Jefferson Davis Highway, then Arlington Boulevard, Ingrid drove down slowly around Arlington Village until she spotted a restaurant that looked adequate for lunch. Parking in one of the spots reserved for customers, she got out with Hien and walked in the place. It was a very American-like restaurant serving mostly grilled meats and fast food items and was nearly full. Finding no available table, Ingrid chose to take two of the still available counter stools and helped Hien sit on one, then sat herself and read the menu that a middle-aged waitress brought her. She had given her order for herself and Hien when three big men entered the restaurant and looked around for a table. Their clothes and accents immediately pegged them as Southerners in Ingrid's mind, whose first previous incarnation had been as a black male slave in an Alabama plantation. Her past souvenirs made her tense at once and discreetly eye the newcomers with suspicion: she had no love at all for racists. Oblivious of her attention, the three Southerners walked to a four-seat table occupied by a young black couple and faced the now apprehensive man and woman. The biggest of the white men then pointed a finger towards the counter, where some stools were still vacant, and spoke with contempt in a heavy drawl.

“Hey, boy! Why don't you and your missus go sit at the counter, so that we could use this table?”

Surrounded by three men bigger than him, the young black man hesitated for a moment, fear rising in him: Virginia may have been next door to Washington D.C. but it was still an old state of the Southern Confederacy, with segregationist attitudes still widespread around it. Besides, he had no wish to put at risk his wife, who was now paralyzed with fear. He was thus as surprised as the three Southerners when Ingrid left her stool and walked resolutely to them, stopping two paces away and addressing the biggest Southerner with contained anger.

“Why don’t you let that young couple eat quietly, as they have the right to? This is not Alabama or Mississippi and good manners apply to everyone here, including rednecks like you!”

The three Southerners turned around to face Ingrid and stared hard at her, with the biggest man again talking for the group as dead silence fell around the restaurant.

“Who the hell do you think you are, girl? Go sit back with your little Chink girl and mind your business!”

Instead of backing down, Ingrid took one more step and stared back with hatred at the Southerner.

“I didn’t fight wars for the United States just to let bigots like you make a mockery of the spirit of the American Constitution. You will be the ones to go sit at the counter or to leave.”

The leading Southerner laughed briefly in derision at her words.

“You, fight for the United States? You are barely old enough to enlist. Return to your seat while you can, nigger-lover!”

Ingrid then turned her head around to look at the waitress watching the confrontation from behind the service counter.

“Call the police, miss! These men are causing a public disturbance.”

While her head was turned, the biggest Southerner extended his right arm and grabbed the front of her blouse, intent on pulling her closer in order to better threaten her. Ingrid’s reaction was immediate and brutal: she kned the man in the groin with all her strength, then followed with a lightning punch to his throat as he collapsed to his knees from the pain, sending him backward to fall on his back while holding his groin and throat and gasping for air. The man’s two companions hesitated for a second, stunned by the ferocity and speed of Ingrid’s reaction. Ingrid used that chance to pull up the bottom of her trousers’ left leg and draw her compact GLOCK 30 .45 caliber pistol from its ankle

holster. Keeping it pointed downwards at the floor, she stared back at the two Southerners still up.

“Why don’t you two pick up that piece of redneck trash on the floor and leave now before I get really pissed?”

Watched closely by Ingrid, who had taken two steps back in order to avoid any attempt at disarming her, the two men meekly obeyed her and helped up their comrade, who was still in pain and choking. The trio then left the restaurant without further ado. When she saw the Southerners drive away in their car, Ingrid allowed herself to relax and smiled down at the black couple.

“Please forget those three assholes. Are you okay?”

“We...we are now, miss.” Stuttered the young man. “How could we thank you for this?”

“By eating your meal in peace at your table, as the American Constitution gives you the right to. I was too happy to teach good manners to those rednecks.”

“You said that you fought wars for the United States, miss.” Said the black woman in a subdued voice. “Was that true?”

Ingrid nodded while holstering back her pistol.

“It is! Major General Ingrid Dows, United States Air Force, at your service. Enjoy your meal and have a good day.”

Turning around and walking back calmly to the counter, where Hien had fearfully watched the confrontation, Ingrid passed a reassuring hand on the girl’s head and then looked at the waitress, who was still standing motionless behind the counter.

“You may forget about the call to the police, miss.”

“Uh, right, miss!” Could only say the shaken waitress. As the atmosphere in the restaurant eased up progressively, Hien looked up at Ingrid and spoke in her little voice.

“Mommy, are there many bad men like those around here?”

Ingrid couldn’t help then feel some discouragement then: the racial situation in the United States in general and in the Southern states in particular was still in her mind a disgrace and an affront to the values she believed in and had fought for. There was unfortunately still way too much intolerance and bigotry around for her to feel fully comfortable in her own country of adoption.

“Too many to my taste, Hien. Unfortunately, no place is perfect.”

The arrival of their orders then allowed her to change the subject of conversation.

## 13:42 (Washington Time)

### The Pentagon

Having obtained a V.I.P. visitor's pass at the main entrance of the Pentagon, Ingrid went first with Hien to the central personnel office and the mail room of the huge building, to register her new residential address and home telephone number so that she could be contacted in case of an emergency and also to have her mail forwarded to her new address. Once that was done, she decided to take a chance and see if the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Arthur Radford, could receive her for a minute. Her posting orders, while stating that she was moved to the Washington D.C. area and was to be attached to the staff of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, did not state what her exact position or function would be. Officially, she didn't need to report in to Admiral Radford before July 25, when her vacations would be over, but that suspense was positively killing her. Going to the section of the 'E' Ring, the outermost of the five pentagonal rings forming the Pentagon building, that housed the offices of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Ingrid presented herself to Admiral Radford's secretary and asked if he was available. The middle-aged woman had a quick look at her military identity card and also smiled to Hien before grabbing her telephone. After a brief exchange, the secretary smiled up at Ingrid.

"The admiral will receive you, General. If you are to discuss classified matters, then I would suggest that your little girl stay here during your discussion with Admiral Radford."

"I will take your suggestion, miss." Said Ingrid before looking down at Hien. "Hien, I will have to go speak in private with my new boss. Do you mind going to sit down in one of those chairs in the meantime? It won't be long, I promise."

"Okay, Mommy!" Said Hien, now long accustomed to all the fuss attached to what Ingrid called 'classified matters'. She thus went to sit in a sofa of the anteroom without further ado. Ingrid was then introduced into Radford's office, where the graying admiral had gotten up from behind his desk to come greet her with a handshake. She came to rigid attention before shaking hands with the four stars admiral.

"Sorry to bother you like this without warning, Admiral."

"Don't be! I can already bet why you came to see me. It is about your new job, right?" Said Radford, smiling to her.

“Correct, sir! I know that I was not due to report for another three weeks but the suspense is killing me. I was also wondering why my exact assignment was kept so secret.”

“That’s because it is going to be a very sensitive one, General Dows.” Replied Radford, becoming very serious. “Let’s sit down over there, so I can explain this to you.”

Going to sit in a sofa of the coffee table corner of the office, Ingrid waited for Radford to sit facing her and resume his talking.

“General, while you are officially going to be part of my joint staff and will be under my direct authority, in reality you will be answering to the President himself, as one of his presidential advisors.”

Ingrid, not having expected that, uncrossed her legs and straightened up in her sofa.

“A presidential advisor, sir? In what domain of competence? National security?” Radford shook his head once and grinned, obviously enjoying the suspense he was putting her through.

“No! While you will be officially listed simply as a ‘special presidential advisor’, you will actually be named ‘National Director of Aerospace Programs’, a brand new position decided on by President Dewey and created specifically with you in mind.”

Ingrid’s mouth opened slightly as she realized what such a title meant and how extensive her powers would be in such a position.

“President Dewey wants me to launch the United States into space, sir?”

“In a nutshell, yes! He and I fully realize that you will be starting with nearly nothing, but the way you successfully led our new aircraft development programs from 1948 to 1952 proved that you have the managerial capacities and, most importantly, the vision and technological competence needed for your new job. You will actually be wearing two hats: a civilian one as National Director of Aerospace Programs and a military one as the commander of the still to be formed ‘United States Military Space Command’, a new joint command that will answer directly to me rather than to the Chief of Staff of the Air Force.”

As Ingrid was still digesting those words, Radford added after a short pause another bombshell.

“Of course, such a huge responsibility, involving a space program and new military command that will undoubtedly involve huge budgets and a profound reorganization of our national assets, will have to be compensated with an appropriate



level of authority for you. Unless you would refuse to accept your new post today, something that would truly surprise me, the President will present to the Senate Armed Services Committee a request for confirmation for your promotion to the rank of lieutenant general, retroactive to the first of July. I doubt that any senator with a head on his shoulders will deny the fact that you are plenty qualified for such a promotion. You showed your mettle as a combat commander in Indochina, Palestine and Europe while wearing the ranks of major general, on top of previously leading our new aircraft programs in a brilliant manner. Besides, you have been wearing two stars on your shoulders for close to seven years now. You were more than due for your third star in my opinion.”

“Thank you, Admiral.” Could only say Ingrid at first, her mind now in overdrive. “Do you wish that I cut my vacation period short, so that I could assume my new duties earlier?”

“No!” Answered at once Radford, sober. “You truly deserved some time off after all the fighting you did in those last few years. You also have a little daughter to take care of. Take the time to establish yourself in Washington and to decompress a bit.”

“One last question, Admiral: will I be working out of the Pentagon or the White House?”

“You will have a small, not to say tiny, office in the White House, but the bulk of your work will be from here, in the Pentagon. That is, until you can build up your new Space Command and decide where it should be headquartered. Ah, this brings me to one last point about your new job. Since building such a space program and producing meaningful achievements will take years, if not decades, the President wanted to know if you would be willing to stay on indefinitely in your new position, in order to firmly keep it on track for the time needed. Of course, a fourth star would be forthcoming as your command will grow in size and importance.”

“Sir, my own rank is secondary in my mind. What matters to me is the possibilities this new post will give me to truly propel our nation forward into space. I had in fact dreamed of such a job for years now and I can only thank the President for having selected me for it.”

“You deserved the post, General Dows.” Said Radford before getting up from his easy chair. “I will see you again on July 25, in dress uniform. We will then go

together to the White House to meet with the President. Have a pleasant vacation in the meantime.”

“Thank you, Admiral.”

Parting with a handshake, Ingrid then walked out of Radford’s office, prompting Hien in jumping out of her sofa to run into her arms.

“Are you finished here, Mommy?”

“Yes, my sweet one. Let me do one last thing before we go back to my car.”

Ingrid, still carrying Hien in her arms, went to Radford’s secretary and gave her her new address and telephone number, so the admiral could contact her easily if need be. She then left, heading back to her car.

### **16:13 (Washington Time)**

#### **Ingrid’s home, South Grove Street**

#### **Aurora Hills, Arlington County**

The moment Hien entered the house ahead of Ingrid, Sarah grinned and winked to her.

“There is a big surprise waiting for you in the backyard, Hien, along with three small neighbors who want to play with you.”

Without even bothering to ask what the surprise was, Hien ran at once to the rear door of the house and threw it open. Ingrid smiled when she saw the big happy grin and wide eyes of her stepdaughter that came on at the sight of three large, modern play modules made of brightly colored plastic elements. Three preteen children, two boys and one girl, were already having fun climbing, sliding, entering and exiting the modules, one of which was made like a medieval castle and another like a children’s house. The third module was a combination of watch tower, slide and swing set. Miniflick was running around from module to module, following the children and happily barking while playing with them. Squealing with joy, Hien ran to the modules and stopped in front of the three children now looking at her with curiosity. Hien gave them her best smile.

“Hello! I am Hien. Can I play with you?”

“Sure!” Replied the bigger boy, who appeared slightly older than her. “I’m Jimmy and this is my little sister Annie. Our friend Tommy was also invited by your nanny. You want to go in the castle?”

“YES!” Replied at once Hien before running with her new friends into the castle. Ingrid, watching this with Sarah while smiling tenderly at the scene, then noticed a woman in her late twenties looking as well at the children from the other side of the high wooden fence to her right. Going to her neighbor, Ingrid offered her hand over the fence to the blonde, who shook it.

“I’m Ingrid Dows. Pleased to meet you, miss.”

“And I’m Carolyn Loomis, the mother of Jimmy and Annie. Your nanny was really kind to invite my children and little Tommy Rodman to play in your new toy sets.”

“It’s our pleasure, Carolyn: Hien was dying to make friends in her new home.”

While still smiling, Carolyn Loomis discreetly eyed her, intrigued by her young new neighbor.

“So, where were you before coming to Washington? Is your husband due to join you here soon?”

“We came from Germany, where I was posted before. I’m a widow.”

“Oh! I’m sorry to hear that, Ingrid. Was your husband killed in the recent war there?”

Ingrid eyed for a second Carolyn: it was now obvious that Sarah had said little about her to her neighbor, which was actually to Ingrid’s taste.

“He actually died in the Philippines. I am a military pilot. May I ask what his your husband’s occupation?”

“Gregg is a lawyer by profession but is presently an assistant district attorney in Washington. He often works very long hours but he lives for his job and believes in it totally.”

Ingrid didn’t miss the hint of resignation in Carolyn’s tone then.

“A commendable professional attitude, I may say. Do you have other children?”

“Just Jimmy and Annie. Mind you, they are a handful by themselves. Your nanny offered to occasionally watch them during the Summer school break if I needed a break but, as tempting as it is, I really wouldn’t want to impose myself on you.”

“Nonsense!” Replied Ingrid, grinning. “Hien needs friends and me and Sarah love children. Since we got those play modules for Hien, we might as well let other children profit from them.”

“You are sure that my kids won’t be a burden?”

“Certain! Bring them to our backyard or house any time that Sarah is in.”

“Gee, I really don’t know how to thank you for that, Ingrid.”

“Pah! I’m simply being a good neighbor. Besides, Hien really needs friends: her years in Vietnam, where I adopted her three years ago, were rough indeed, on top of having her parents killed in the war. She was lucky enough to have been sheltered and cared for by French nuns that ran an orphanage there. That’s where I first saw her. It was love at first sight.”

“She certainly looks very cute and nice.”

Ingrid beamed with pride at those words.

“Thanks! Your children are also cute. How old are they?”

“Jimmy is seven, while Annie is five. Tommy Rodman, who lives on the other side of your house, is four.”

“Oh, so your Jimmy will be going to Oakridge Elementary School with Hien?”

“Annie will, as well: she will be six in seven weeks.”

“But that’s great! Hien will love this. She turned eight in May. Well, I’m afraid that I have to go do some unpacking and decorating now if I want my new house to be presentable by Independence Day. I also still need to buy many things to furnish it properly.”

“Then, good luck with your decorating, Ingrid.”

“Thanks, Carolyn!” Replied Ingrid while walking away, satisfied that she could still enjoy some quiet from her notoriety.

### **13:10 (Washington Time)**

**Friday, July 15, 1955 ‘C’**

**Ingrid’s house, South Grove Street**

**Aurora Hills, Arlington County**

Hien beat Sarah to the door and opened it, then smiled to Jimmy and Annie Loomis, standing in front of their mother.

“Hello! You want to go play in the backyard with me?”

“We would love to!” Replied Jimmy. The three children then ran together towards the back door of the house, watched by an amused Carolyn Loomis.

“These three get so well together. It is truly hearth-warming. Are you sure that watching them is not a burden for you, Sarah?”

“They will never be a burden on me, Carolyn. You can go to the hair salon with peace in your mind. Take all your time too.”

Carolyn then made a tired smile while nodding once.

“I truly appreciate that, Sarah. I could use some relaxation right now.”

Sarah gave her a worried look while discreetly scanning her neighbor’s mind.

“Is something wrong, Carolyn? Can I do something for you?”

“You are already doing a lot for me and the kids, Sarah. It is just that Gregg is presently involved in a big, complicated case and is spending little time at home lately.”

Sarah, without letting it show, mentally sensed at once that a lot more was going on but simply patted Carolyn’s shoulder.

“Forget about it for the moment, Carolyn, and go relax at the hair salon. I will do supper for your kids as well.”

“Sarah, you are a sweetheart! Uh, is Ingrid home by chance?”

“She left half an hour ago for Langley, where she will spend the weekend doing some piloting in order to keep her pilot certification.”

Carolyn, who by now had belatedly learned who Ingrid really was, nodded her head once.

“The lucky girl! I sometimes wish that I could get out of the house and do wild things like she does. Well, I will leave you with the kids now. Just in case, here is the telephone number of the hair salon.”

Sarah took the piece of paper and said goodbye to Carolyn. As the latter walked to her car, parked in her driveway, Sarah noticed a black sedan car parked some fifty meters down the street, with four men sitting in it. Closing the door and locking it, Sarah then went to the lounge and discreetly looked through a small gap in the drapes of the front window. She saw the black sedan roll slowly forward once Carolyn’s car was gone, to stop again a mere ten meters short of the house’s property. Three big men in suits and hats then got out, leaving only the driver inside. Despite their suits, the men had ‘mafia’ written all over them. Leaving the lounge and hurrying to Ingrid’s study, Sarah went to the locked cabinet behind the work desk there and, unlocking it, took out of it Ingrid’s old Glock 17 pistol, along with a full magazine. Sarah could easily handle those three men by herself, unarmed, but that would expose her supernatural abilities and nature. She thus would have to use normal, earthly means to stop them. Loading the pistol first, she locked back the cabinet, then ran to the kitchen, from where she could look into the backyard. She was just in time to see the three men walk past the corner of the house, having obviously entered by the wooden gate of the backyard’s fence. Crouching down and rushing to the back door with her pistol in hand, Sarah peeped quickly through the

mosquito screen of the outer door to locate precisely the three men, then stepped out and leveled her weapon as Miniflick was starting to run towards the men, barking at them.

“FREEZE! WHO ARE YOU?”

The three men stopped at once and turned towards her, taken by surprise. Two of them then went for holstered guns, with the third raising a pistol that was already in his right hand. Sarah shot the latter one first, hitting him between the eyes. Her second bullet pierced the hearth of another gangster, while the third shattered the right wrist of the last man standing, making him scream with pain and fall to his knees, his revolver now on the grass. Sarah shouted at the three children now hiding behind a play module as she walked quickly to the wounded gangster.

“HIEN, BRING YOUR FRIENDS INSIDE THE HOUSE AND LOCK THE DOOR, QUICKLY!”

Hien, accustomed from her years in Vietnam to having to react while bullets or shells flew around, moved at once and encouraged the terrified Jimmy and Annie to get up and run to the house, also taking the time to grab Miniflick in her arms before sprinting to the house. With the three children now at her back, Sarah approached the wounded gangster and kicked his revolver away. There was fear in the man’s eyes when she put the muzzle of her pistol against his forehead. Her own eyes were cold, unflinching.

“Who sent you?”

The gangster swallowed hard but didn’t say a word. His thoughts were however more than enough to answer Sarah’s question. The look she then threw him truly scared the man.

“You think that I won’t kill you for trying to kidnap those children? Your wrist is already shattered. Do you want your left kneecap to be next?”

“WAIT! Big Joe Bolsano sent us. The father of those kids is squeezing Big Joe’s operations too hard. We were to kidnap the kids in order to persuade their father to cut some slack. Please, call an ambulance: I’m going to bleed to death!”

“Not before you tell me where I can find Joe Bolsano.”

“I...I can’t do that! He’ll kill me!”

“Suit yourself!” Replied unsympathetically Sarah, who then grabbed his collar with one hand and forced him up on his feet with an ease that shocked the gangster.

“Who the hell are you?”

“The family nanny.” Said flatly Sarah while forcefully dragging the man towards the house. Once at the back door, she made her prisoner sit against the house and pointed a specific point above the man’s right wrist.

“Put pressure there: it will help stop the bleeding. Stay here and don’t move or I will kill you.”

She then knocked on the door, which Hien had locked as she had asked her to do.

“HIEN, YOU CAN OPEN THE DOOR.”

Hien did open the door less than ten seconds later and looked up anxiously at Sarah.

“Are you okay?” She asked in Vietnamese. Sarah answered in the same language.

“Yes! Go upstairs with your friends while I check on the fourth bad man and call the police.”

Making sure first that Hien and her two friends went upstairs as told, Sarah went quickly to the lounge’s front window and looked for the black sedan. It was still there but the driver seemed unsure about whether to leave now or go check on his partners. Grabbing the telephone sitting on a low table of the lounge, Sarah dialed the number for the police while keeping an eye on the black car. She got an answer after four rings.

“Arlington Police Department! May I help you?”

“Yes, miss! I urgently need patrol cars at 326 South Grove Street, Aurora Hills. Three men tried to kidnap small children and a shootout followed. At least one man is wounded and will need an ambulance, while two more men are dead. There is also a suspicious black Ford sedan car parked nearby with one man inside. Its plate number is JDH 885. Tell the patrol cars to make it quick!”

“We already received reports of gunshots fired in your area, miss. Two cars should arrive soon. Are you and your children safe?”

“Yes! We will stay inside 326 South Grove until the patrol cars arrive.”

“Excellent, miss! You may hang up now.”

Sarah did so, then went quickly to the back door to check on the wounded gangster. She then saw that the man had taken the less than two minutes she had been inside to get up and go to one of the two dead gangsters lying in the grass. Holding his wounded wrist while also holding a revolver, the wounded mafioso was turning the corner of the house and disappearing from her sight by the time she stormed out of the back door in hot pursuit. The gangster had just passed the wooden gate of the backyard’s fence and was running towards the black sedan when Sarah leveled her pistol and shouted.

“STOP OR I SHOOT!”

In panic, the man turned around while still running and pointed his revolver, which he held in his left hand. Sarah didn't give him a chance to shoot, killing him with one bullet in the head. The driver of the sedan, seeing that, got his engine in gear at once and started speeding away with tires screeching. Using the long experience and incredible skill at pistol speed shooting gained previously as Nancy Laplante 'A', the angel peppered the moving car with no less than six bullets that shattered its windows. With its driver probably hit, the car then veered off the road, rolling on the grass of the adjacent park before slamming to a stop against a big tree. Sarah didn't go to investigate it, instead returning inside the house via the back door and locking it. She was now able to hear the sirens of approaching police cars. Putting down her pistol on a table of the lounge, she then called upstairs.

“HIEN, JIMMY, ANNIE, YOU CAN COME DOWN NOW! ALL THE BAD MEN ARE DEAD.”

Hien was the first to come down the stairs with Miniflick, followed a lot more hesitantly by Jimmy and Annie Loomis. Jimmy looked with big eyes at the Glock 17 pistol on the table, then at Sarah.

“Wow! How did you do that?”

“Easy, Jimmy: I shot better and faster than those men. Come all sit with me on the sofa: the police should be here soon.”

The first patrol car effectively screeched to a halt in front of the house forty seconds later, followed ten seconds afterwards by a second car. The four policemen, guns drawn and looking nervously around, found a dead man and a revolver lying on the front lawn of the house, plus an equally dead man inside the car crashed against a tree nearby. One policeman who went to check the driver of the black sedan shouted at the senior policeman present.

“HE'S DEAD! HE ALSO HAS A REVOLVER IN A SHOULDER HOLSTER.”

“THEN LEAVE HIM AND COME COVER US WHILE WE GO CHECK THE BACK OF THE HOUSE.”

The policemen quickly found two more bodies in the backyard, both carrying shoulder holsters and with two handguns lying near them. The police sergeant eyed the single bullet hits that had killed them and shook his head in disbelief.



“Hell, these bozos must have faced Bat Masterson<sup>25</sup>!”

Going next to the back door of the house, he knocked on it while standing to the side of it.

“THIS IS THE POLICE! OPEN UP!”

Someone moved inside at once, approaching the door. A beautiful young woman dressed in a loose robe and sandals opened the door a few seconds later and, looking at the sergeant, nodded to him once.

“Thank you for showing up this quickly, Officer. I have three young children inside, safe. I believe that all the bandits that came to try to kidnap them are dead now.”

“Did you see who killed those men, miss?” Asked the sergeant, still nervous but lowering his revolver. The woman’s calm answer then stunned him and his partners.

“I killed those men, Officer. If you come inside, I will show you the weapon I used.”

His mind unwilling to believe what the young woman had just said, the police sergeant nonetheless followed her inside, a patrolman at his back with revolver still drawn. The latter did lower his weapon when they entered a lounge where three preteen children sat together in a sofa, a small dog in the lap of one of them, an oriental girl. The woman then showed to the two policemen an impressive pistol with some kind of optical sight on it that sat on a high tablet of a shelving unit.

“This pistol legally belongs to the owner of this house, who has a carrying permit as well for it. I am the nanny for this little Oriental girl here, who is the adopted daughter of the owner. I was also watching over these two other children, whose mother has gone to the hair salon. I believe that those armed men were after the little neighbors, as their father is an assistant district attorney in Washington.”

The police sergeant, who had been examining with curiosity the pistol on the shelf, snapped his head around at those last words.

“An assistant district attorney? What is his name, miss?”

“Gregg Loomis. Do you know him?”

“I heard his name a few times. I believe that he is actually investigating an organized crime ring. He certainly would be the kind of man to attract some nasty attention from muscle men like the four lying dead outside. This could be a big case

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<sup>25</sup> Bat Masterson: famous sheriff and outstanding pistol shooter of the Far West.

indeed. I will call a detective and a full crime scene crew to here right away. In the meantime, I will ask you and the children to stay here until the detective arrives, miss.”

“Will you have to confiscate the pistol, Officer? It is a legal one and doesn’t belong to me. Besides, it is also considered by the military as classified technology and cannot be taken away so simply.”

“Uh, why so, miss?”

“It belonged to Nancy Laplante, the time traveler, and came from the future. This is the house of Lieutenant General Ingrid Dows, the female fighter ace.”

The eyes of the police sergeant widened then. Eyeing the pistol again, he next went to the telephone sitting on a low table of the lounge and called the central police station of Arlington County, getting the homicide section after one transfer.

“Detective Lake? This is Sergeant Hurst, calling from a private residence in Aurora Hills. I have here what looks like four dead muscle men, all armed, killed apparently while trying to kidnap the two children of Assistant District Attorney Loomis.”

“Hell! Did Loomis catch them flat-footed?”

“No, sir: the nanny of a little neighbor who was watching over them killed the four of them.”

“WHAT?” Came the shouted response. “You can’t be serious, Sarge!”

“I’m very serious, sir. You better get here with a full crime scene team before the place is run over by reporters.”

“If any of these idiots show up, don’t let them touch anything. What is the address?”

“It is a bungalow at 326 South Grove Street, just besides Fort Scott Park.”

“I know the area. I will be there in ten minutes.”

The detective then hung up at the other end, making the sergeant put down his receiver. Going to the three small children and crouching in front of them, he smiled to them, trying to reassure them.

“Don’t worry, kids: no bad men will come and scare you now.”

“We were not scared: Sarah was with us.” Replied the cute Oriental girl as if going through a shootout had been nothing. The boy in the trio grinned at those words, adding enthusiastically his own comments.

“Yeah! She was awesome! Shot them all with only one bullet each, like in the westerns.”

Hurst couldn't help then glance at Sarah, who was standing quietly behind the sofa. She in turn spoke in a calm, matter-of-factly tone.

"I am an experienced soldier, Officer. I already killed dozens of time in Israel."

Getting back up, Hurst eyed Sarah critically.

"Are you an American citizen, miss?"

"No, but I hold a Green Card. I am employed as a nanny and a guardian by General Dows for her daughter Hien and am an old friend of her."

"Could I see your papers, please?"

"Certainly, Officer." Replied Sarah before going to her purse, lying on a nearby shelf. Searching in it for a few seconds, she then took out and handed to Hurst her Green Card and her French passport. Hurst examined them quickly, noting down a few words in his pocket note pad, then handed them back to Sarah.

"Alright, miss, could you tell me in detail what exactly happened from the beginning?"

Sarah obliged with good grace, speaking for a bit over two minutes. Excusing himself for a moment, Hurst then went outside to talk briefly with his partners, who were now busy keeping a small but growing crowd of curious onlookers away from the four dead men on the lawn and in the crashed car in the park. A young woman holding the hand of a small boy waved to him from the next door property to his left as he was about to go back in the house.

"EXCUSE ME, OFFICER. COULD YOU TELL ME IF LITTLE HIEN AND SARAH ARE ALRIGHT?"

Hurst approached her before answering, so that he would not have to shout.

"They are, maam, along with two small neighbors from the Loomis family. Are you a neighbor, maam?"

"Yes, Officer. This is my house and my name is Vanessa Rodman. I was about to bring my little Tommy to the Dows' house so that he could play with the other kids there when the shootout happened."

Not believing his luck, Hurst took out his notepad and pen and started writing down notes while questioning Vanessa Rodman.

"How much of the shootout did you witness, maam?"

"I really saw well only the last part, when the man now lying on the Dows' front lawn and the driver of the black car in the park were shot by Sarah. I only heard the first part but it was enough to make me lock my doors at once."

“A sensible reaction, maam. Did any of the dead men fire a shot during the fight?”

“I don’t think so, Officer. The one on the lawn was ordered by Sarah to stop but he instead turned around and leveled a handgun at her. She shot him once before he could shoot, then peppered the car as it tried to speed away. God, I never saw someone shoot so quickly yet so accurately in my life. She shot five or six times in maybe four or five seconds, all of them apparently hitting the car, then returned into the house as if nothing had happened.”

“Uh, right!” Said Hurst, having a hard time believing many of the details of this case. “Have you known this Sarah for long, maam?”

“Only for about two weeks, when Ingrid Dows bought that house and moved in with her and Hien. I have however talked with her many times, as my Tommy and her Hien often play together. She is a very nice and incredibly cultured woman who knows many languages and who sings and play the guitar very well. Is she going to be in trouble for shooting those men, Officer?”

“I don’t think so.” Replied cautiously Hurst. “This looks like a straight case of self-defense by someone protecting small children from a possible act of attempted kidnapping. I can hardly see any prosecutor indicting her for that.”

Hurst was still interviewing Vanessa Rodman when Senior Detective Harry Lake arrived in his old Ford sedan, closely followed by the van of the crime scene team of the Arlington County Police Department. Excusing himself with Vanessa Rodman, Hurst went to meet Lake and quickly explained to him what seemingly happened, then showed him his notes. Harry Lake, an old hand at police work and a big graying man in his mid forties, eyed critically the dead man on the lawn and crouched besides the body, examining the revolver still held in the man’s left hand.

“Hmm, still fully loaded, with no traces of burnt powder. That bozo is wearing a right-handed shoulder holster but is holding his revolver with the left hand. He must have been shot first in the right wrist and then picked up his gun with his intact hand. Let’s check for spent brass from that woman’s pistol.”

They found quickly enough a total of seven spent 9mm casings on the lawn, all grouped in one relatively small area. Lake eyed them, then looked at the body on the lawn and the crashed car in the park.

“That man was shot from an approximate distance of fifteen yards, while the car must have been over thirty yards away and moving. That’s pretty good shooting.”

“That Sarah did say that she was an experienced soldier.” Volunteered Hurst, making Lake nod.

“That would explain a few things. Let’s go see the two other stiff’s.”

“They are in the backyard. This way, sir.”

Lake first made sure that his assistants knew about the brass casings, then followed Hurst to the back of the house. His eyes opened wide when he saw the three play modules dispersed around the backyard.

“Hell, look at those things! My grandson would love to play in one of those.”

Then returning his mind to his investigation, Lake looked down at the two corpses and the two handguns on the grass. He took a few seconds to find three 9mm brass casings near the rear door of the house.

“Damn! That woman certainly makes her every shot count. Her name should be Calamity Jane. Is she cute?”

“As cute as she is a deadly shot, sir.” Replied Hurst, making the detective wince.

“Ouch! That’s what I call a dangerous woman. Thanks for your help, Sarge, I will take it from here. Just keep reporters and bystanders at a safe distance for the moment.”

As Hurst returned to the front of the house, Lake went to the rear door and, out of ingrained courtesy, knocked on it before entering. He found a beautiful young Semitic woman, three preteen children and a small dog in the lounge, which was furnished comfortably with very modern-looking furniture. Lake flashed his police badge at the woman.

“Senior Detective Harry Lake, Arlington PD. I am now in charge of this case.”

“And I am Sarah Ur, nanny for Hien, who is sitting between Jimmy and Annie Loomis. Would you like me to tell again what happened?”

“That would be most appreciated, miss.”

Sarah executed herself, basically telling the same story that she had given to Hurst. Lake, taking notes while comparing her story with the notes passed to him by Hurst, nodded in satisfaction at the end.

“Could I see the gun you used, miss?”

“Certainly, Detective. It is on this shelf. I already unloaded it and put the magazine with the remaining bullets besides it, along with the firearms possession permit for it. It belongs to Lieutenant General Ingrid Dows, the owner of this house and Hien’s adoptive mother. I would really appreciate if you didn’t have to confiscate it: it comes from the future and is considered sensitive technology by the Department of Defense. Ingrid Dows got it from Nancy Laplante, the time traveler.”

“You do seem to know how to use it well, though.” Said Lake after digesting her words.

“I have had a lot of practice with it. Detective, may I speak to you away from the children?”

Lake gave her an inquiring look but nodded once and went with her to the kitchen, where Sarah continued in a low voice.

“Detective, those men didn’t come for me or Hien, but rather to kidnap Jimmy and Annie Loomis. Of that I am pretty sure: organized crime muscle men would have no reasons to attack me, Hien or Ingrid. On the other hand, Gregg Loomis is an assistant district attorney who is, according to his wife, very busy with an important case, a case that very well may involve organized crime. While I was able to stop those four men outside, their boss will undoubtedly react badly to losing them and will probably try again to hurt or pressure Gregg Loomis. Since I often watch over his children, I will need that pistol I used if I am to be able to protect them.”

“And how would you know that those men were from a crime syndicate, miss?” Sarah gave Lake a dubious look.

“Detective, I may look young but I am no fool. Those men had ‘Mafia’ written all over them, down to the shoulder holsters and Italian shoes. Assistant District Attorney Loomis should be warned at once about this.”

“What about his wife? Have you called her yet about this?”

“No!” Said softly Sarah. “She badly needs that quiet time at the hair salon. I will call her before you leave here.”

“Have you called General Dows yet?”

“No, and I won’t unless you absolutely want to see her, which I don’t see why you would need that. She is gone for the weekend to fly some hours needed to keep current her pilot qualifications.”

Lake looked at her with misgiving.

“Miss, aren’t you presuming a bit too much about what you can decide by yourself? You are just a nanny, or so you say. General Dows could fire you if you try to hide from her the fact that her daughter was nearly caught in a kidnapping attempt.”

It was Sarah’s turn to look hard at Lake.

“Detective, I am a lot more than just a nanny and Ingrid would never even think about firing me: she trusts and respects me way too much for that, as we are very old friends. Look at me as the guardian of Hien.”

“Like Dows’ famed guardian angel?” Joked Lake, who had read like everybody in the United States the newspapers headlines two years ago about Ingrid’s miraculous healing in Palestine. The hard, unflinching stare Sarah gave him strangled his attempt at humor at once. Subjugated by her powerful personal presence, Lake became serious again.

“Alright, miss: you can keep the pistol...for the moment being, but don’t go around town while carrying it. As for the Loomis kids, I will have to call at least their father and get him here, as he is probably the trigger for all this.”

“Go right ahead, Detective. You will find a telephone in the lounge. In the meantime, I will go entertain the kids a bit.”

Harry Lake eyed her cautiously as she then walked out of the kitchen: there was a lot more to that small, young woman than what she appeared to be. He would definitely have to do a background check on her.

### **14:49 (Washington Time)**

#### **326 South Grove Street, Aurora Hills**

Jimmy and Annie Loomis, who were playing with Hien with miniature cars and planes, jumped joyfully on their feet on seeing through the window their father walk towards the entrance door. The moment Gregg Loomis was let in by a policeman, he crouched and let his two children jump in his arms.

“Jimmy, Annie! Thank God that you are safe. Are you alright?”

“We are, Dad!” Answered enthusiastically Jimmy. “You should have seen the way Sarah shot the bad men. She was like John Wayne in those Western movies.”

“She was?” Said Gregg Loomis while looking at Sarah, who stood a few meters away inside the lounge, Hien and Miniflick at her side. Harry Lake however approached him before he could speak to Sarah, flashing his police badge.

“Mister Gregg Loomis? I am Senior Detective Harry Lake, Arlington PD. I am covering this case. May we speak in private for a minute?”

“Uh, sure, Detective.”

Giving a kiss first to his children, Gregg then accompanied Lake outside, in the backyard. A tall and fit man for his 37 years of age, Gregg was accustomed by his job as assistant district attorney to view gory details or pictures. Seeing two dead men being hauled away from spots mere meters from the play modules in which his children had been playing however shook him badly.

“What happened here, Detective?”

“Basically, four men came to probably kidnap your kids but ran into a wall, the wall being this so-called nanny watching over your kids. Thankfully for you and your kids, that Sarah can shoot like Buffalo Bill and is one cool customer indeed. I had a quick background check made by telephone on the four dead men. They all had criminal files longer than my arm and were armed. They also are apparently linked to a Washington suspected crime boss named Joe Bolsano. Would you by chance be working on a case involving this Joe Bolsano, Mister Loomis?”

Harry Lake didn't miss the way Gregg Loomis paled at the name of Joe Bolsano.

“I...I do, as a matter of fact. I am heading a big case of tax evasion and racketeering against Bolsano.”

“Has Bolsano threatened you because of your investigation, Mister Loomis?”

“Once, on the telephone, but I have no witnesses for that, Detective. The bastard! Sending goons to kidnap my kids.”

“That we can't prove...yet! We however can expect a reaction from Bolsano when he learns about his men's death. For one thing, you and your family are definitely under a grave threat now since Bolsano felt rash enough to try to kidnap your kids, probably to blackmail you into dropping your investigation against him.”

“But, I can't drop my investigation like this.” Replied Gregg Loomis, getting agitated. “It is already quite advanced and a whole team is assisting me on it. Can't we arrest the bastard on suspicion of attempted kidnapping?”

“Not with what we have now. Besides, even while in jail he could order some lieutenant of his to finish the job for him. What I can do, though, is to place your family under police protection for the time being. I already arranged for a patrol car to park overnight in front of your house.”



"Thanks, Detective." Said Gregg, feeling a bit better. "That will certainly help me sleep better tonight. Will the nanny be in trouble because of this incident?"

"From the justice? Hell no!" Replied Harry Lake with an amused smile. He then however turned deadly serious. "The same can't be said about Joe Bolsano. He is liable to have her killed, even if only to punish her for killing his men. He could make it long and painful too."

Gregg Loomis lowered his head at that, knowing too well what Lake meant.

"I know, Detective: One informant that I had inside his organization disappeared a few months ago. We found his mutilated body a week later, in a ditch."

Both were silent for a few seconds then, mentally reflecting on how hard modern justice made the successful prosecution of human sharks like Joe Bolsano. Lake was the first to speak again.

"Is there anything else that you could tell me that could help my investigation into this incident, Mister Loomis?"

"I...I don't think so. To be frank, right now, the only thing that I can think about is the safety of my family. Where is my wife, by the way?"

"The nanny told me that she went to the hair salon. She has not been informed about this incident yet."

"Why?" Said Gregg Loomis after a moment of surprise, making Lake shrug.

"Because the nanny didn't want her to be panicked."

"IS SHE NUTS?" Nearly shouted Gregg before charging towards the rear door of the house and entering. Sarah faced him resolutely when he came to her like a furious bull.

"BY WHAT RIGHT DID YOU DECIDE BY YOURSELF TO KEEP CAROLYN IGNORANT ABOUT THIS?"

Instead of stuttering some excuses or explanations, the young woman resolutely stared back up at him, pointing at the door giving on the private study and saying calmly three words.

"In there, now!"

"Excuse me?" Said Gregg, becoming angrier. Sarah's answer to that was to grab him by one arm with surprising strength and drag him towards the study, ignoring his protestations. Once inside the study, with the thick oak door closed, she jabbed her right index in Gregg's chest while staring into his eyes.

“Listen, Mister Loomis! In case you didn’t notice, a simple nanny would not have been able to stop four mafia muscle men from kidnapping your children. In reality, I am as much Hien’s bodyguard as I am her nanny. I didn’t call your wife because I deemed that she was badly in need of some quiet time. You, on the other hand, should try to realize how hard your work habits have been lately on your family.”

“What do you mean? I have important work to do and I’m simply doing my best to do it.”

“Mister Loomis,” said more slowly Sarah, trying to make him understand, “have you even noticed the effects of your late work hours on your wife and kids? Your worries have also gotten at them. I know because your kids made remarks many times about that while I was watching them in the last days. You have assistants? Then delegate some of your excess workload to them. That’s what they are there for anyway. I could also tell you to empty your mind of your investigation case before going home every day but, with Bolsano now sending his goons after your family, that is now unfortunately impossible.”

Gregg Loomis, stunned to see what he had considered up to now as no more than an imported domestic aid give him advice like this, was silent for a few seconds while thinking over what she had just said. He felt bitter as he realized that she was right on all counts: Carolyn had grown distant and sullen in the last weeks, while Jimmy and Annie had become unusually quiet at the dining table on the increasingly rare occasions when they could have a family meal together.

“Alright, I’m sorry for having yelled at you, Sarah.” Finally said Gregg, looking down and averting her eyes. She surprised him again by gently grabbing his chin and forcing him to look directly at her.

“You were already forgiven, Gregg. I have myself gone through many stressful episodes in life and know how it can affect good people. Now, about our main problem at this time: Bolsano. You know well how slowly the justice system works, especially against a man like Bolsano, who can afford to hire a battery of high-priced lawyers. He thus has unfortunately time on his side, time that he can use to try again to intimidate or hurt you and your family. The only way to stop him from doing that is by preempting him.”

“How? I need proofs to arrest him. Besides, as Detective Lake told me, even in jail he can still order his lieutenants around.”

Sarah withdrew her hand from his chin while staring hard into his eyes.

“How? By doing some vacuum cleaning in that dirt pile. It may not be legal justice in your eyes but it is nonetheless long overdue justice.”

Gregg looked with shock at the small, young Semitic woman.

“Are you proposing seriously that we kill Bolsano and his lieutenants? That’s not only illegal: it’s plain crazy!”

What happened next made Gregg step back against the work desk of the study while he stared open-mouthed at Sarah, who was turning into a luminous shape. After a couple of seconds, Gregg found himself facing a tall, brilliant translucent humanoid shape. He fell on his knees, overwhelmed, as the angel spoke with a resolute voice.

“The justice of The One supersedes any Earth-bound justice, Gregg. Justice for all and protection of the innocents are my principal duties and I will fulfill them tonight. Do not worry anymore about Bolsano or his men hurting your family.”

### **17:41 (Washington Time)**

#### **326 South Grove Street, Aurora Hills**

Carolyn Loomis, having parked her car in the driveway of her house, then got out and walked to the Dows’ house next door. She was eyeing with curiosity the police patrol car parked a few meters away on the street, two policemen inside it, when four men, one carrying a video camera and another holding a still camera, ran to her while shouting questions.

“MISS, ARE YOU A FRIEND OF THE OWNER OF THIS HOUSE?”

“DO YOU KNOW THE CHILDREN INSIDE?”

“Why are you asking that?” Replied Carolyn, worried at once. “Did something happen to my children?”

“CBS News, maam.” Said one of the men while holding a microphone up. “There was a shootout here earlier this afternoon, with four men killed. What can you tell us about the young Arabic woman living in this house?”

“Oh my god!” Could only say Carolyn, then breaking into a run towards the front door of the house while ignoring the reporters’ shouted questions. The door was opened from the inside as she approached it and her husband signaled her to come in.

“Get inside, Carolyn. Don’t worry about our kids: they are fine.”

“Gregg? You are already back from work? What is going on?”

“I will explain inside.”

Carolyn entered at a near run, with Gregg slamming the door and locking it in the face of the pursuing reporters. Jimmy and Annie then ran to their mother, who crouched and hugged them emotionally.

“Jimmy! Annie! Thank God that you are safe. What happened?”

“Four bad men came to take us but Sarah shot them all, Mommy.” Answered enthusiastically Jimmy. Before Carolyn could recover from her surprise and shock at those words, Gregg gently touched her shoulder and spoke softly to her.

“Bolsano, the gangster I am presently investigating, apparently sent four of his men to kidnap Jimmy and Annie, probably to intimidate me in sabotaging my case against him. Sarah was fortunately able to shoot and kill all four of them before they could get at our children. A police patrol car will watch over our house tonight.”

Carolyn, dumbstruck, looked up at Sarah, who had just come out of the kitchen with Hien. She was wearing a kitchen apron and was smiling as if everything was just fine, speaking to Carolyn in her usual warm tone.

“Hi, Carolyn! You and your family are invited for supper here today: I made a mean couscous for the occasion.”

## **21:18 (Washington Time)**

### **Private mansion, Fort Bunker Hill Park area**

#### **Washington, D.C.**

The senior patrolman in the lead police car couldn't help swear out loud when the headlights of his car illuminated the bodies of two men sprawled in the driveway leading to the luxurious mansion that was their objective. Both had handguns lying besides them.

“Shit! This was a shootout alright! Park here, Mike: we better continue on foot from here. I have no wish to drive right into an ambush.”

“Right!” Answered the driver between clenched teeth, already feeling the adrenaline flowing in his veins. The panicked telephone calls from area residents had made clear to the police dispatch center that a short but furious gunfight had occurred at the house of a known gangster and that they could expect about anything. Stopping his car on the side of the driveway just short of the two dead men, the driver and the three other policemen in the car then jumped out and ran to take cover behind a nearby clump of bushes and trees. The policemen in the second patrol car soon joined them,

scanning nervously the silent, dark mansion. After a few seconds, the police sergeant waved his men forward. His revolver firmly held up, the sergeant cautiously approached the mansion's front door and saw three more bodies in front of it. Again, a collection of firearms were in evidence around the dead men.

"Try not to disturb or touch anything, guys: this will be one major crime scene if I ever saw one."

Crouching besides the bullet-riddled door, the sergeant then cautiously tried the door knob and found it unlocked. Pushing the door open, he then ran inside for a few paces but had to stop nearly at once: another dead man lay in the vestibule, covered with blood. Looking at him with the help of his service flashlight, the sergeant saw that the man had his throat cut wide open.

"Jesus! This was a massacre, pure and simple. Spread out in pairs and be careful, men."

Exploring the large house room by room, the policemen, soon reinforced by the Washington D.C. tactical squad, found seventeen more dead men, all armed, along with plenty of evidence that a furious, desperate gunfight had just occurred. In a conference room on the upper floor, the police sergeant found eight of the dead men around the remains of a long table that had been reduced mainly to splinters by an explosion.

"My god! It looks like someone threw a primed grenade on top of this table. Those men seemingly never had time to react before it literally blew in their faces."

"Yeah!" Said the patrolman with him while examining one of the bodies. "Someone then finished them off with head shots to make sure that they were all dead. This was one ruthless job alright."

"Probably a war between crime gangs." Concluded grimly the sergeant. "This may be only the opening shot of something very nasty and bloody."

Approaching a dead man sprawled on the carpet at one end of the destroyed table, the sergeant then saw with a shock that the head had been severed from the body and lay a few paces away, along with a blood-covered meat cleaver. Fighting his mounting revulsion, he searched the pockets of the decapitated body and soon found a wallet. Searching it, he quickly found a driver's license and read the name on it. The face on the license's picture was that of the severed head lying on the floor.

"Joseph Bolsano... Well, it seems that the reign of that hoodlum is over. The question now is who did him in and who will take his place?"

**22:46 (Washington Time)**  
**F.B.I. headquarters, 9<sup>th</sup> Street**  
**Washington, D.C.**

“Alright, what the hell is happening tonight?” Grumbled John Edgar Hoover, Director of the F.B.I., as he entered the central operations room of his agency’s headquarters. He was in a truly foul mood, having had to cut short a party he had been hosting in honor of the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee. One of his senior field agents present took on him to pass the news, reading from a notepad.

“A probable gang war, sir. Big Joe Bolsano and 21 of his men were massacred at his Washington mansion in a short but furious firefight at around nine this evening. At about fifteen past nine, Vito Genovese, the New York mafia boss, was killed in his Manhattan penthouse, along with sixteen of his lieutenants and bodyguards. In Chicago, Sam Giancana, the local mafia boss, was similarly massacred with ten of his men at around nine, give or take half an hour. The reports on that last fight were confused, since it happened in an isolated property on the shore of Lake Michigan. The three attacks were ruthless and brutal and were apparently well-coordinated affairs. Of note, Bolsano, Genovese and Giancana were all decapitated with meat cleavers after being shot.”

“Damn!” Said Hoover, shaken. “Do we have any inkling about who could be involved in this bloodbath?”

“The local police departments are still combing through the crime scenes and have not had time yet to draw any meaningful conclusions, apart from the fact that whoever did these raids was incredibly ruthless. There are however already speculations that another crime boss may have done this, to either grab power for himself or as revenge for some slight.”

“God!” Replied Hoover, rolling his eyes and throwing his hands up. “And I thought that this afternoon’s shootout in Aurora Hills would have made the front page news tomorrow. Do you have any idea of the kind of crime war that could follow this?” The senior agent nodded grimly.

“It could be very bloody indeed, sir. I took on me to alert all our offices nationwide, telling them to be ready for anything.”

“Good move!” Said Hoover, a little bit relieved.

**16:31 (Washington Time)**

**Saturday, July 16, 1955 'C'**

**F.B.I. headquarters**

J. Edgar Hoover felt secret relief as he sat down wearily at the conference table, along with twelve of his senior agents and assistants: in the list of known dead mobsters was one man in particular who had some very embarrassing and compromising information about him. Hopefully for Hoover, that information would now follow its owner to the grave. Looking around the table, he could see that his men appeared on edge and harassed, which was no surprise for him: the game of tit-for-tat murders had already started in New York and Chicago and this crime war was shaping up as the biggest case of the year for the F.B.I., by a long shot. Hoover eyed his senior agent from New York while grabbing his pen to take notes.

"You throw the first ball, Sam. Resume what is known of the situation in New York."

"Yes sir!" Replied grimly the Jewish-American New York native. He knew intimately from his youth how powerful and extensive the hold of the Italian mobsters was over his city and could foresee a lot more blood to be spilled in the near future. He then opened his briefing file and read the main points in it.

"First, the preliminary results of the N.Y.P.D. investigation of the massacre at the Vito Genovese penthouse, which happened at about nine fourteen last night. Confirmed dead there were Vito Genovese, five of his lieutenants and nine muscle men and bodyguards. Also killed while apparently having a meeting with Genovese were Dutch Schultz and two of his men. A total of at least six different weapons were used to murder them, apart from two grenades apparently thrown in the penthouse at the start of the fight. The two Mafiosi guarding the door of the penthouse were killed with knives first, which allowed the attackers the benefit of surprise over Genovese and his men. Nobody in the building saw any of the attackers either come in or out and the fight was apparently over in less than two minutes. Genovese was already dead when someone cut his head off with a meat cleaver. The meat cleaver was left on the scene but had no fingerprints on it. Whoever did this was both very efficient and incredibly ruthless. If I had to make a guess about the author of this massacre, I would say that Albert 'Mad Hatter' Anastasia was involved: that bloodbath is exactly his style. Talking of Anastasia, word on the street is that Vincent 'Chin' Gigante and three other men loyal to Genovese

tried to kill him this morning but bungled their attempt. Gigante was killed by Anastasia in the shootout that ensued, while two of the other attackers were gunned down by Anastasia's bodyguard and driver. Anastasia is now in hiding and may be preparing a counterstrike on the remaining lieutenants loyal to Genovese. A lot of Italian hoodlums are now laying low in New York, waiting for the other shoe to drop. In contrast, the Irish and Jewish gangs are said to be mobilizing, in order to be ready for any attack and, possibly, to be in position to grab whatever they can after the dust settles. The N.Y.P.D. is in full alert and is flooding the streets with cops to prevent as much as possible any public shootouts."

Hoover shook his head in disbelief while taking notes: Genovese had been the reputed big boss of the Italian Mafia in New York. It would now probably going to be a dog-eat-dog contest to take his throne. Then looking in succession at his senior agents from Chicago and Washington, he got them to brief him on their respective findings. Their reports sounded very much like the one from his New York agent, with the picture of very efficient and ruthless killers having been at work coming out. In fact, Hoover was starting to seriously believe that Anastasia had a hand in this: as the most feared killer of a group of contract assassins and as a direct rival of Vito Genovese, he had both the means and motives to commit this. The attacks in Chicago and Washington however denoted something much bigger than just a battle for power in New York. One point from the briefing of his Washington senior agent did make him frown.

"You said that Joe Bolsano was apparently planning to kill Assistant District Attorney Loomis when he was killed? How do we know that?"

"From the notes written down by Bolsano's lieutenants just before being killed and from the fact that pictures of Loomis and of his house were found at the scene. There were also old newspaper clippings showing both Sarah Ur, the woman who earlier shot four of Bolsano's men when they tried to kidnap Loomis' kids, and her employer, General Ingrid Dows. The notes taken by Bolsano's lieutenants showed that Bolsano wanted that Sarah Ur killed along with Loomis, probably as a revenge for her killing his four muscle men."

Hoover bent forward, very interested by this: he had briefly and discreetly investigated Ingrid Dows when she had been suspected of collusion with communists in Indochina and still had many questions in his mind about her.



“Tell me more about this, John. What were those news clippings on Dows and that Sarah Ur about?”

John Wainwright shuffled paper sheets inside the file in front of him before answering.

“I have to say that I was also intrigued by them when I saw them, sir. They were clippings from articles written on Dows while she was serving in Indochina and Israel over two years ago. There were also pictures from various fashion magazines showing both women wearing a new sort of very skimpy bathing suit said to have been copied by Dows from a design from the future. The article about Dows’ tour in Israel was particularly interesting, so I took the time to look for more articles of that period and did some inquiries with the Air Force. While the exploits of General Dows made most of the articles, that Sarah Ur was described as a very beautiful but also deadly woman who killed by herself fourteen British elite commando soldiers during a failed British night raid on Ramat David Airbase in Israel.”

“She killed fourteen British commandos?” Exclaimed Hoover, stunned like the rest of his agents and assistants by that. “Who the hell is that woman, exactly?”

“Officially, she is a childhood friend of Dows and the nanny for her eight year-old Vietnamese adopted daughter. According to information from the INS, she was born in Iraq, then emigrated with her Jewish parents to Germany, where she lived until they fled to France, then Palestine, in 1939 to escape Nazi persecutions against Jews. From there, she went to work as a nanny for a Levantine family in Indochina. Her employers were said to have been killed during the Indochina war, at which point Ur offered her services as a nanny to Dows and was hired. She followed Dows to Palestine and then Germany to care for her daughter, then flew in here with Dows and her kid. She told the Arlington PD after killing the four muscle men yesterday that she was an experienced soldier who had fought in Palestine before going to Indochina. By the way, the Arlington PD report on that shooting says that her demonstrated level of pistol marksmanship was simply phenomenal and would make her easily a World-class pistol shooter.”

“Could she be the one who killed all those mobsters last night?”

“If we go by normal standards, no! She was seen by Arlington cops near the Loomis house both just before and after the time those mobsters were killed. She thus has a rock-solid alibi in this case, sir.”

Hoover nodded his head at that.

“Alright, John. Thank your assistants for their research work. Also, put a good investigator on that Sarah Ur, to see if he can find more about her through actual

acquaintances and contacts. You will continue investigating the Bolsano massacre and try to predict the local fallouts from it in the meantime. The same goes for all the rest of you. I want to know where this mafia war is going, so that we could prevent any innocent deaths in the process. The public will not appreciate to see the streets of America turned into a battle zone and I bet that the President won't appreciate it either. I will now let you go back to your respective investigations. Good luck, gentlemen!"

Hoover discreetly signaled to Wainwright to stay behind while the others picked up their papers and left, then led him to a corner away from the door of the conference room and spoke to him in a low voice.

"John, make sure that the investigator who will look up Sarah Ur is both competent and discreet. Warn him about how dangerous that Sarah could be. He is to report his findings directly to either you or me and to nobody else."

"Got that, sir. I believe that I have just the right person for that job. I will keep you posted if anything pops up."

"Excellent! Again, good work, John."

"Thank you, sir!" Said the senior agent, who then left the room. Now alone with his thoughts, Hoover wondered for a moment about all the fantastic things happening around Ingrid Dows. First, her ability to remember her past incarnations, then her miraculous healing and rejuvenation in Israel, accompanied by the resurrection of her dead driver. Now, this so-called 'nanny' of hers who proved to be a top pistol shooting expert.

**17:08 (Washington Time)**

**Sunday, July 17, 1955 'C'**

**326 South Grove Street, Aurora Hills**

**Arlington County, Virginia**

"MOMMY!" Shouted happily Hien, getting up from the carpet of the lounge where she had been watching the television and running into the arms of Ingrid. The latter, wearing her summer short sleeve order uniform, kissed her repeatedly and grinned to her.

"And how has my dear daughter been this weekend?"

“I played a lot with my friends. We couldn’t go much out, because of the people with the cameras asking questions.”

Ingrid looked at Sarah, who was standing just outside of the kitchen, and smiled to her. Sarah was wearing a shoulder holster holding her Glock 17 pistol over her robe.

“Thanks for what you did, Sarah. You lived up to your duties...again.”

“Could I really do less, Ingrid? Hopefully, this world will now be a bit better place without these gangsters. And you? How was your flying?”

“It was truly nice to fly again.” Replied Ingrid with a smile. “I flew a total of seventeen hours in three flights, one of them at night. I came to an arrangement that was to everybody’s satisfaction in Langley: I will fly operational patrol missions on alternate weekends and thus keep my certifications current. In exchange, that will free some of the pilots from the 1<sup>st</sup> Fighter Wing, who will now be able to spend the weekend with their families instead of having to stand duty.”

Ingrid then looked at Hien in her arms, who had listened to that with some misgiving.

“Don’t worry, Hien: I will reserve the other weekends just for you.”

Hien smiled instantly at those words and hugged her tightly, prompting Ingrid into caressing her back with one hand. That picture of affection and bliss warmed up Sarah, who spoke softly once Ingrid put down Hien.

“I am making some Vietnamese specialties for supper. I thought that you would appreciate after a weekend of military food.”

“Now you are talking!” Replied enthusiastically Ingrid.

## **CHAPTER 14 – THE ROAD TO THE STARS**

**09:52 (Washington Time)**

**Friday, July 29, 1955 'C'**

**'The tank' (NMCC secure conference room)**

**The Pentagon, Washington, D.C.**

“Well, now that we have expedited our routine business, let’s get to new business, gentlemen.” Said jovially Admiral Radford, savoring in advance the bomb he was about to drop on his unsuspecting service chiefs. He then punched a button on his intercom and spoke in it. “Lieutenant General Dows, you may come in now.”

“LIEUTENANT GENERAL?!” Exclaimed the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Maxwell Taylor, looking both surprised and upset. “How did she get her third star so soon?”

The Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Randolph McCall Pate, a fatherly-looking gentleman wearing glasses who had served in Guadalcanal in 1942 with Ingrid Dows, threw Taylor an unsympathetic look.

“I personally went up from colonel to four star general in less than seven years, Taylor. Why would you object about that woman getting up by one rank in a bit less than seven years? General Dows fought in the last four wars the United States was involved in and earned her ranks in combat. She also saved the bacon of many of my marines in Korea, plus that of many army troopers as a matter of fact, on top of giving a hell of a beating to both the Communist Chinese and the Soviets.”

“But she is too young to be a lieutenant general.” Objected Taylor, not noticing in his excitement that Ingrid was now entering the room. “Hell, she can barely get herself inside a bar without being turned away by a bouncer.”

“I have no problem whatsoever getting into a bar, General Taylor: I am 31 years old.” Said calmly Ingrid while going to her seat. “Besides, all the bouncers in town know me well by now.”

The other generals present looked on in silence as Taylor and Ingrid exchanged hard stares for a moment, expecting some fireworks. Admiral Radford however cleared his throat then, attracting the attention back on him.

“Well, gentlemen, the reason I called in Lieutenant General Dows was twofold: first, I wanted to advise you that, following an executive request from the President, the Senate Armed Services Committee has decided in an emergency closed session yesterday to confirm the promotion of General Dows to the rank of lieutenant general, retroactive to the First of July. Second, I wish to announce to you that President Dewey has created yesterday by executive order a new joint command: the United States Military Space Command. The USMSC will be commanded by Lieutenant General Dows and will be directly under myself and the President. It will control and coordinate all the military departments and agencies involved in research, development and operations involving space, and will direct the military use of space by the United States. As well, General Dows was named by the President as National Director of Aerospace Programs and will have the status of special presidential advisor. General Dows is here to brief us on her preliminary findings and decisions.”

“Space Command?” Said Maxwell Taylor in a derisive tone. “But we have nothing that can go into space yet. What kind of command will that be?”

“It is true that after years of efforts we have nothing yet in space,” said Ingrid, straight-faced, “so the President decided to put a woman in charge for a change.” While General Pate had a hard time not bursting out in laughter, General Twining of the Air Force covered his face with both hands and shook his head. On his part, Taylor pointed an accusing index at Ingrid.

“I don’t know how you managed that, but you are not touching my ballistic missile agency at the Redstone Arsenal.”

Ingrid’s answer was to smile in a devilish way, despite being dead tired from a night spent preparing her presentation.

“I won’t touch anything that can’t go in space or has a range that doesn’t exceed 200 miles, General. The rest is mine for the picking, though.”

Ingrid’s smile then faded and she looked around the table at the other generals and admirals, who all looked like they could be her grandfather.

“Believe me gentlemen when I say that I am not on some kind of power trip. I had absolutely no clue that this job would be given to me when I arrived from Germany four weeks ago. I was however put in charge of this new command by the President and I intend to do my best in the national interest. One of the reasons why we still don’t have anything in space or even have a decent ballistic missile yet is that too many departments and services are splitting the pie and trying all at once to draw the blanket

to themselves while working in a completely uncoordinated fashion. This has to stop if we ever want to accomplish anything useful before the Soviets make us look stupid. As of next Monday, I will fire away a number of messages and directives to the military agencies and departments involved in space-related projects, in order to patch up my new command. For the sake of our nation, I hope that nobody will then try to block or delay those directives simply because of inter-service rivalry. If that happens, then those responsible will have to explain themselves to Admiral Radford and the President. This said, here is the tentative organizational chart of the new USMSC.”

On a signal from Ingrid, a lieutenant lit up an overhead projector, making a chart appear on a wall screen. Ingrid then started commenting the chart in a strong voice.

“As you can see on this chart, the USMSC will combine facilities and personnel from the Army, Air Force, Marine Corps and Navy, plus a number of civilian high technology firms under contract on an ad hoc basis. Space Command headquarters will eventually be located in Cape Canaveral, Florida, at Patrick Air Force Base. Patrick AFB and its surrounding space-related installations will in turn become the Eastern Test Range Complex, or ETRC in short, of the United States Military Space Command. The ETRC will be used to develop and test-launch rocket booster systems. It will also launch rocket boosters and their payloads that need to be launched eastward close to the Equator. On the West Coast will be the Western Test Range Complex, or WTRC, yet to be established at the old Army Camp Cook, northwest of Los Angeles. That base is quite isolated and is well situated to fire test shots westward across the Pacific and to launch rockets and their payloads into polar orbit.”

“What the hell is a polar orbit, General Dows?” Asked Admiral Arleigh Burke, the Chief of Naval Operations. Ingrid answered him politely, understanding that few people would know much about what she was talking about.

“A polar orbit is a trajectory over the Earth that is roughly aligned on a North-South axis, Admiral. Such an orbit, combined with the rotation of the Earth, will permit artificial satellites to overfly periodically any point on Earth, something that would be most useful to, say, a reconnaissance satellite equipped with high definition cameras.”

“Oh, I see!” Said Burke, understanding at once the strategic interest of such a concept. “Do you have other uses planned for that Western complex?”

“Yes, Admiral, I do. It will also be home to the testing and operational use of our future space plane system. I am in fact placing a lot of hopes on that project. If it turns out to be successful, it will then give us a military system able to deliver in orbit a wide

variety of payloads, both more cheaply and at a faster rate than rocket booster systems could. Such a space plane could also conduct flights from orbit over enemy territory, be it for reconnaissance or strike purpose. In order to be able to quickly develop and test that concept without having to wait for Camp Cook to be rehabilitated and enlarged, I intend to use one or more hangars at nearby Muroc AFB, our Air Force Flight Test Center, which has the added benefit of having the use of the wide landing surface provided by the Muroc dried lake. As well, Camp Cook will house launch silos for our first nuclear-tipped intercontinental missiles, once they are developed and become operational.”

The generals around the table, save for Admiral Radford, looked at Ingrid as if she was crazy when she said the words ‘space plane’. Maxwell Taylor was again the one to give his two bit of criticism.

“A space plane? You have read too much science-fiction novels, General Dows.”

“What I read were files from the future, General Taylor, and they told me that the concept is not only feasible, it is also a highly desirable one. If we stick to the basics and don’t go overboard on the final product, such a space plane could be operational in a matter of a few years at the most. To put some icing on that cake, the heavy plane that will be used as the first stage of the system will also be able to be modified to become a super heavy lift cargo aircraft, something that both our Air Force and Army certainly could use.”

“What kind of lifting capacity are we talking about here?” Asked General Twining, of the Air Force. Ingrid answered him without hesitation.

“Close to 200 tons, General. That transport plane won’t be the fastest of all but it will be optimized in order to fly as high as possible, a critical point for our projected space plane. To finish reviewing the list of bases for the USMSC, secondary test and launch centers will be kept at Wallops Island in Virginia, at the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico and at the Point Mugu Naval Air Facility in California. White Sands will actually become our prime static test site for rocket motors, due to its isolation. As well, part of the resources and personnel of the Army Ballistic Missile Agency at the Redstone Arsenal in Alabama will be used as a rocket research and development branch of the USMSC. Next, here are the achievements expected from the USMSC by the President, along with their stated deadlines.”

The next overhead slide to show on the wall left the generals silent for a long moment as they digested the information. General Twining then gave a questioning look to Ingrid.

“Send a manned spacecraft in orbit by no later than 1960? Isn't that quite optimistic?”

“Not if my space plane project is successful, sir. Along with producing an operational, nuclear-tipped ballistic missile with intercontinental range, that space plane will be my biggest priority.”

“And who will design and produce that space plane?” Asked General Pate, making Ingrid smile with malice.

“I believe that I already have someone in mind about that, sir.”

### **14:07 (Los Angeles Time)**

**Tuesday, August 2, 1955 'C'**

**Lockheed 'Skunk Works' plant**

**Palmdale area, California**

Ingrid, having just shut down the jet engines of her F-83A fighter-bomber, slid open her canopy and waived happily at two men she had just recognized and who were waiting for her on the parking apron. The two men waived back and approached her personal aircraft as Lockheed technicians deployed for Ingrid the integrated ladder of the F-83A. Ingrid took little time to climb down, clutching in one hand a secure briefcase. She then hugged first the older of the two men.

“Kelly, it's a true pleasure to see you again.”

“And it is always a pleasure to see you, Ingrid.” Replied the chief design engineer of the Lockheed Aircraft Corporation. Clarence 'Kelly' Johnson then eyed the three silver stars pinned to the collar of her flight suit.

“A lieutenant general? My god, Ingrid, you are going up at the speed of a rocket.”

“Hey, could you give me a chance to hug that lieutenant general, Kelly?” Interrupted the other man, a tall and jovial-looking one wearing designer sunglasses. Tony LeVier, head test pilot at Lockheed, then warmly hugged Ingrid, who returned the favor before smiling up to him.

“Hello, Tony! How is life treating you and your family?”

“Quite fairly indeed, Ingrid. You also seems to be getting the best out of life, it seems.”

“Bof, I got lucky again.”



“Ingrid,” chided Kelly Johnson, “you don’t rely on luck: you make your own luck. So, what was so important that I had to miss a meeting of the board of directors of Lockheed?”

“The possibility of a juicy, under-the-table government contract for Lockheed and a chance for you to design the most extraordinary plane ever.” Replied a smiling Ingrid while patting her secure briefcase. Kelly’s eyes opened wide at once.

“Fuck the contract! Tell me about the kind of plane you want me to design.”

“A space plane.”

Ingrid giggled at the faces Johnson and LeVier did then.

“No, I’m not joking, Kelly. You are looking at the commander of the new United States Military Space Command and the President has big expectations for me to fill. Since you are the most visionary of our aircraft designers, I came to you to propose something I saw in files about the future.”

“Hell, Ingrid, you just convinced me on the spot. Let’s go to my design office to discuss this in a more discreet setting.”

Leading Ingrid and Tony to his car, Johnson then drove them to an office building that was an annex to what looked like a huge aircraft hangar. Ingrid however knew already that the hangar-like building was in fact an aircraft manufacturing plant kept under strict guard day and night. The ‘Skunk Works’ was where Lockheed conceived and built the classified aircraft projects contracted from the government. The prototypes of her F-83 fighter-bomber had in fact been built here. Ingrid could not think of a better place where her space plane project could be realized. It had all the specialized tooling needed to built the most advanced aircraft possible, had highly talented engineers and, most important for her, worked outside of what was considered normal conventions and ways of doing things.

Once Kelly had locked the door of his office behind Ingrid and Tony, he invited them to sit down on a sofa in one corner of his design office, then sat opposite them, a clipboard holding a paper pad in his hands.

“So, Ingrid, what exactly do you have in mind?”

“A reusable space plane system that could bring to low Earth orbit and launch a variety of satellites or, if need be, retrieve them from orbit for repair or overhaul. When I said low Earth orbit, I meant a steady orbit achieved at a minimum altitude of 150 miles,

with a final velocity of over 4.87 miles per second. Our space plane will have a crew of two and a payload of up to five tons. It should also have a belly compartment for a fixed battery of reconnaissance cameras. Its main roles will be satellite launch and retrieval and strategic reconnaissance.”

Johnson stopped writing notes for a moment and gave a cautious look at Ingrid.

“Those are very exacting requirements, Ingrid. Can you give me any clues on how I could meet them? After all, I know next to nothing about rocket systems.”

Seeing a large drawing pad sitting on an easel in a corner of the office, Ingrid pointed at it.

“May I?”

“Go right ahead!”

Followed by Kelly and Tony, Ingrid went to the easel and, grabbing a large felt marker pen, started drawing a number of simplified sketches.

“One of the reasons why we still have nothing in orbit is because everybody is trying hard with rocket boosters that have insufficient efficiency to put a meaningful payload into orbit. The big problem is that most if not all of the rocket’s power is used to climb above the densest parts of Earth’s atmosphere. Once that is done, the rocket has to tilt to one side to start taking speed relative to the Earth’s surface, with the minimum speed needed to achieve a stable orbit being roughly 4.87 miles per second. Anything less than that and the rocket will fall back to Earth in a ballistic trajectory. Once over that speed, however, the rocket stays in orbit until friction with the very much rarefied air in low orbit slows it down below orbital speed. Then, the rocket falls back to Earth. Tilting the rocket right after takeoff will not help solve that problem, as the drag from the dense air of the lower atmosphere would eat up so much of the thrust from the rocket’s engine that it would run out of fuel before leaving the atmosphere. The only solution when using a classic rocket booster is to have the most efficient design possible and to have enough raw power to carry what will be in essence a proportionally very small payload into orbit. All that costs a lot in terms of fuel, not counting the fact that the whole rocket is basically thrown away at each launch.”

“Sounds like a nearly no-win situation.” Said Tony LeVier, making Ingrid nod her head.

“It is! From what Nancy told me, space exploration in her time was a complicated, risky and extremely expensive proposition. After decades of trying it the hard way, the engineers in Nancy’s time finally were ready to throw the conventional

rules book out and try something different, namely the space plane concept. However, even by 2012, that concept was still only a theory, except for a sub-orbital civilian space plane system that could not stay in orbit. Despite of that, I firmly believe that the concept is sound and feasible. In essence, we need to take the space plane itself aloft under the belly of a heavy aircraft that will then carry it to high altitude and subsonic speed and release it there. The space plane's engines would then be able to work up its speed instead of fighting the atmosphere density. In turn, it would save all the fuel previously used to climb out of the lower atmosphere. If the space plane is also designed to fly to hypersonic speed on air-breathing engines, you further save on the weight of oxidizer fuel you would normally have to carry when using pure rocket engines. You can also more than double the efficiency of your rocket engines within the atmosphere if you place them inside air channeling tubes, in order to use the ram air effect to augment thrust. Add to that the aerodynamic lift provided by the wings and fuselage and you save more fuel while gaining altitude."

"That is indeed a fascinating concept, Ingrid." Said softly Johnson while eyeing the sketches on the pad. "However, getting air-breathing engines that can work up to hypersonic speed would be tricky, unless...of course! Ramjet engines! They are at their best past Mach two and can work well past mach five. Since the space plane is launched at subsonic speed, that eliminates the main shortcoming of ramjets, mainly that they cannot work at zero speed."

"Exactly, Kelly." Said Ingrid, happy to see that Johnson had thought by himself about that without having to be helped. "I actually want to combine both a ramjet and a rocket engine together into an integral package, in order to improve the performances of both engines and use as much as possible the oxygen contained in our atmosphere, thus improving the specific impulse of our engines. Now, that will bring our space plane up to maybe a bit over one mile per second of speed. Once the ramjet part of our integral space engine reaches its limit around an altitude of 100,000 feet and a speed of Mach 5.5, the rocket engine part will then continue alone and push the space plane into orbit...hopefully."

"Do we have yet even one working rocket engine that would be suitable for the job, Ingrid?"

"We do have a couple of options. What I am going to say is classified, so be discreet about it. Our Army Ballistic Missile Agency had a rocket engine developed by Rocketdyne, the S-3, able to produce thrusts of up to 150,000 pounds. It uses liquid

oxygen and kerosene as bipropellants. The Marquardt company, which specializes in ramjet engines, is going to pair up with Rocketdyne on a contract I will provide them to design and develop our main integral ramjet/rocket engines. This is however only the first of a series of technological challenges we have to face. I have to get designed the most efficient first stage heavy transporter I can, so that our space plane has the best chance possible to attain orbit. Then, we have to deal with the intense heat of the reentry into the atmosphere, find a way to be able to pilot our space plane in the vacuum of space and add systems that would be essential to operate the space plane without making it too heavy. Thankfully, I have a few possible solutions from the future that I can tell you about. I brought with me copies of documents selected from our ATHENA files, which describe a number of space systems from Nancy's time, so you can start thinking about the design of our space plane. So, you think that Lockheed will be up to this job, Kelly?"

Johnson smiled to Ingrid, his eyes sparkling.

"Are you kidding, Ingrid? Where is that contract of yours?"

**14:27 (Florida Time)**

**Monday, August 8, 1955 'C'**

**Military aircraft hangar lines**

**Patrick Air Force Base**

"There she comes, sir!"

Major General David Aldridge, commander of the newly renamed Eastern Test Range Complex, previously known as the Air Force Missile Test Center, and of Patrick Air Force Base, squinted his eyes to see in the direction pointed at by his aide. Standing along the northern edge of the main military tarmac with the other senior officers waiting for the arrival of their new commander, Aldridge saw through his glasses a tiny dot in the sky that was approaching the far end of the base's main runway. Watched by the group of seven senior officers and one civilian scientist, a F-83A fighter-bomber soon touched down smoothly and rolled down the runway, turning on a taxiway leading to the main military tarmac after a minute or so. By now, all could distinctly see the paint scheme of the combat aircraft, including the name painted in black and pink on its nose section. The civilian scientist made a face when he read that name.

"Lady Hawk? A strange name for a military aircraft."

Aldridge smiled and threw an amused look at the civilian, a man in his mid-forties dressed in a tired suit.

“I have seen much stranger names given to military aircraft during my career in the Air Force, Doctor Von Braun. In the case of Lieutenant General Dows, her combat record in the air amply justified her nickname. She is said to have the most acute vision ever seen in a pilot, apart from having by far the highest number of air combat victories by any American fighter pilot in history. In fact, I understand that, when still a teenage auxiliary in the Luftwaffe in France in 1940, she learned much about air tactics while dating such top Luftwaffe air aces as Adolph Galland and Werner Moelders.”

While the rocket scientist raised an eyebrow at that, Brigadier General John Medaris, commander of the Army Ballistic Missile Agency in Huntsville, Alabama, hid his face in his hands for a moment, speaking in a disgruntled voice.

“She learned her trade in bed? God help us all!”

Major General Bernard Schriever, commander of the future Western Test Range Complex of the new Military Space Command, gave Medaris a warning look.

“Don’t misjudge her because of that, John. She learned her trade in the air, in combat and during five wars. Don’t forget also that she humbled in succession the Soviets, the Communist Chinese and the British.”

“Don’t worry, Bernie, I was just joking.” Replied Medaris, becoming serious again. His eyes then caught a marking painted in black on the fuselage of the approaching F-83A. “United States Military Space Command. I have to say that it sounds quite nice.”

“It sure does.” Said Aldridge. “I just hope that this is the last time that this place changes names. If it continues like this, I will put up a revolving sign at the base main gate.”

Colonel John Merrick, commander of the 6550<sup>th</sup> Air Base Group, rolled his eyes then.

“Amen to that!”

Werner Von Braun looked around him and, seeing only the small convoy of staff cars that had brought the group to the tarmac, touched Aldridge’s left arm.

“General, how come that there is no guard of honor or even a military band present to greet Lieutenant General Dows?”

“That was on General Dows’ own request, Doctor. I understand that she tends to be quite modest as a person, even after all her military successes. Quite refreshing when coming from a fighter pilot.”

That last remark made Navy Commander Steven Ross, commander of the Naval Ordnance Test Unit, based at Port Canaveral, strangle a laugh.

“Sorry about that, sir. I have to say that Navy fighter pilots are quite insufferable too.”

The group of waiting dignitaries kept watching mostly in silence as the F-83A, its canopy slid open, rolled to a gentle stop a mere thirty meters in front of them. They could now see clearly the pilot, its colorful flying helmet painted the colors of the American flag and sporting a gold-plated visor. As soon as the two turbofan engines of the fighter-bomber had stopped, four Air Force ground technicians rushed to the plane in an aircraft tractor. They took only seconds to attach the front wheel of the plane to the tractor’s towing bar and to put up an access ladder on one side of the cockpit to let the pilot climb down. Von Braun and the senior officers then watched with interest a young woman climb down after replacing her helmet with an Air force blue beret and removing her flying gear. Major General Aldridge called the group to attention as the pilot walked towards them at a calm pace, dressed in a standard flight suit and carrying a secure briefcase. He then saluted the young woman when she stopped at attention in front of him.

“Major General David Aldridge, Commander of the Eastern Test Range Complex and of Patrick Air Force Base. Welcome to Florida, General Dows.”

“Thank you, General Aldridge.” Replied Ingrid while returning the salute. She then shook hands with Aldridge and the rest of the group, speaking in German when Von Braun’s turn came up.

“Nice to see you as part of this team, Doctor Von Braun. Be assured that I have big things lined up for you and your scientists and engineers.”

“Thank you, General.” Replied with difficulty Von Braun, mesmerized by her youthful beauty. With her soft features, sexy lips and big blue eyes, Von Braun would give Ingrid only eighteen years of age in appearance, yet he knew that she was quite older than that, something that was to be put on a much celebrated miracle of rejuvenation in Israel over two years ago. Ingrid smiled slightly then before turning towards General Aldridge.

“I suppose that you must all be impatient to hear what I came to tell you, General.”

“Indeed! We will go to the base headquarters right away.”

Aldridge then had his aide make the four waiting staff cars approach them while ground technicians brought three pieces of luggage taken from the storage compartment of the F-83A. They soon piled up in the cars, which then drove away towards the headquarters building, situated 800 meters to the north of the hangar lines.

Aldridge couldn't help discreetly admire Ingrid's profile as their car drove past a series of hangars and buildings. She was actually even more beautiful than her reputation said but was also impossibly young in appearance for her rank. Aldridge, along with most of the senior officers following in the other cars, could easily have been her father. No one could however deny her genius at joint tactics and her qualities as a combat pilot and as a military leader. Aldridge just hoped that her new powers and rank would not go to her young head. He was honest enough with himself to acknowledge the fact that many male generals he knew were of questionable competence when compared to Dows or had a rather lackluster combat record, with some generals at the Pentagon and elsewhere having in fact never been themselves in combat. On her part, Ingrid didn't say much during the car trip, busy eyeing with interest the base she was eventually going to work and live in. It was obvious from the numerous construction sites visible to her and from the still rather sparse facilities of the base that Patrick AFB was still growing in leaps and bounds, along with the other military and space-related installations around Cape Canaveral. That state of affairs was probably going to continue for quite a few more years still.

The staff car eventually slowed down and stopped in front of a three-story concrete building, letting Ingrid and Aldridge get out. They were soon joined by the others and by an airman carrying Ingrid's luggage. The group then entered the building, saluted by the two military policemen guarding the entrance, and proceeded to a medium-size conference room. While the officers sat around the table, Aldridge had the airman drop Ingrid's luggage in one corner of the room, then closed the door behind him and went to take a seat facing Ingrid. Ingrid was already taking out a number of files and papers from her secure briefcase, putting them in front of her on the table. All the men around the table were listening intently when she finally spoke in her clear, agreeable voice.

"Thanks you all for being here on such short notice, gentlemen. Things have however been moving fast since the President decided to create this new command.

They may in fact be moving even faster in the next few weeks and months. I will start by distributing around copies of the command's organizational diagram and of the list of required achievements and deadlines given to me by the President two weeks ago."

While the men around the table read the documents she passed around, she used the opportunity to study the reactions of her new subordinates to the list and diagram. As she had expected, the list of desired achievements drew the most reactions, with Von Braun showing clearly discomfort with it. Ingrid was not surprised by that, as the German rocket scientist was the one in the group most likely to fully realize the extent of the technological breakthroughs needed to satisfy the list of desired achievements. Once most of the men had looked up from their copies, Ingrid passed copies of yet another document around.

"The copies I am now giving you are classified 'TOP SECRET'. Please treat them as such. This is my list of preliminary directives and actions already taken during the last two weeks, all vouched by Admiral Radford. It will give you a good idea of where we are heading from here. You will see that one of my first decisions taken was the cancellation of the Navy's Project VANGUARD. Its projected payload was simply too small to be worth the money and effort expended on it."

Von Braun made a tentative smile at those words, obviously hoping for something.

"Does that mean that our own satellite launch project at ABMA will take over from Project VANGUARD, General Dows?"

The incisive look he got from Ingrid cooled somewhat his hopes then.

"Doctor Von Braun, what is the projected weight of your Project ORBITER's payload?"

"Uh, our instrument payload will be about ten pounds but, with the final rocket stage attached to it, the weight in orbit will be about thirty pounds."

"Thirty pounds..." Said Ingrid, apparently not impressed. Her tone of voice made Von Braun and Brigadier General Medaris suddenly sweat. Their hopes then went back up when she nodded her head once.

"Thirty pounds isn't enough for me to qualify as a useful military orbital payload but there are political considerations at play here on top of military ones. The President wants us to be the first nation to launch a satellite into orbit, ideally no later than 1957, a requirement that is on the list I got from him. How long before you think that you could successfully launch ORBITER 1 into orbit?"

Brigadier General Medaris took on him to answer Ingrid, sounding quite sure of himself.



“If given priority, ABMA can effect a test launch of our JUNO rocket from Cape Canaveral in about a year, General. If all goes well then, we would proceed with the launch of ORBITER 1 six months later.”

“Then you have my go ahead, General Medaris. Send me your list of needs as soon as you can. Keep in mind though that your ORBITER project is just a stopgap measure until better, more performant systems can be developed.”

While Medaris and Von Braun beamed at once with satisfaction, Commander Ross, of the Naval Ordnance Test Unit, looked with bewilderment at Ingrid.

“But, General Dows, you just said that you killed Project VANGUARD because its payload was too small. Yet, Project ORBITER’s payload isn’t much larger.”

Ingrid gave Ross a no-nonsense look.

“True, but history said that ORBITER will be successful. VANGUARD will not. This by the way is classified TOP SECRET ATHENA information. Now, if you may all go back to my list of directives and actions, you will see that I handed black contracts to both Lockheed and Douglas for the design and production on a most urgent basis of a two-stage reusable space plane system, in cooperation with the Rocketdyne, Marquardt and Aerojet companies. That spaceplane is to become our main space launch system in the near to medium future. The contract requirements are listed as well.”

“TWO CREWMEN AND UP TO FIVE TONS IN LOW ORBIT?” Exclaimed nearly at once Von Braun as he read the list. Ingrid corrected him gently.

“Two persons, Doctor, not necessarily two men.”

That got her funny looks from the men around the table. Colonel Ralston was the one to speak his mind on that.

“You are not seriously considering sending women in space, General? The environment in space is way too harsh to expose a woman to it.”

“And you will tell me that a man’s blood will not boil as fast as that of a woman in vacuum, Colonel?” Replied Ingrid in a sarcastic tone before becoming dead serious. “Gentlemen, according to ATHENA information, dozens of women flew in space in the world known to my late adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante. She told me many times about them and the other brave astronauts who went into space. There is basically no other reason but male chauvinism that precludes women from flying in space. For one thing, women generally weigh much less than men and can also resist quite well centrifugal forces. If you don’t believe that last point, ask one of the enemy pilots who

got shot down while trying to outturn me in a dogfight. I will personally select the crewmembers for our future space plane, gentlemen.”

“Uh, about that space plane, General Dows.” Said Major General Schriever, trying to steer away from the last, contentious point. “What can you tell us about that project?”

Ingrid answered by passing him two thin files.

“These are the preliminary estimates and sketches made by Lockheed for the space plane and by Douglas for the heavy lift transporter. Bear in mind that these sketches are still very tentative and may change quite a lot in the months to come.”

With the nearest officers bending sideways to look at the files, Schriever examined quickly the two files, then passed them to Major General Aldridge for him to look at.

“That is quite a revolutionary concept, General Dows. Is it from the future?”

“The basic concept is. However, I told the companies involved to use as much as possible existing parts and materials. Rocketdyne S-3 liquid bipropellant rocket engines will be used, combined with a Marquardt ramjet design, to form an integrated rocket/ramjet engine. The space plane will be made mostly of titanium alloy panels and frames, with the parts most exposed to reentry heat covered with ablative materials. As for the heavy lift transporter, it will use the wings and engines from the Douglas C-152 and will be built of standard aluminum alloys. The space plane project will have top spot in the priority list of the Military Space Command, along with Project ORBITER and with the design and production of a nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missile. Major General Schriever, you will be in charge of that last project at the Western Test Range Complex. Use the facilities at White Sands to test your rocket engines. As soon as Project ORBITER is successful, I want Doctor Von Braun and his design team to transfer to your division and help you design our future ICBM. I want solid propellant rocket motors to be used, so that our future ICBMs could stay on launch alert indefinitely without the need to be fuelled up just before launch.”

“Point noted!” Said Schriever, taking notes down. Ingrid then went on for a good hour, describing what she wanted done and by whom, distributing as well copies of technical documents pertaining to space systems, extracted from the ATHENA files in Washington. When the group broke up, Werner Von Braun and Brigadier General Medaris made their way to the main entrance to get to their staff car, feeling quite good about the way things had gone inside. Medaris in particular looked pleased and flashed a smile to Von Braun.

“Things went quite better than I expected, I have to say. That young Dows was quite reasonable, apart from being a true visionary.”

“A visionary she certainly is, General. When I think that she started up as a simple Luftwaffe auxiliary.”

**07:15 (Washington Time)**

**Tuesday, September 6, 1955 ‘C’**

**Corner of South Grove Street and Fort Scott Drive**

**Aurora Hills, Arlington County, Virginia**

Hien was nearly jumping up and down with excitement and anticipation as she got to the school bus stop with Ingrid, Sarah and Miniflick. Jimmy and Annie Loomis were already at the bus stop, along with their mother and with four other children and one more mother. Annie’s eyes popped wide open with envy and she sucked air in when she saw Hien’s school bag: it had the appearance of a large stuffed teddy bear and was worn like a backpack.

“Mommy, I want a bag like Hien’s bag!”

Carolyn Loomis, who was actually admiring Hien’s beautifully embroidered red Chinese silk dress, which went down to her knees and had slits on both sides, chided her daughter at once.

“Annie, it is not polite to ask things like this.”

“But her bag is so groovy!”

“I tell you what, Carolyn.” Intervened Ingrid, smiling with amusement. “When I will have a chance I will try to find another bag like this one. They come in either beige, dark brown or black and white.”

“Gee, Ingrid, I really don’t want to cause you an inconvenience because of a simple whim.”

“That’s nothing, Carolyn.” Replied Ingrid before looking down at Annie, who was now six years old. “Those bags also come as stuffed tigers or as lions, you know.”

“A TIGER! I WANT A TIGER!” Shouted Annie, overjoyed.

“Then I will do my best to find a tiger backpack, Annie, but you will have to be patient.”

“I will, Misses Dows.” Replied Annie in her small voice, making Ingrid smile warmly: she liked that little girl, who had quickly turned into Hien’s best friend, with her older brother Jimmy being a close second.

The bus for Oakridge Elementary School showed up twelve minutes later, already half full of excited children. Ingrid’s summer Air Force uniform, with its numerous rows of medal ribbons and the three stars insignias of a lieutenant general, made most of the children stare at her with curiosity as she helped Hien climb aboard the bus. Ingrid and Sarah waved a last goodbye at Hien as the bus drove away, then walked back to their house with Carolyn Loomis, with Sarah holding Miniflick’s leash.

“Hien was so happy to go to school and meet other children.” Said Ingrid thoughtfully. “She missed the atmosphere of her old orphanage in Da Nang, where there were dozens of kids. The French nuns that ran the orphanage were also sweet to her.”

“But she does look very happy with you.” Volunteered Carolyn, making Ingrid nod once.

“She is, and I love her very much. She is like a small angel to me. With her and flying, I have everything I wanted of life.”

Carolyn, being now at her house, then split from them with a goodbye. Ingrid walked in turn to her Porsche 550, parked in the driveway of her house, and got in it. Sarah watched her drive off to work at the Pentagon, then entered the house and locked the door behind her. Memorizing the exact time and location she was in, the angel concentrated and jumped spacetime: she had other children to take care of in Jerusalem ‘B’, the children of Nancy Laplante ‘A’, plus a country to rule in the name of The One. After spending six months there, she would return here to the same location, five minutes after her departure, to spend another six months in this timeline.

**09:30 (Florida Time)**

**Tuesday, October 30, 1956 ‘C’**

**Launch Control Center, Eastern Test Range Complex**

**Cape Canaveral, Florida**

**United States**

“THREE, TWO, ONE, IGNITION!”

The voice of the engineer speaking from the concrete blockhouse of Launch Complex 26, where a JUPITER-D rocket stood on Pad A, resonated from the loudspeakers of the main launch control center. Ingrid, listening anxiously to it along with dozens of officers and technicians, stared through the thick armored glass window of the big bunker at the lone rocket as its liquid fuel engine erupted. The 21.5 meter-high rocket then started rising from its pad with a roaring thunder, taking speed gradually as Ingrid and the others encouraged it on. It soon rose too high to be followed visually from the armored window, prompting Ingrid in leaving the observation gallery and entering the launch control room proper. There, she found Doctor Werner Von Braun watching intently over the shoulder of another German scientist manning a control station. Leaving him alone for the moment, as she knew that he had tons of things to check, Ingrid went instead to Brigadier General Medaris and Major General Aldridge, who were standing in one corner of the big room and watching the large television screen that showed the picture of the rocket taken from a ground pursuit camera. Medaris gave her a cautious smile.

“So far so good, General Dows. Let’s hope that it keeps going on like this.”

“Yes! My late adoptive mother told me often that this business of counting down the last minutes and seconds was nerve-wracking on everyone. Now I can see that she was right. Do we really have to count down loudly all those minutes or is it all just for show?”

“Uh, I frankly don’t know why they count out loud for so long, maam. It does tighten you up, though.”

“Then I will make the following an official launch policy: after the last ten minutes are counted on the beat, only the ten last seconds will be counted down out loud. If someone is caught by surprise because he or she is asleep at the switch, then too bad.”

“I will formalize that with Colonel Ralston as soon as this satellite is in orbit.” Replied Aldridge while still watching the television screen. The three of them then watched on in tense silence as the first stage of the rocket burned out and separated, with the second stage rocket engine taking over without apparent incident. That second stage engine was actually different from the one known in Nancy’s history, being liquid-fuelled rather than solid-fuelled. That made it more efficient and had allowed a marked increase in the final mass of the payload carried by the rocket. The latter was soon too high to follow even by the ground pursuit cameras and they had to switch their attention

to the radar monitors. Ingrid instinctively tensed up further when the third stage ignited at an altitude of over 160 kilometers.

“Come on! Come on! You can do it!”

The fourth and final stage soon ignited properly as its small payload was already past the limits of Earth’s stratosphere. The laconic voice of a technician announcing each step of the mission with impossible calm pushed Ingrid into whispering to Aldridge.

“Gee, I hope that this guy doesn’t speak to his wife in this tone while they make love. I would divorce him on the spot if I was her.”

Aldridge choked at once with contained laughter and took a few seconds before he could answer her.

“Maybe we should put a woman as announcer.”

“Naah! I met quite a few steel virgins that are as cold as this guy.”

“Maybe a sports announcer then? We could watch launches while munching on popcorn and hot dogs.”

“An interesting idea. I will have to think about it.”

The calm voice of the flight controller then returned them to the situation at hand.

“Fourth stage engine burnout! EXPLORER 1 is now in a stable orbit.”

Those words made the personnel in the launch control center erupt in wild cheers, with Ingrid not being the quietest in the lot. A round of handshakes and back-patting then followed. Waiting a few more minutes in order to let the technicians confirm that the satellite was indeed in a safe orbit, Ingrid then grabbed the telephone reserved for her use and called the White House. After a minute spent waiting for her call to be connected to the Oval Office, she heard the voice of President Dewey on the line.

“This is the President speaking.”

“Mister President, this is Lieutenant General Dows, calling from the launch control center at Cape Canaveral. The JUPITER-D rocket carrying EXPLORER 1 left its launch pad at precisely 09:30, local hour. Our satellite subsequently achieved a stable orbit at 09:41, Florida time. It is now performing its first elliptical orbit around Earth with a perigee of 224 miles and a projected apogee of 1,550 miles.”

The President’s first answer was a loud cheer that forced Ingrid to pull away the receiver from her ear for a second. He then went on in a more controlled voice, joy still evident in it, though.

“General Dows, you made me feel like a kid again for a few seconds. You and your crew down at Cape Canaveral performed admirably.”

“Then, may I let you speak with the ones who truly made this launch possible, Mister President? I have here near me Brigadier General Medaris and Doctor Von Braun, from the Army Ballistic Missile Agency that developed the JUPITER-D rocket.”

“By all means, General Dows.”

Ingrid then hurriedly signaled Medaris and Von Braun to approach while covering the mouthpiece of the telephone.

“General Medaris, Doctor Von Braun, the President wants to speak with you.”

Medaris was the first to take the telephone, smiling with gratitude at Ingrid before speaking in it and announcing himself. While Medaris and Von Braun spoke in turn with the President, Ingrid went to Major General Aldridge, feeling quite satisfied with herself.

“Well, this is certainly a nice first step in space for us, Dave.”

“It certainly is! What next now?”

“Next, we go to bigger things.” Replied firmly Ingrid. “Much bigger things.”

### **19:43 (Washington Time)**

**Wednesday, October 31, 1956 ‘C’**

**326 South Grove Street, Aurora Hills**

**Arlington, Virginia**

Hien, now nine years old, was growing more impatient by the second as she waited for Sarah just inside the entrance door, disguised like a witch and ready to go pass the Halloween with her friends. Ingrid, wearing a suit of medieval armor and ready to give out candies to passing children, smiled at seeing her daughter’s eagerness.

“Be patient, Hien: Sarah will be ready any time now to escort you around.”

“I’m here!” Said the voice of Sarah a mere second later, making both Hien and Ingrid twist their heads to look towards the private study, where Sarah had gone to supposedly change into a costume. By now, Hien had been told by Ingrid about her secrets, being a Chosen of The One and a member of the Time Patrol with the ability to travel through time, along with the true nature of Sarah. Hien still sucked air in in delighted shock on seeing the transformed Sarah, who had shapeshifted into a plump pink dragon with yellow spots and big luminous eyes. The dragon then walked to her in a jumpy gait, a pair of small wings visible on its back.

“Sarah, this is fantastic! All the other kids will be jealous.”

"Isn't that one of the goals of disguising yourself for Halloween, Hien?" Said Sarah/the dragon before handing to the little girl the end of a plastic chain attached to her neck. "Here is my chain, mistress. You need to keep your dragon in leash while walking around outside."

Hien happily grabbed the chain and kissed Ingrid before going out with Sarah, an empty plastic pumpkin-shaped container held in one hand. Ingrid, who was staying home with Miniflick, waved her hand at them as they were walking away.

"HAVE FUN, HIEN! AND DON'T BREATHE FIRE DOWN ON OTHER KIDS, SARAH."

In response, the dragon opened its mouth upwards and let out a short tongue of fire, making Hien clap with excitement.

**16:08 (London Time)**

**Thursday, January 17, 1957 'C'**

**10 Downing Street, London**

**England**

Prime Minister Rab Butler, standing in the middle of his office and waiting for his Defense Minister and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, didn't like the look on their faces when they were introduced in by his principal secretary.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen. Please, have a seat and tell me what is preoccupying you."

The Minister of Defense, Anthony Henry Head, spoke up as soon as he was sitting, not even letting time to Field Marshall Sir Arthur Meecham to take place in the sofa offered by Butler.

"Mister Prime Minister, a few hours ago a ballistic missile was fired from Camp Cook Army Base in California and covered approximately 7,200 miles before splashing in the Pacific Ocean near the Philippines. From very preliminary studies of the trajectory done by our specialists, that missile could have flown even further if wanted to by the Americans. With such a range, that missile can reach all the way to Australia from the Western Coast of the United States. The Americans are thus now in possession of a ballistic missile with true intercontinental range, something we don't have ourselves."

Butler, who was himself in the process of sitting down, hesitated before looking at Sir Arthur Meecham.



“Do we know what kind of payload that missile could carry, Field Marshall? Can it cover such a distance with a nuclear warhead?”

“We don’t know that yet, Mister Prime Minister.” Replied the graying officer, who looked the archetype of the distinguished British officer. “I have ordered our Military Intelligence to work on that as a priority. It would however be prudent to assume that this American missile is a fully operational one, especially in view of the one who headed that project.”

“Uh, could you elaborate on that, Sir Meecham?” Said Butler, confused by his last words.

“Certainly, Mister Prime Minister. From sources we have inside the Pentagon we know that the commander of the American Military Space Command, Lieutenant General Dows, had fixed herself three firm objectives when she took her post at the head of the Space Command. Those were in order of priority to launch a satellite in a stable orbit, to put in service a nuclear-tipped ballistic missile with intercontinental range and, finally, to put a piloted spacecraft in orbit by no later than 1960. Dows’ first objective was successfully fulfilled on October 30<sup>th</sup> of last year, when the satellite EXPLORER 1 was orbited using a modified medium range ballistic missile. Now, it seems that her second objective has just been attained. Dows would not be content with a half success and more than probably had that missile fired with a full-weight inert payload. By the way, that success paves the way for the third objective she had: sending a piloted spacecraft into orbit. The initial calculations of our scientists show that this same missile could send a payload of close to a ton into orbit, enough for a small, one-man capsule.”

“Bloody hell! That woman is working at an incredible speed. How could she accomplish all this so fast? She is no rocket scientist.”

“No, she is not, Mister Prime Minister. However, our sources in Washington all agree that she was able to reorganize and coordinate in a masterful way the efforts of the American missile program, which was prior to her taking command parceled out all over the place and was plagued with inter-service rivalry. She is also said to have proposed a number of technological innovations, most of which we still can only guess about. In this I would have to agree with M.I.6 about her still having access to fresh knowledge from the future. Our own ATHENA files don’t show all the technical knowledge needed to accomplish all that she did.”

Butler then gave a cold look at Sir Meecham.

“If you came here to propose again that we have her assassinated, my answer is still no. Spying on the American program is fair game but I draw the line at that.” Anthony Head then cut in, saving Meecham from potential embarrassment.

“Mister Prime Minister, we didn’t come here with some sinister plot to sabotage the American space program. Rather, we came here to inform you of this development and to propose a counter to it.”

“Go on, Anthony.” Said cautiously Butler, not sure that he could trust Head much more than Meecham where the Americans were concerned.

“Basically, this underlines yet further a major deficiency of our own nuclear forces: basically, the lack of an intercontinental range missile in our inventory. I realize that the funding for such a project was cut years ago, when the overseas basing scheme for our medium range missiles and our submarine-launched missile system were deemed as effective while much less costly. We are however still left today with serious gaps in our worldwide missile coverage, gaps either the Americans or the Soviets could exploit. My recommendation is thus to restart that long range missile program and give it top priority.”

“Do you know the projected costs of such a program?” Said sharply Butler, a man very much concerned with the British economy and one considered left-leaning by the standards of the Conservative Party when it came to social spending. “We had to sink hundreds of millions of pounds into the development of a successor to our disappointing LIGHTNING jet fighter, after it was shown to be outclassed by the American F-83, and now you want me to spend even more on defense? Do I need to remind you that we also spent a fortune subsidizing our airlines and our aircraft industries, which were on the verge of bankruptcy because the new American jet airliners were so superior to anything we produced?”

“Sir, it is the prudent thing to do, unless we want to end up at the mercy of the Americans and, soon, of the Soviets as well.”

“The Soviets have an ICBM too?” Asked Butler, surprised and shocked. Head shook his head once.

“Not yet, Mister Prime Minister, but our intelligence tells us that they are less than a year away from that capability. If we don’t do something very quickly, the Empire will soon find itself both outranged and outgunned, sir.”

Butler lowered his head then, feeling bitter about all this. He had personally no wish to continue this silly rivalry with the Americans and was honest enough to accept the fact

that the British Empire, for all its expanse and flashy titles, was no match for the United States in terms of sheer industrial might. The Prime Minister finally slapped down a hand on top of his desk in frustration.

“Dammit! Can’t we put an end to this stupid rivalry? We started it ourselves by attacking the Americans anonymously in Israel, using SAS commandos.”

“Sir,” started to protest at once Sir Meecham, “Our oil supplies were at play then and we had to support our Arab allies.”

That only made Butler explode.

“AND IT MAKES THE FACT THAT WE WERE HELPING THE ARABS TO SHOOT DOWN AMERICAN AIRCRAFT WITHOUT A PRIOR DECLARATION OF WAR MORE ACCEPTABLE IN YOUR EYES, FIELD MARSHALL? THE PREVIOUS GOVERNMENT SENT A WHOLE SQUADRON OF S.A.S. TROOPS ON A COVERT MISSION IN ISRAEL TO ATTACK AN AMERICAN AIRBASE AND TO GO ASSASSINATE AN AMERICAN GENERAL. I AM NOT GOING TO WASTE MORE MONEY JUST TO TRY TO KEEP UP WITH THE UNITED STATES. THIS MESS WAS OF OUR OWN MAKING, WHETHER WE LIKE IT OR NOT.”

Butler then covered his face with his hands and took a deep breath, trying to regain his cool while Head and Meecham stared at him with stupor. He was however still mad when he looked back at the two men.

“As Prime Minister, my primary responsibility is to the general welfare of the British public, not to the grandiose ideas some may have about Britain becoming again the master of the World. We have already over 260 nuclear-tipped missiles within range of American soil at any given time, and this doesn’t count the weapons carried by our bombers. That is in my mind more than sufficient as a deterrent to any possible American nuclear attack. Your request for an ICBM program is denied, gentlemen.”

“But, Mister Prime Minister, the Americans...” Started to say Sir Meecham in protest. Butler was instantly on him, jabbing his index in Meecham’s chest.

“The Americans warned us clearly about not touching Israel, then reacted in open sight when we ignored that warning, displaying their colors for all to see while we played in the shadows like cowards. That woman you once wanted to have assassinated displayed more true honor than we did then. It is high time that we reconcile our differences with the Americans, instead of pouring oil on the fire. Goodbye, gentlemen!”

The minister and the field marshal then walked out stiffly, startled by the fury of the Prime Minister's reaction. Butler blew air out once the door of his office closed, then went to his telephone, picking it up and forming the number of his Foreign Secretary. Selwyn Lloyd answered after three rings.

"Lloyd speaking!"

"Selwyn, this is Rab. I need you here to discuss a question of foreign policy. I would also need you to bring along your best experts on American affairs."

**09:51 (Washington Time)**

**Tuesday, January 22, 1957 'C'**

**Office of the Commander, Military Space Command**

**The Pentagon, Washington, D.C.**

**United States**

Ingrid sighed with impatience as the document she had just typed on her IBM 388 desktop computer saved itself slowly, taking long seconds to do so. Having seen and used a number of times the incredibly advanced computers used by the Time Patrol, the American computer technology of 1957 'C' felt downright like stone age stuff to her. It was however as good as anything produced at this time despite all its limitations and slow processing speed. Her WORDSCRIPT program finally finished saving her text, allowing her to initiate a print of it on the thermal printer connected to her computer. At least that technology was allowing her and other Americans to do away with the painfully slow process of passing handwritten papers to a pool of typists, who would then have to do manual corrections as needed on carbon copy forms. Still, Ingrid couldn't wait to see better computer hardware and software be eventually introduced into service. One of her staff clerks then knocked on her door and, entering with her permission, dropped a few files in her 'IN' basket.

"The daily intelligence summary file is on top of the pile, ma'am."

"Thank you, Sergeant Brubacker."

Taking the time first to check quickly the printout of her text and signing it, then going briefly out of her office to pass it to a clerk for reproduction and dissemination, Ingrid sat back behind her desk and grabbed the daily intelligence summary file and started reading it. The second item in the summary made her jerk in her chair and tense up: it concerned the recent forced resignation of British Prime Minister Richard Butler following

an internal revolt of his cabinet. The analysis stated that Butler's demise was probably caused by his refusal to invest further in Britain's nuclear missile force. As an immediate consequence of that resignation, Harold Macmillan had temporarily stepped in as caretaker Prime Minister but was far from assured of keeping that position, as many in his Conservative Party considered him too soft on the United States. Ingrid, who had always followed carefully European politics, partly because of her German birth and education, sneered in disdain at that. Harold Macmillan was the type of politician she despised to the core, someone ready to lie, cheat and deceive in order to gain and keep power. That same Macmillan had, as then minister of housing, denied and played down the responsibility of the British energy industry, which produced heat and electricity mostly from highly polluting coal-burning plants, in the deadly London smog crisis of 1952. That thick, asphyxiating smog had caused over 12,000 deaths within a week inside the Greater London area. Macmillan had however gone to great lengths to deny the problem, refusing to take any measures to alleviate a pollution problem that was visible for all to see. He even had official death statistics reduced by arbitrarily decreeing an end date to the smog crisis, blaming all further deaths afterwards on a nonexistent flue epidemic. Somehow, Macmillan had then managed to wiggle himself out of that scandal without significant political damage. That same Macmillan had then been one of the ministers that had pushed Prime Minister Churchill into the failed policy of covert confrontation with Israel. Ingrid shook her head in disgust at the thought that Great Britain could be led by such an irresponsible opportunist.

The ringing of her secure telephone then took her off her reading. Answering the call, she recognized at once the voice of the Chairman of the Chiefs of the Joint Staff.

"Ingrid, this is Admiral Radford. We need to go secure on this."

"Going secure now, sir." Replied Ingrid before pushing a red button on her telephone set. A green light lit up within seconds on the set, following which she spoke in the receiver.

"Can you hear me, sir?"

"I can hear you well, Ingrid." Replied Radford, his voice now slightly distorted. "First, I wanted to tell you that you and your team are doing a great job. That successful ICBM test last week did a lot to placate those in the Congress who were whining about the expenditures of our space program."

"Thank you, sir. I will pass your compliment around."

"I know you will, Ingrid: you always took care of your subordinates. About our space program, how is your space plane project going right now?"

Suddenly suspecting that she would be asked to accelerate further that project, Ingrid quickly grabbed the pertinent file on her desk and opened it before answering.

"Well, sir, the XC-200 LEVIATHAN heavy lift transporter prototype was designed and built in record time, as you know already. It was after all quite simple to produce, being little more than a giant pair of diamond wings. The systematic use of existing parts also helped save a lot of time there. The XC-200 prototype has now been at Muroc AFB for close to four weeks, being flight tested there. Up to now no significant design flaw has shown up and it is fulfilling all the requirements, including taking off with an inert underbelly mass of 210 tons without problem and lifting it to an altitude of 60,000 feet."

"Two hundred and ten tons to 60,000 feet?" Nearly shouted Radford, clearly impressed. "That is fantastic!"

"It probably could have gone higher then, sir, if we had used the two booster rocket engines of the XC-200. That phase of testing is next, with a flight scheduled for this Friday."

"And the space plane itself?"

Ingrid took more time to answer that, choosing her words carefully.

"Sir, that part of the project is the real challenge in view of the severe requirements asked of it. Lockheed has up to now concentrated its efforts on static testing of components and on the SPS-10A prototype. The SPS-10A has now flown four times, all on its own power, taking off from the Lockheed plant and from Muroc AFB with the help of its integrated turbofan engines. Those flights were however done without any rocket fuel in its tanks and only demonstrated the basic airworthiness of the prototype. As for the bigger SPS-10B, I don't expect it to be ready to fly for at least another year. The two types of rocket engines to be used by our space plane are also still being tested for reliability and multiple restart capability. The Lockheed team is going truly full tilt on this project but we are still talking about cutting edge technology and mostly unknown parameters, sir."

"That prototype, is it capable of flying into space?" Asked Radford after a short silence. Ingrid braced herself then.

“Yes sir! It was designed to bring a crew of two and a payload of about five tons up to low Earth orbit. However, our first satellite intended to be launched by our space plane is still not ready.”

“And when could you have it attempt to attain orbit, ideally with an actual payload, at the earliest?”

“Sir, that will depend on the degree of risk you want us to assume. What’s up, sir?”

“What’s up is that we just learned that the Soviets, who were quite miffed by our recent successes, have started what appears to be an astronauts training program. One of our high-altitude reconnaissance planes was also able to take pictures of a giant rocket booster sitting on a launch pad at the Soviet complex in Tyuratam, east of the Aral Sea. Since, up to now, we have been able to only orbit two small satellites, the President is worried that the Soviets may be ready to try soon to send a man in space in order to gain international prestige. Many in the Congress and Senate also want more substantial achievements in order to justify our space program expenditures. So, when could you proceed with a launch, at the earliest?”

It was Ingrid’s turn to be silent for a moment, as she reviewed mentally the steps still to be done. She finally spoke, caution in her voice.

“Normally, I would not proceed with a manned space launch for at least another four to five months, at best. If you however judge that the risk is justified, I can attempt to make a demonstration launch within two months. I would however then give that trial a fifty-fifty chance of success, sir.”

“And, if that attempt is a failure...”

“Then, the pilot will die, sir.” Said bluntly Ingrid. That seemed to shake Radford seriously, making him pause for long seconds.

“Ingrid, the national prestige of the United States may be at play here. Do your best.”

“I will, sir. Anything else, sir?”

“No, not for the moment. Keep me posted on this.”

“Yes sir! Have a good day, sir.”

Ingrid then put down the receiver and lost herself in thoughts for a minute before picking up the telephone again and making two calls, one to the Lockheed Skunk Works plant in California, the other to the Air Force Test Flying Center in Muroc AFB. With that done, she got up and left her office after telling her head clerk she was leaving for Florida,

going out to the parking lot where her Porsche sports car was parked and then driving away towards her home to pack a bag before flying to Patrick Air Force Base. With the growing frequency of her trips to Cape Canaveral and with the headquarters of her Military Space Command now completed there, the time was approaching when she was going to have to move out of the Pentagon and to Florida, to be near to where most of the work of her command was being done. Hien was going to be sad to leave her friends in Arlington, but that was something that the children of American service members had come to expect and accept. Still, having to sell her house in Arlington was going to be a sad necessity for Ingrid, who had cherished the time she had been able to spend there in peace with her daughter.

### **13:38 (Washington Time)**

#### **Bioastronautics Operations and Support Building**

#### **Eastern Test Range Complex, Cape Canaveral**

#### **Florida**

Stepping out of her staff car in front of the Bioastronautics Operations and Support Building of the station, Ingrid climbed the steps at the entrance, a briefcase held in her left hand. Saluting back two airmen who were exiting the building, she then walked at a hurried pace inside, heading for a particular technical laboratory. She soon knocked on a double door bearing a plaque saying 'Environmental suits development and testing lab', then entered. She found inside six men and a woman in white lab coats busy examining or working on various metal or plastic parts. The seven engineers and technicians came to attention at once, prompting Ingrid in telling them to relax.

"At ease, please! Do as if I was not here. Major Sweeny, could I speak with you for a moment?"

"Of course, maam!" Replied at once the tall and thin Air Force systems engineer. Both of them then went to a deserted corner of the large lab, where Ingrid spoke in a low voice to Sweeny.

"Major, we may need at least one spacesuit much earlier than I expected. How fast could you produce a working prototype?"

"Hell, maam, we were already on a tight schedule and have only recently started to do separate tests of the various systems to be integrated in our new spacesuit design. Going much faster than now would invite big trouble."



“Is there any problems with the basic design concept I gave you to work with, Major?”

“No, maam! That concept is quite sound, albeit completely revolutionary, but doing all the mandated safety-related testing takes time, time we cannot shave without taking huge risks.”

“What if you forgo the individual parts testing, assemble a complete suit and then test thoroughly the whole product as one system?”

“Uh, that could work, maam, but if a snag shows up then, it will be that much more difficult to isolate the exact source of the problem. When exactly would you like to have that spacesuit prototype ready?”

“Within a month.” Said calmly Ingrid, making the major nearly shout and in turn making the other technicians turn their heads towards them.

“Within a month? But, maam, I really can’t guarantee anything in such a short time! What’s the rush?”

“National prestige: that’s what is at play, Major. Can you do it?”

“Uh, we won’t take any weekends off until then but we could have one suit probably ready in a month. That is if we don’t hit any major problem.”  
Sweeny then caught and corrected himself.

“Make it ANY problem, maam: any fault or vice, however minor, could easily kill the pilot wearing that suit if it fails in the vacuum of space.”

“I am very much aware of that, Major.” Replied Ingrid, her voice calm and her eyes staring into Sweeny’s eyes. “Let’s proceed as I said, then.”

“Uh, I would then need as quickly as possible to have the poor bastard due to wear that spacesuit show up here, so that we could take his precise body measurements, maam.”

Those words made Ingrid grin devilishly at the engineer.

“You are looking at the poor bastard in question, Major.”

Sweeny was left speechless for a moment, while the jaws of the technicians in the room dropped wide open.

“You, maam? But, you are the head of the program.”

“Exactly, and I am not ready to tell someone to take risks I am not ready to take myself. If I survive the test launch, many others will be free to volunteer for the job, but not before. Where is your measurement booth?”

“Uh, we don’t have one, maam. This lab room is all I have as working space.”

“Then, have the door locked and get a measurement tape.”

“Yes maam!” Replied Sweeny at once, a bit red with embarrassment. Ingrid was already starting to unbutton her shirt as Sweeny turned towards one of his male technicians. “Jack, lock the door at once and get me a measurement tape and a notepad. Roger, pull down the blinds.”

Sweeny watched his technicians to make sure that the entrance door was locked and the windows were covered, then looked back at Ingrid, only to stiffen and suck his breath in: Ingrid was now down to her panty and bra, which had been bought in the future and were quite revealing and sexy. The engineer had a tough time not staring hard at her young, beautiful body, with her firm breasts and shapely hips and legs. With sweat rolling down his forehead, he took the tape and notepad offered by his technician and did his best to take her body measurements in as professional a manner as he could. However, even with heroic efforts, he could not help become as horny as a bull when the time came to measure her chest size and turned in desperation towards his lone female technician, a civilian specialist in polymers and plastics.

“Uh, Miss Prendergast, could you come here to help me with this?”

“Certainly, Major.” Said at once the young woman, her face neutral, who then went to him and took the tape from his hands. Sweeny kept the notepad and did a half turn at once, keeping Ingrid just outside of his field of view while noting down the measurement taken by the female specialist. Seeing one of his technicians shooting discreet looks at Ingrid, he in turn signaled him to keep his eyes on his microscope.

After a couple of minutes of what amounted nearly to mental torture for him, Sweeny had all the measurements he needed and told Ingrid that she could dress back. When he faced her after the female specialist nodded to say that Ingrid was decent, he found his commanding general throwing a smile at him.

“I’m sorry if this embarrassed you, Major. Keep me posted on your progress or problems, whatever comes first.”

“I will, maam.” Replied weakly the engineer. Ingrid then left the lab, letting him free to blow air out in relief. Seeing Diane Prendergast signaling him to come to her work counter he did so in quick steps, hoping that she was not going to make a fuss about the recent scene. To his relief, Diane gave him a benevolent smile.

“You handled that mostly well, Major. Congratulations!”

“Mostly? What did I do wrong?”

“You stained your trousers.” She said in a whisper while grinning. She then laughed on seeing the face he did.

**14:09 (Florida Time)**

**Wednesday, February 20, 1957 ‘C’**

**Bioastronautics Operations and Support Building**

**Cape Canaveral Air Force Station**

Ingrid smiled at once on seeing the completed spacesuit she was going to test try: it looked exactly as she had hoped for. The assembled engineers and technicians of the environmental suits lab, along with the senior Air Force doctor and nurse present, were also smiling as she examined the spacesuit, obviously proud of their work. Contrary to the classic spacesuit designs worn in the early space programs of Nancy’s time, with their flexible jumpsuit with helmet style, this one was a semi-rigid suit design. The torso and head section was a molded rigid aluminum shell with a fixed transparent helmet and flexible arms and legs attached to it. To enter the suit, one had to open the large dorsal rectangular hatch that also supported the life support systems backpack and then literally jump inside before closing back the hatch. That type of spacesuit had two main advantages: first it was quick and easy to get in it; second, its rigid frame allowed it to use a normal atmospheric mix at sea-level pressure, thus preventing any potential problems with pressure equalization and possible bubbles forming in the blood if one had to leave the suit in a hurry once out of space vacuum. The only drawback was a slightly bulkier suit than with the flexible jumpsuit models but that could be partially alleviated by good, thoughtful design, something that had been done according to her suggestions. The spacesuit was as well covered with a protective multi-layered sort of coverall that left only the large transparent visor uncovered. Ingrid knew already that the coverall was meant to provide anti-radiation protection and thermal insulation. Suspended besides the spacesuit was a relatively thin, body-hugging jumpsuit that she would be wearing directly on herself while inside the spacesuit.

“So, General, ready to jump in?” Said with a grin Major Sweeny. The Air Force doctor held up his hand at once.

“Not too fast please, Major! General Dows still needs to have an urethra tube put in place first, unless you want her to either hold it in for twelve hours or swim in her urine inside her suit.”

“Yuck!” Said at once Ingrid, making a face. “That would not be fun at all in zero gravity.”

“Exactly, General!” Replied the doctor, grinning, before grabbing Ingrid’s inner jumpsuit and leading her to a medical examination room two doors down the hallway, followed by his nurse.

Ingrid, now wearing the sky blue inner jumpsuit, was back fifteen minutes later with the doctor. She wiggled her index in a warning manner as soon as she entered back the lab.

“Don’t I catch anyone here saying to others on this base that I was wearing a diaper today.”

That made the small group laugh at once. While the urethra tube she was wearing, connected to a flexible bag strapped to her inner left upper leg, would collect and safely store away up to a pint of urine, nothing could handle the problem of having to defecate while in a spacesuit, nothing except a simple diaper of the type used by adult incontinent patients. It may be embarrassing for one’s ego but it was still a lot better than having to handle a sudden diarrhea problem in space while not wearing a diaper. Going to the semi-rigid spacesuit kept suspended on a special stand, Ingrid opened the dorsal hatch and, grabbing the support bar of the stand with both hands, flexed her knees and got feet first in the spacesuit. Once her feet were in correctly all the way down the legs and boots of the suit, Ingrid connected the various water, electrical and communications connectors of the suit to those of her jumpsuit, then bent her head and introduced it inside while slipping her arms in the flexible sleeves and gloves. With her whole body now inside the spacesuit, she walked backward a couple of paces, freeing her spacesuit from its supporting stand, then cautiously stood against a wall, thus forcing closed the dorsal hatch. A simultaneous pull outwards and upwards of two large knobs on the lower sides of her suit backpack firmly locked her hatch shut with an audible ‘click’. Major Sweeny applauded when Ingrid did that final step.

“Well done, General! It is as if you had done it a hundred times before.”

Ingrid smiled but didn’t say a word then. The general design of this spacesuit was actually similar to the spacesuit model worn by the ship crews of the Time Patrol, minus the advanced electronic and life support systems, of course. Her timeline twin, Ingrid Weiss ‘B’, was a scoutship pilot and had given her on a few occasions the chance to go into space, including a couple of space walks in zero gravity. The spacesuit design

Ingrid had described to Major Sweeny's development team was about the most efficient one possible and was already a few centuries old...in the 34<sup>th</sup> Century. With her large visor opened and thus breathing outside air, Ingrid walked around heavily in her 26 kilo spacesuit and was agreeably surprised by how relatively comfortable it felt around her. The Air Force doctor then led her out of the lab again, this time turning right and going to the section containing the large decompression chamber of the base. As a fighter pilot and test pilot, Ingrid had been in such chambers many times, getting trained on high altitude flying and becoming used to wearing a pressurized suit. This time, however, the testing would be both much more severe and quite longer than usual.

If anything, the walk down the long hallway proved to Ingrid that her spacesuit was surprisingly flexible despite its bulk, since she had to return numerous salutes from passing airmen and officers. Once in the decompression chamber section, the Air Force doctor briefly reviewed with her the test program she was going to go through in her spacesuit, then had two technicians do an ultimate external check of her suit. Only then did Ingrid step inside the large decompression chamber. The technicians followed her in briefly long enough to connect a number of wires and tubes to her suit that would monitor her vital functions and the conditions inside her spacesuit, plus provide extra air. Once left alone inside and with the thick steel door closed, Ingrid closed her suit's visor and activated her life support systems. Soon breathing air from her own reserve tank, she gave a thumbs up signal to the doctor watching her through a glass porthole. The air inside the chamber was then pumped out gradually, making her spacesuit's flexible parts inflate and become more rigid. Flexing her joints repeatedly, Ingrid tested her mobility while listening carefully for the awful hissing noise that would announce a leak in her spacesuit. Thankfully, no such noise popped up. Sitting then in the large padded seat similar to the one that would be installed in the space plane, she judged the comfort of her spacesuit while trying to relax: she was after all going to be inside here for long hours.

Ingrid was in her sixth hour in the decompression chamber and was now drawing fresh air and electrical power from an umbilical cable when Major General Aldridge showed up at the chamber's porthole and spoke to her via a microphone.

"How are you up to now, Ingrid?"

“Apart from getting bored, I feel okay, Dave. This suit is actually quite comfortable to wear: lots of padding.”

“That’s good. Look, I have some news.”

“Then start with the bad ones.” Replied at once Ingrid.

“First, the Soviets just launched a satellite in orbit from Tyuratam. They call it ‘SPUTNIK’. It is on an elliptical orbit with a perigee of 140 miles, an apogee of 580 miles and an inclination of 65 degrees. The Soviets say that it weighs 184 pounds.”

Ingrid nodded her head inside her suit but didn’t show displeasure.

“Good for them! There is nothing like healthy, honest competition to keep you on your toes. I bet that they will do even better pretty soon. We will have to keep full steam on in order not to be overtaken.”

Aldridge made a face at that.

“Well, they may just do that within a few weeks, Ingrid: a second giant rocket booster was photographed by a RF-83 reconnaissance plane as it was entering the preparation building at Tyuratam. What is worse is that what looked furiously like a manned capsule was also imaged arriving by train at Tyuratam.”

That got the full attention of Ingrid at once, who thought furiously about the possible implications. What she could figure out was not good.

“But, that’s way too soon for their program. They must be rushing through like madmen and cutting corners in order to prepare so soon for a manned flight.”

“Like we are doing right now, Ingrid?” Said softly Aldridge, stating something Ingrid had to recognize was quite true. “This mad rush towards space for reasons of national prestige will end up eventually in a disaster, mark my words.”

“You may very well be right about that. At least, our space plane concept is safer for manned flight than a pure rocket booster solution.”

“In theory.” Replied Aldridge. “We won’t know that as a fact until we have had a few real flights under our belts.”

“True again. However, we are committed now and can only do our best to make sure that no preventable mistakes are made. This gives me an idea. Is Major Sweeny around still?”

Major Sweeny’s face popped up nearly at once in front of a second porthole, his mouth full and a sandwich in his hands. He had to swallow before speaking in his headset’s microphone.

“I’m here, General. Sorry for the sandwich but it is supper time. What can I do for you?”

“This business of possible future disaster in space made me think about something. Write the following down, please.”

“Go ahead, maam.” Said Sweeny after a few seconds.

“I want your team to start another high priority project. It should however be much simpler than this spacesuit. In essence, I want you to design a one-person recompression chamber that could fit as a payload in our SPS-10A prototype space plane. It will probably have to be made of aluminum or titanium in order to respect the weight limit. I want a large airtight top hatch able to let in a fully suited astronaut, plus a sealed hatch that would connect to the airlock of our space plane and be air-tight. Both hatches must be able to be opened and locked from the inside as well as from the outside. There will be inside a crashworthy seat with safety harness large enough for my spacesuit and facing forward, plus lighting, intercom, radio and life support systems good for at least twelve hours of operation. The goal of that recompression chamber will be to give us the capability to go in orbit with the SPS-10A and rescue one astronaut from a disabled spacecraft if need be. The life support system will have to be compatible with both American and Soviet spacesuits.”

That last sentence got her a curious look from both Sweeny and Aldridge, with the latter speaking in his microphone.

“Feeling like running an international space rescue service, Ingrid?”

“If we can do it, why not?” Replied Ingrid, unrepentant. “I certainly don’t want to see war move into space and providing help to save lives could actually create some much needed goodwill. It is not as if that item will cost us a bundle.”

“It shouldn’t, maam.” Then said Sweeny while looking at his notes. “A simple aluminum sphere with a battery system and an air tank inside will probably do the trick. Hell, an Air Force welder could probably build one in a couple of days.”

“Then, jump on it once this spacesuit is certified operational, Major. General Aldridge, did you have other news for me?”

“I did! This one is a good news, though. Our prototype SPS-10A was dropped safely from the XC-200 in its first flight separation test today. While the SPS-10A was not fuelled up, there was no apparent aerodynamic interference between the two planes on separation at an altitude of 80,000 feet.”

“Excellent! This is quite an important step done. If all keeps going as well as now, we will soon be in space in a big way.”

Being hungry by now, Ingrid then turned and lowered her head slightly to the left in order to suck some nutrient solution from one of two straw-like tubes with valves protruding from the inner lower edge of her helmet, the other tube being for water. She couldn't help make an awful grimace then.

“On second thought, not all is well if we keep using this stuff: it tastes like liquefied Australian bully beef. Where is my Schnitzel mit spatzel<sup>26</sup>?”

**09:10 (New York Time)**

**Thursday, March 21, 1957 'C'**

**CBS television studios, New York City**

“Edward Murrow speaking!” Said quickly the celebrated radio and television journalist after taking the receiver from an assistant on the CBS set where he was preparing his next interview episode for his acclaimed ‘Person to Person’ show. A young female voice then spoke on the line.

“Mister Murrow, this is Lieutenant General Ingrid Dows, Commander of the United States Military Space Command. I have a proposition for you.”

“Go on, General.” Said Murrow, his heart already beating faster. Dows was justly known in the medias as a prime newsmaker and was always a good subject for an interview. She was however more often than not unavailable due to the nature of her work. If she was calling to offer some sort of interview, Murrow would be more than glad to make a hole in his schedule for her. What Dows said then went beyond his wildest expectations.

“Basically, I am offering to you and a couple of cameramen the chance to sit on a flight that could make history, Mister Murrow. There would however be two conditions: namely that the filming would not be retransmitted live and that certain details and scenes not be filmed.”

“You are certainly interesting me already, General Dows. Could you be more specific about the flight in question?”

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<sup>26</sup> Schnitzel mit Spatzel : German dish of breaded veal fillet with buttered noodles.



“I can only say on the telephone that it concerns our space program. If you are in agreement with my conditions, then show up with no more than five cameramen and television technicians at no later than eight O'clock on this coming Saturday morning at the Muroc Air Force Base, in California. It is northeast of Los Angeles. If you want to arrive on the preceding evening, I can provide you with overnight accommodations on base.”

Murrow didn't have to think twice before giving his answer.

“Then expect me and my television team in Muroc on Friday evening, General. Thank you very much for calling me.”

“The pleasure is mine, Mister Murrow. If all goes well, you will help greatly the prestige of our country. See you on Friday evening then.”

The line then was cut, leaving Murrow to nearly dance on the spot while thanking his luck.

**08:24 (California Time)**

**Saturday, March 23, 1957 'C'**

**Muroc Air Force Base**

**California**

“Look at that big monster!” Said softly one of the CBS cameramen, stunned like Edward Murrow and his four colleagues as the military bus transporting them to the site of their promised filming came in sight of the biggest aircraft they had ever seen. It was also easily the ugliest one they had seen, with two huge pairs of wings forming a lozenge attached to a long but relatively thin central fuselage with an oval section. A total of no less than eight big turbofan jet engines were attached to the wings. What was attached under the central fuselage was however what attracted most the attention of Edward Murrow. It was a sort of large fighter-size aircraft of unusual design.

“Concentrate on the smaller aircraft attached under, guys. I bet that it will be the true subject of our special report.”

“Correct on that, sir.” Replied the Air Force major escorting their group from the barracks where they had stayed overnight. “The big mother you see is our XC-200 LEVIATHAN heavy lift transport aircraft. The smaller one is our SPS-10A space plane prototype.”

“A space plane?” Exclaimed at once Murrow, truly stunned now. That made the major grin devilishly.

“That’s correct, gentlemen. Today will be the first attempted space flight of the SPS-10A and you and up to two cameramen will be allowed to be aboard the XC-200 as it launches the SPS-10A from high altitude. Please reserve your questions until we are out of this bus: Major General Bernard Schriever, Commander of the Military Space Command’s Western Test Range Complex, is waiting for you near the plane and will brief you in depth.”

While overjoyed by this announcement, Murrow had to ask one question then.

“Lieutenant General Dows will not be here for this flight?”

That only widened the grin on the major’s face.

“Oh, she will be, sir. She will arrive in a few minutes.”

Leaving it at that, Murrow then stayed silent until the bus, dwarfed by the heavy lift transporter, stopped near the rear access ramp of the XC-200 LEVIATHAN. Waiting near the foot of the ramp were two Air Force officers, one of them a tall, graying but also handsome major general. The latter went to Murrow and shook hands vigorously with him.

“It is a pleasure to greet you here, Mister Murrow. Your radio reports from London during the Second World War helped a lot the morale of our Eight Air Force airmen. I am Major General Bernard Schriever, Assistant Deputy Commander of the Military Space Command and Commander of the Western Test Range Complex.”

“I was only doing my modest part in what was a gigantic tragedy, General. On the other hand, being invited to film such an occasion is a true honor for me.”

“We had our reasons to invite you, Mister Murrow. I have to caution you on one thing, though. If this attempt ends in tragedy, then I may be forced to censor heavily your films and report of it.”

“Wouldn’t that be General Dows’ decision to take, General.” Objected politely Murrow, making Schriever lower his head as concern showed on his face.

“If this ends in tragedy, then Lieutenant General Dows will not survive the day: she will be piloting the SPS-10A.”

“She is going to be the first American in space?” Said Murrow, his jaw dropping open. Schriever corrected him at once.

“She is going to be the first human in space, Mister Murrow. To be frank, I can’t think of any other person more worthy of such an honor. Your cameramen may now start filming while I brief you.”

Murrow’s three cameramen fanned out at once, with one filming Schriever as he spoke while the two others took shots of the XC-200 and of the SPS-10A from various angles.

“As I said before, this will be the first attempted flight into orbit of our experimental space plane, the SPS-10A STARBLAZER. It will be first transported to high altitude by this XC-200 LEVIATHAN heavy lift aircraft. Once high in the stratosphere, the XC-200 will drop the SPS-10A, which will then light up its own rocket engines and climb into orbit. If all goes well, the SPS-10A will insert itself into a low Earth orbit, where it will release a communications satellite. That satellite in turn has its own rocket engine that will push it high into what we call a geosynchronous orbit at an altitude of 22,300 miles. In such an orbit, our satellite will always stay over the same area of the Earth, in this case a point in the middle of the Atlantic, from where it will act as a communications relay for our ships and aircraft. After the satellite is launched, Lieutenant General Dows will stay in orbit for a while, then will fire her retro-rocket engines in order to slow down and reenter the atmosphere. That part will probably be the trickiest for her, as the friction of the atmosphere will heat up parts of her space plane to temperatures of up to 2,300 degrees Fahrenheit, or 1,260 degrees Celsius for those who prefer the metric system. If she reenter the atmosphere at the wrong angle or loses control of her space plane then, her craft will be turned into molten slag, along with herself. If General Dows has a successful reentry, she will then pilot back her space plane to a normal landing, like any other plane. For this flight, Mister Murrow, your designated cameraman will be seated in the forward observer’s platform, in the nose, where he will be able to film the SPS-10A as it rockets away from the XC-200.”

“Would you be so kind as to allow me a second cameraman aboard, General? I would like to be able to film simultaneously the release of the SPS-10A from the belly.” Schriever hesitated only for a second before nodding.

“I don’t see a problem with that, Mister Murrow. Your other technicians can wait here and film our takeoff.”

“Thank you, General. When will the XC-200 take off?”

“In less than half an hour. I now see the van transporting Lieutenant General Dows approaching.”

Murrow's nearest cameraman immediately turned around and filmed as an Air Force van approached the XC-200, having turned the corner of a hangar. The van soon stopped near the foot of the access ramp and two Air Force technicians jumped out, going to the double rear doors and opening them. Murrow couldn't help let out a soft exclamation when he saw Ingrid's fantastic suit as she climbed cautiously out of the van.

"My god! She looks like a Martian."

Ingrid, who had her helmet visor opened, heard him and smiled to him while being filmed.

"And how would you recognize a Martian, Mister Murrow?"

"Uh, I don't know but you sure could play a solid role with this spacesuit in any science-fiction movie."

"Well, this time reality is overtaking fiction. Follow me inside with your cameraman, Mister Murrow, and we will be able to take off."

Schriever spoke to Ingrid in a whisper at that point, getting a nod from her. She in turn smiled to Murrow.

"Make that you and two cameramen, Mister Murrow."

"With pleasure, General!"

After Schriever gave an ultimate salute to Ingrid, they boarded the giant transporter, walking up the access ramp and entering a sort of small vestibule. Both an elevator and a long staircase opened in the vestibule. The group took the elevator, going up nearly the equivalent of three stories before stopping in a second vestibule. As they were then following a long passageway leading forward, Murrow asked a question to Ingrid, who was walking at a ponderous pace in her bulky spacesuit.

"How heavy is that suit, General Dows?"

"Please, call me Ingrid. In turn I will call you Ed. Would that be okay with you?"

"Perfectly, Ingrid."

"Then, Ed, I can tell you that this suit weighs 57 pounds. It looks quite bulky but is actually surprisingly flexible and comfortable. It has its own reserves of air and power that are good for up to twelve hours and is insulated against the extremes of temperature found in space."

"And that thing hooked to your belly that looks like an extinguisher?"

“That is a gas jet gun meant to propel me around in the vacuum of space if I ever have to go out to effect a repair or inspect part of my space plane. It is actually little more than a big spray can if you think about it.”

“You were able to train for work in space?” Asked Murrow, incredulous.

“Not really, Ed. Keep this off the record for now but much of this mission will be a series of firsts. This spacesuit is as much a prototype as my space plane and this transporter.”

Those words made Murrow pale as he realized what they meant.

“And how do you rate your chances of success for this mission?”

“A bit better than fifty percent.”

The two CBS cameramen following them looked at each other then but didn't speak. The group was silent again until they arrived at another vestibule with elevator.

“We will take this elevator, which will go down to the transit compartment where I will temporarily leave my spacesuit.”

“You are not going to keep it until launch, Ingrid?”

“The flight to my drop point will take close to four hours, Ed. I prefer to take those four hours easy if I can.”

“Four hours? Where are we going actually?”

“Straight south until we meet the Equator. We will then turn due east before releasing my space plane. By flying eastward close along the Equator, I am then able to use the rotation speed of the Earth to add to my orbital velocity and thus save some precious rocket fuel. That is one of the advantages that a two-stage space plane system has over a classic rocket booster system.”

“That is a clever trick, I have to say.” Said Murrow while following Ingrid inside the elevator, his cameramen behind him. The elevator cage went down that time, stopping in a sort of locker room where two Air Force technicians were waiting. Ingrid went at once to a sort of stand and leaned forward against it. The two technicians then pulled on the two knobs at the base of her suit's backpack and opened for her the dorsal access hatch while the CBS cameramen filmed the scene. Ingrid could have opened the hatch by herself but this saved her some effort she could better use later on. While one technician secured the suit to the stand, the other stood by as Ingrid pulled her head and upper torso out of the spacesuit, disconnected the tubes and wires between the hard suit and her jumpsuit, then grabbed an overhead handle bar and pulled herself out of the suit. Now wearing only her inner jumpsuit, Ingrid smiled to Murrow and his cameramen.

“Well, time to show you my little toy.”

As they crossed into the next compartment aft via a pressurized airlock, Murrow heard the big turbofan engines of the heavy lift transporter start with whining sounds one after the other. He however quickly concentrated back on his tour, as they were now standing on a platform with guardrails overlooking the opened cockpit area and access airlock of the SPS-10A space plane.

“Uh, are we allowed to film this, Ingrid, or is it too classified?”

“Go right ahead, Ed. There is nothing really classified about the cockpit instruments, as they are all standard items that have been in use for years. The truly classified parts of our space plane are its engines. Before you ask, the only thing that I can tell you about them is that the rocket engines use liquid bipropellant fuel.”

The two CBS cameramen didn't have to be told twice, filming at once the cockpit through its opened top canopy section as Ingrid kept speaking.

“The transparent panels of the canopy are actually a thick sandwich made of three layers of various materials, the outer one being made of transparent silica in order to resist the heat of the reentry. The nose and underbelly plates of the X-10A are covered as well with a heat-resistant, ablative material. After each flight, those outer plates are unbolted from the airframe and replaced with new plates. That was the easiest and fastest way we found to protect our space plane from reentry heat without making it too complicated to maintain and refurbish.”

“This reentry procedure sounds like a real hell, Ingrid.”

“Oh, it probably will be. You will actually be able to see it, as there is a fixed camera to the left of my seat's headrest that will film the inside of the cockpit and the view through the forward windshield during my flight. If the mission is a success, I will provide you with a copy of that film.”

“That would be truly fantastic, Ingrid.” Said Murrow, meaning it, as he could already see the kind of special report he could produce out of this space mission. By now he could feel the heavy lift transporter roll forward on the tarmac, probably heading towards the start of the base's main runway. Ingrid kept giving him information for another minute, then invited the CBS crew to go up to the cockpit of the XC-200. Using the elevator again, they then had to walk forward along a passageway for about twenty meters before entering a spacious cockpit occupied by five Air Force crewmembers. Murrow then saw that the big transporter was already lined up on the runway and ready

to take off. The pilot, a young lieutenant colonel with a strong jaw, pointed at a row of two groups of four airline seats fixed along the aft bulkhead of the cockpit.

“If you may strap yourselves in, gentlemen, we are about to take off. Everything is nominal, General.”

“Then proceed, Colonel Partridge.”

With one of the CBS cameramen filming from his seat, Partridge and his copilot, a female major, pushed the eight turbofan engines to maximum power, making the XC-200 accelerate rapidly along the runway. Takeoff was actually surprisingly short for such a huge aircraft, the wheels lifting off the runway after a run of only a bit more than 1,200 meters. The ascent was also quite rapid, demonstrating the power of the aircraft's engines. After about fifteen minutes, the XC-200 leveled off at an altitude of 12,000 meters. Ingrid then left her seat and invited the CBS crew to follow her. Using a steep staircase leading down from the cockpit, she led Murrow and the cameramen into the lower nose compartment of the XC-200 and showed them an Air Force technician sitting behind a camera fixed to a swiveling mount that let him film through the nose section, which was one huge Plexiglas transparent cone.

“First Sergeant Morris here is tasked with filming the release and climb sequence, when my SPS-10A will shoot up past this transporter. One of you can sit on this jump seat behind and to the left of Sergeant Morris and thus have a good view of my launch.”

Murrow nodded and looked at one of his cameramen.

“Harry, you take the nose position.”

“With pleasure, boss.”

As the cameraman took place in the jump seat, Ingrid led Murrow and the remaining cameraman aft to a large Plexiglas panel that gave a good view downward and rearward. Murrow could see clearly from here the nose part of the SPS-10A space plane as it protruded from under the support pylon partially covering its upper parts. He nodded in satisfaction at that and looked at his second cameraman.

“That view will be perfect for the release sequence. You take this position, Bill.”

“Understood, sir!”

Turning to face Ingrid, Murrow gave her a questioning look.

“What do we do now?”

“We wait until we approach the release point, at which time I will get into my space plane. In the meantime, if you feel the need for a toilet break, there is a toilet

compartment just aft of the cockpit. If you will now excuse me, I have a few things to go check.”

Once Ingrid had left, Murrow returned to near Sergeant Morris' seat and admired the view of the California coast, which they were now overflying on their way South. The huge transparent nose cone truly gave a perfect view on the frontal arc of the plane. Seeing an unoccupied jump seat in the right corner of the compartment, Murrow went to sit in it, enjoying too much the view he had from here. Seeing a headset hooked to the partition next to his seat, he put it on and found out to his satisfaction that it was connected to the plane's intercom system. Now all set, he sat back and relaxed as much as he could before the historic moment to follow in a few hours.

Ingrid came to him three hours later, still wearing her light blue jumpsuit.

“Time for me to suit up. If you may bring one cameraman with you.”

“Sure! BILL, FOLLOW US WITH YOUR CAMERA!”

The trio took two minutes to end back in the transit compartment where Ingrid had stored her spacesuit. Two Air Force technicians again helped her as she got into her spacesuit and connected her headset and other suit systems inside, then closed the dorsal hatch and secured it. One technician handed oxygen masks connected to portable oxygen bottles to Murrow and his cameraman, then put one on himself before leading Ingrid inside the airlock leading to the space plane berthing compartment. With both hatches of the airlock now closed, Murrow heard the hissing of air being pumped out and felt cold nearly at once. He was nearly shivering as the technician opened the aft hatch and kept it open for Ingrid and the CBS men. Signaling his cameraman to start filming, Murrow watched Ingrid get on a sort of narrow platform above the opened cockpit of the space plane. The technician then pressed a button and the platform went down slowly, bringing Ingrid inside the cockpit. It stopped just above the bottom cushion of the pilot's seat, permitting Ingrid to safely step down from the platform and into her cockpit. Once the platform was raised out of the way, Ingrid sat in her large pilot seat and connected her air, power and radio umbilical cables before strapping herself in. She then slid her seat forward, so that she could touch the command panels and the rudder pedals of the cockpit. After a last thumbs up signal to the technician and to Murrow, she closed the canopy of her cockpit and secured it. With the space plane now sealed closed, the technician signaled Murrow and his cameraman that it was time to return into the transit



compartment. Murrow couldn't help give a last look at Ingrid, visible through the thick canopy of her space plane, before passing the hatch of the airlock.

"There goes a brave woman."

With his cameraman returning to his viewing station, Murrow decided to go sit in the cockpit. As he entered it, he could see that the pilot was banking his huge aircraft in a wide turn to the left. Next, the aircraft started climbing steadily as the crewmembers exchanged data and directives.

"Space plane's cockpit shows fully pressurized, with all systems green, sir."

"Start transferring liquid oxygen to the space plane's oxidizer tanks."

"Transfer of LOX initiated, sir."

"Marilyn, push all throttles to full power."

"Full power, aye sir!...Engines now at maximum thrust."

"Good! Keep a fifteen degree climb angle."

"Space plane's liquid oxygen tanks now full and pressurized, sir. General Dows signals that all appears to be well on her side... Sergeant Moran reports that the LOX transfer valve and plane intake cover are closed and secured, with the LOX hose retracted and secured."

"Excellent! Make sure that Muroc is following this."

"Aye, sir! Telemetry on...Muroc confirms getting the telemetry signals."

"We are now passing 40,000 feet, sir. Still climbing steadily."

"The USS HUNTSVILLE tracking ship confirms having us firmly on its radars. No air contact within 400 miles of us, sir. The USS SUNNYVALE is now 800 miles east of us and is ready to track us. She signals being shadowed by a British cruiser, sir."

"Does the SUNNYVALE have an escort ship?"

"Yes sir! One of our heavy cruisers is close at hand if need be."

"Then let that British cruiser enjoy the view. We are over international waters."

"Aye, sir!"

Murrow followed all this with fascination, his pocket recorder on. About fifteen minutes later the copilot announced that they were at the impressive altitude of 54,000 feet, something that must have been close to a record for such a big airplane. The XC-200 however appeared to be at the end of its legs, refusing to go higher. That was when the pilot spoke firmly in the intercom.

“All crew, brace yourselves firmly: we are going on rocket boosters.”

“Rocket boosters?” Could only say Murrow before being pushed back in his seat by a sudden and powerful acceleration while the thunderous noise of rocket engines made talking difficult. The XC-200 resumed its climb at once, monitored closely by the copilot.

“We are now passing 60,000 feet. Climbing steady at a fifteen degree angle and still accelerating.”

“Increase climb angle to twenty degrees.”

“Climbing now at twenty degree angle. Turbofans now showing signs of choking on the thin air of the stratosphere.”

“Throttle them back to sixty percent. We can’t risk them flaming out now.” Replied the pilot, who then spoke in his headset. “General Dows, we are past 62,000 feet but we are risking a flameout of our turbofans... Understood, general!”

Lieutenant Colonel Partridge then looked back at his flight engineer, sitting at a console behind the copilot’s seat.

“Be prepared for separation! You will shut down the rocket boosters as soon as the SPS-10A is safely on its way!”

“Aye, sir!”

“Marilyn, level the plane and keep it steady for the separation phase.”

“Leveling the plane, sir... We are now flying level at 62,700 feet.”

“To all crew, standby for separation.”

Murrow then saw the pilot grab a large red handle and twist it one half turn before speaking in his headset.

“SPS-10A, DROP, DROP, DROP!”

He then pulled hard on the handle. Murrow felt nearly at once the big transporter seemingly jump upward, as if relieved of a big weight. Less than four seconds later the SPS-10A sped under their nose on top of a blinding twin rocket exhaust. Murrow, like the cockpit crew, stared at the space plane as it climbed quickly out of sight, finally muttering to himself.

“Harry, you better had filmed that or I will kill you.”

Pushed hard in her seat by the 320 metric tons of thrust from her two solid propellant rocket boosters, Ingrid made her space plane climb at a shallow angle at first, wanting to take on speed while having enough air around to start her ramjet engines

once past the speed of sound. She was quickly through the sound barrier, then attained Mach 2 in less than one minute. That was when she lit up her ramjet engines, injecting liquid hydrogen to be mixed with the oxygen in the ambient air as her two solid rocket boosters, now burned out, were jettisoned. The cryogenic hydrogen, passing first through thermal exchangers in the inlet ducts of her Marquardt ramjets, nearly instantly cooled down to the freezing point the inlet air that had been superheated by being compressed in the inlet duct through ram effect, increasing its pressure and greatly increasing the efficiency of her ramjet engines, with the now vaporized hydrogen igniting after mixing with gaseous oxygen and producing a total thrust of 240 metric tons. All the while she kept speaking in her helmet microphone, informing by radio the crew of her transporter and of the tracking ships of her progress. She felt exhilaration when she attained and passed Mach 5: she was now the first pilot ever to fly at hypersonic speed. At a speed of Mach 5.6 and an altitude of 28,000 meters, she registered a slow but steady loss of thrust from her ramjet engines: they were running out of air, even though there still was plenty of hydrogen fuel for them in the space plane's tanks. Having expected that but not knowing in advance at what point it would happen since the hurried development and testing of her space plane had precluded doing the required wind tunnel testing, she ignited her Rocketdyne main rocket engines, which were situated in the center of her ramjet engine ducts. Her two rocket main engines, creating a pumping effect in the thin air still going through the ramjet ducts, produced then a total of 180 metric tons of thrust at first, with Ingrid progressively switching off the flow of liquid hydrogen through the ramjet ducts and going to pure rocket mode. Her main rocket engines pushed her past Mach 6 as she continued climbing out of Earth's atmosphere. As she now burned over 34 metric tons of fuel per minute, her space plane's weight diminished rapidly, while the acceleration increased progressively. Despite all her foreknowledge of future technology and science, Ingrid was now literally flying by the seat of her pants, and so were the engineers and scientists of the ground team anxiously following her progress in Cape Canaveral. Too many uncertainties about the whole concept of a space plane and about the exact conditions to be found at high altitude, such as the precise atmospheric density at various altitudes, had allowed for only an approximate flight profile to be calculated. Nobody had really known how high the XC-200 could have gone before dropping her, for one thing. It actually had gone higher than expected, something that was going to help her measurably. She however now had to judge continuously the optimum climb rate to use in order to attain a

stable orbit. Switching on the attitude control vernier motors system, Ingrid lowered her nose to a mere five degrees up once past an altitude of 106 kilometers. Her main rocket engines were still burning when she broke through the altitude of 121 kilometers, at which time she couldn't help yell briefly in triumph: she was now officially out of the atmosphere and into space. A ground tracking station contacted her on her radio a minute later.

"STARBLAZER, this is SHEPHERD FOUR. Your speed is now clocked at 17,810 miles per hour and your altitude is 107.5 miles and increasing. You have now exceeded minimal orbital velocity. How much burn time have you left for your main engine, over?"

Ingrid glanced quickly at her fuel gauges before replying, elated by her success up to now.

"SHEPHERD FOUR, I have approximately twenty seconds of burn left, over."

The voice of Doctor Werner Von Braun then came on the radio, speaking from Cape Canaveral.

"STARBLAZER, this is Cape Canaveral Control. You should level off now in order to avoid an excessively elliptical orbit, over."

"Leveling off now, Cape Control." Replied at once Ingrid while obeying. In order to be fully effective, the satellite she was carrying had to be placed in as circular an orbit as possible. That meant that the perigee and apogee points, respectively the lowest and highest altitudes of her orbit, had to be as close to each other as possible.

Her main rocket engines finally burned out, out of fuel, leaving her to float silently above Earth. The sight she had now through her canopy was of incredible beauty. Before she could comment on the radio about that, Cape Canaveral spoke first.

"Cape Control to STARBLAZER, your perigee has been established as being at 148 miles of altitude at engine cut off point. Your present speed is 18,505 miles per hour. Your precise apogee point will be known once you complete one orbit but should be around 600 miles high. Once we have your precise orbit parameters, we will be able to calculate for you the launch and engine burn program for your satellite. How are you feeling up there, over?"

"Like a goddess, Cape Control. The view of Earth from here is so beautiful. I am in zero gravity now but I don't feel any disorientation or sickness. How long will one orbit take me to complete, over?"

“About 97 and a half minutes, STARBLAZER. You will have that much time for yourself until we can calculate the ignition point and burn time of your orbital engines in order to start regularizing your orbit prior to satellite release. Someone would like to speak to you now.”

Expecting some patriotic blurb from a high official or even from the President, Ingrid suddenly felt like crying when the small voice of Hien came on the radio.

“Mom, this is Hien. I just want to say how proud I am of you. I wish that I could be up there too and hug you real tight.”

“I will soon enough be with you again, my little treasure. Then, we will celebrate this moment as it should be, together.”

“Tell me about Earth, Mom. How does it look like?”

“Like a beautiful blue orb surrounded by a sea of black ink, Hien. Since there is no air here, the stars do not sparkle but they are much clearer to the sight.”

Ingrid ended up speaking for a full four minutes with Hien and felt truly on top of the World by the time Hien had to give back the microphone to the mission controller. After giving to the latter a number of technical readings from her space plane instruments, Ingrid was free to observe Earth again. Taking her personal camera from a stowage bag to the right of her seat, she snapped a number of pictures of Earth through her canopy. Just for fun, she also snapped a few pictures of a pen she let fly around in the zero gravity of the cockpit. Storing back in place the camera and pocketing the pen, Ingrid next sucked in some water and nutrient from the tubes inside her helmet. Thankfully, someone had come up with a much better tasting liquid nutrient solution for this flight instead of the one she had tried a month ago. The following twenty minutes were used by her to check thoroughly the indications of her instruments, including testing her radar altimeter. Leaving on that system, Ingrid checked her position on her inertial navigation display unit and saw that she would pass to nearly the vertical of Singapore in a few minutes. Resolved in using to the fullest this first space flight, she pushed a button that uncovered the high precision lens of a very high resolution reconnaissance camera installed vertically inside the belly keel of her space plane. Using a smaller resolution telescope that had its eyepiece protruding inside the cockpit, Ingrid carefully lined up her camera towards the approaching British base situated next to the city of Singapore, then took a series of photos of the base and of the nearby port. She could actually distinguish in her smaller telescope the tiny shapes of ships in harbor

at the time, so her reconnaissance photos should be able to detail them well enough to identify them. The embedded reconnaissance camera system of her space plane was one feature that was staying secret from all but the American military and by itself would amply justify the acquisition of a whole squadron of space planes. Once fully operational and launched on polar or highly inclined orbits, space planes would be able on demand and on short notice to photograph in detail about any spot on the planet, thus constituting an invaluable strategic reconnaissance asset in times of crisis.

Cape Canaveral Control came back on the radio a few minutes after she completed her first orbit of Earth, giving her a precise timing and duration for firing up her orbital rocket engines in order to circularize her orbit. Ingrid followed those instructions on cue, ending up starting and stopping her orbital engines three times and performing in the process six more revolutions around Earth. The next step was to release the satellite stored in the payload bay of her space plane, situated five meters behind her cockpit. She had to wait another two revolutions before Cape Canaveral Control could calculate the launch parameters of the COURRIER ONE Navy communications satellite, time that President Eisenhower used to call her by radio and congratulate her in a message broadcasted across the United States and retransmitted in most of the World. Two hours later, again on cue, Ingrid opened the doors of the payload bay and released the satellite. While that operation went well, a light on her instruments panel lit up just after a gentle shake announced the ejection of the satellite from the payload bay. Ingrid's heart skipped a beat on identifying the indicator light.

"Cape Control, this is STARBLAZER. My centerline belly landing gear shows that its cover is now open. If that is true, it could mean big problems on reentry, over."

"Try resetting the switch, STARBLAZER."

Ingrid did so, with no change to the light indication.

"The light is still red, Cape Control. Maybe it is only a false indication. The shake from ejecting the satellite was quite minimal after all."

"Uh, our engineers will review at once our options on this, STARBLAZER. For the moment, let's concentrate on the firing up of the satellite's orbital engine."

"Understood, Cape Control. Am set for command ignition of the satellite's engine."

"Engine ignition sequence in six, five, four, three, two, one, ignite now!"

“Igniting now!” Said Ingrid at the same time she pressed the ignition command switch for COURRIER ONE. Overhead, she saw through her top viewing panel the small rocket engine of the communications satellite light up silently in the vacuum of space. The satellite then climbed out of sight within a minute, on its way to its selected geostationary orbit. Ingrid was then able to concentrate back on her landing gear cover problem. If that cover was really in the open position, then gases as hot as 1,400 degrees Celsius or more would be free to enter the belly keel during reentry, melting or burning everything inside and dooming her space plane to a fiery destruction. Her problem was that she had only an indicator light to go on at the moment to judge the situation, something she felt clearly inadequate to take a decision that could mean life or death for her. Finally making her mind and not ready to wait for a bunch of engineers on the ground to throw suppositions at her, she unbuckled her seat harness and lowered her seat, so that she could go into her crew cabin section. Floating to the hatch of the airlock, situated aft of the crew cabin, she opened it, entering the airlock before closing back the hatch and locking it. Next, she sealed her helmet visor and started her suit’s independent life support systems, then started depressurizing the airlock. The Cape Canaveral controller came on the radio nearly at once, his voice a bit unsettled.

“STARBLAZER, our instruments show that your airlock is losing pressure. Have you initiated an airlock depressurization?”

“Affirmative, Cape Control. I am going out to check visually the landing gear cover.”

“But, nobody even trained for such a space walk yet.”

“There is a first for everything, Cape Control. Your engineers will be able to work better with facts than with suppositions. I will be linked to the cockpit by my safety line and will use my gas jet gun to move around.”

Not waiting for further objections from the controller, Ingrid hooked up firmly a long safety line to her suit, made sure that she had both her gas jet gun and her tool kit on her, then unlocked and opened the top access hatch of the airlock. Then pulling herself up the airlock’s ladder, she stuck her head out, lit up her helmet lights and started her helmet camera.

“Cape Control, I am now standing half outside the airlock. I will now go out and fly around towards the belly section.”

There was no response from the ground as she exited completely the airlock, then pushed gently herself towards the underbelly of her space plane, the gas jet gun in her

right hand and tethered to her suit by a safety strap. Her push was off a bit and she had to use her gas gun to correct her trajectory, firing only short, calculated jets in order to save on her gas propellant. Floating like this in zero gravity in the vacuum of space and with Earth under her felt as marvelous and incredible as the first time she tried it outside of the Time Patrol scoutship TEEN TEAM II. However, the seriousness of the situation helped her keep her focus on the problem of the landing gear cover. Inspecting visually the parts of her space plane she went by, she arrived at the centerline landing gear cover after two minutes of cautious free flight. What she saw made her swear loudly in German.

“Scheisser! That damn indicator light was wrong. The landing gear cover is firmly closed. There isn’t even a crack showing. All the other cover panels I passed by are also in place and closed. I am returning to the airlock now.”

She could nearly hear the mission controller blow air out in relief then.

“We copy, STARBLAZER. Good work!”

“Flattery will get you nowhere, Cape Control.” Replied Ingrid, trying to relax the atmosphere a bit. It worked, as the mission controller laughed briefly on the radio.

“Then I will have to try something else, STARBLAZER. Advise us when you will be safely back inside.”

“Will do, Cape Control.”

It took three minutes of slow, cautious flying to Ingrid to get back to the airlock, by which time she had become nearly addicted to the incredible thrill and beauty of space walking above the Earth. Reeling in first her umbilical cable, she closed and secured the top hatch and pressurized the airlock, so that she could go back into the crew cabin. Once there, she decided to get out of her space suit and floated to her suit’s retaining frame. Clipping two safety lines to her suit, she then opened her rear access hatch and floated out after disconnecting her jumpsuit from her rigid suit. Returning to the cockpit and strapping herself back in her seat, she called Cape Canaveral on the radio.

“Cape Control, this is STARBLAZER. I am back in my seat after removing my space suit. How is COURRIER ONE doing?”

“COURRIER ONE is now in geostationary orbit and within a few miles only from the planned insertion point. Its transponder is also transmitting and we are in the process of remotely activating its systems. Up to now this mission can be considered a resounding success, STARBLAZER.”



“Well, don’t dance until I’m back on the ground, Cape Control. The toughest part is still left to be done. I have been in space for about nine hours but I feel okay right now and ready to go on for quite longer. Let’s go for another 24 hours and see how it goes, Cape Control.”

There was only a brief pause before the mission controller came back on the radio, sounding confident.

“We see no problems with that down here, STARBLAZER. You have a go for another 24 hours in orbit.”

“I copy, Cape Control. I am going to take a lunch break now, out.”

Ingrid verified her position and trajectory before leaving her pilot seat, finding out that she was about to pass over the general area of Moscow in about forty minutes. She smiled at that, as that would give her time to eat before she started using in earnest her reconnaissance cameras. Undoing her seat harness, she floated through her cabin, going to the small kitchen corner of the space plane, which consisted of a small refrigerator, a convection oven, a rations locker, a thrash container and a small table covered with Velcro, on which she could fix her food containers, which had Velcro bands glued to them. For this first flight, Ingrid had decided to keep her menu simple and easy to eat in zero gravity, stocking up on sandwiches, cold cuts, pieces of dried fruits and cheese cubes. She was soon munching with delight on a ham and cheese sandwich, drinking milk from a bottle equipped with a tube and a valve. She however kept an eye on the instruments situated at the observer’s station, behind the pilot’s seat, while eating.

Thirty minutes later, and after using the zero-G toilet of the crew cabin, Ingrid sat at the observer’s station and used its targeting telescope to examine the terrain she was going to overfly. She smiled with glee when she saw that she would pass in succession nearly at the vertical of two important Soviet military airbases.

“Well well, these will make fine targets for my cameras. Showtime!”

Powering up her high definition mapping radar and opening the lens covers of her four reconnaissance cameras, she was soon taking detailed pictures of the two Soviet airbases as she passed overhead, totally unsuspected by the Soviets, whose local radars were not designed to track space targets. She stayed in the observer’s seat for another ten minutes afterwards, until she started overflying the Arctic coast of the U.S.S.R.. That was when she decided to take a nap until she overflew the next area of

interest, alerting Cape Canaveral of this before setting an alarm clock and going to sleep inside the sleeping bag fixed to the ceiling of the crew cabin.

The next 23 hours were spent in a mix of ground observation and filming sessions, a few nap periods and a few radio interviews, notably with Edward Murrow of CBS, whose film of her launch was now being replayed nearly every hour on all American television channels. Those interviews included live video images from inside the space plane when its position allowed direct downlink with the main tracking stations in Cape Canaveral and the old Cook Army Base, renamed Vandenberg Space Base in honor of the now deceased General Hoyt Vandenberg, dead from cancer.

After 46 hours in space and 29 orbits completed around Earth, Ingrid and Cape Canaveral Control finally decided that it was time for her to come back down. Putting back on her space suit, Ingrid then started to do a complete check of her systems, concentrating particularly on her retro-rocket engines. She was more than a little pleased at seeing that her space plane's concept was actually so efficient that there was still a significant amount of propellant left in the tanks of her orbital rocket engines. That gave her an idea that pushed her into calling the mission controller.

"Cape Control, I still have enough fuel in the tanks of my orbital engines for a 55 second burn. Why not use that fuel now to slow me down? I will simply need to turn ass-end first for the burn, then turn around again."

"Uh, let me run that by our engineers first, STARBLAZER."

There was a delay of a few seconds before the mission controller came back on the radio.

"You may proceed now with a 55 second burn of your orbital engines in retro mode, STARBLAZER."

"I copy, Cape Control. Am turning around now."

Using her attitude control vernier motors, Ingrid then turned her space plane a full 180 degrees around its pitch axis. Once she was certain that her space plane was correctly aligned, she advised Cape Canaveral by radio, then ignited her orbital engines. The more than 8.8 tons of thrust from the two Aerojet rocket engines pushed her back into her seat for an actual burn time of 57 seconds, instead of the expected 55 seconds. That seemingly small extra time, however useful it could be, showed with other previous indicators how much hurried the development of the SPS-10A had been. She promised

herself to slow down the pace of the program to a safer rhythm once back on Earth safely, so that she could deal with all the things that should have been done first if not for the political pressure from the White House. Having more pressing matters to attend to now, Ingrid turned her space plane around again as soon as the orbital engines ran dry. Then, on the mission controller's cue, she fired her retro-rockets for a total of 600 seconds. Next, Ingrid closed the cover of the retro-rockets and made sure that her space plane was ready for reentry, then braced herself for hell.

Contrary to common belief, firing retro-rockets did not push back a spacecraft squarely into the atmosphere by itself, unless one used an insane amount of fuel. In Ingrid's case, her retro-rockets, fired at the lowest point of her trajectory, simply slowed her space plane down enough that it would go lower than 120 kilometers of altitude, where the atmosphere's density would be high enough to start braking her. Making sure that both her helmet camera and her seat camera were on, Ingrid grabbed her control stick, ready to correct any attitude instability as the first whispers of exosphere wind buffeted her space plane.

"Cape Control, I am starting my atmospheric reentry. We may lose radio control soon because of the growing ionization around my plane."

"Understood, STARBLAZER."

Within minutes, the whispers had grown to roars, then to continuous thunder, with the first vivid flames also appearing around the nose and leading edges of Ingrid's space plane. She lost radio contact with the ground as flames ran all over her canopy and as her space plane was shaken hard constantly. Ingrid was now breathing in quick, hard breaths, partly because of the deceleration forces trying to smack her face on her instruments panel and partly from fear and stress. If anything gave way right now, she would have maybe a few seconds to feel the pain while being roasted alive and dying. Concentrating on her artificial horizon and her other flight instruments, Ingrid kept herself ready to correct any attitude deviations that could tumble her space plane and turn it in mere seconds into pieces of molten slag. Thankfully, the shape of her space plane, which was in essence a lifting body, proved highly stable at this stage of her flight. Whether that was through good design guesswork or through sheer luck was still to be determined.

The fiery storm mostly abated a few minutes later, as the space plane slowed down to more reasonable speeds below 14,000 kilometers per hour and lowered to an altitude of 48,000 meters, just short of the stratosphere. Ingrid, now soaked with sweat and with her heart still beating furiously, heard the now clearly anxious voice of the mission controller attempting repeatedly to call her on the radio.

“...lease come in...STARBLAZER, this is Cape Control. Please come in.”

“Cape Control, this is STARBLAZER. I seem to be still in one piece and am now flying eastward over the Mid Pacific at a speed of 8,850 miles per hour and at an altitude of 29 miles. I will try to slow down further if I don't want to miss the coast of America and will also turn northeast towards Muroc.”

“Understood, STARBLAZER.”

Ingrid then ran into a frustrating problem: as soon as she raised the nose of her space plane in order to brake it further, she felt her SPS-10A bounce hard on the upper layers of the stratosphere. To her astonishment, while that atmospheric bounce shaved maybe 300 kilometers per hour off her speed, it also made her rebound all the way up to an altitude of 54 kilometers before her plane started coming slowly down again. Even more, she found herself nearly 500 kilometers further East once back at her previous altitude, with her course having only changed by a few degrees to the North.

“Er, Cape Control, I have a slight problem here. It seems that my space plane is actually too good as an hypersonic glider: I bounced clean off the stratosphere as soon as I raised the nose up.”

There was a delay of a few seconds before the voice of Doctor Von Braun answered her.

“We should have actually expected that, STARBLAZER. This phenomenon is called ‘atmosphere skipping’ and you will probably skip hard a number of times before being able to slip under the stratosphere. Unfortunately, without proper wind tunnel studies, we can't predict how far that will bring you. Did you try to change course yet?”

“I did, Cape Control. I succeeded only in changing heading by four degrees. If I try to bank my plane harder it may tumble out of control. I may not have a choice but to hope that this skipping won't lead me halfway around the World.”

“Uh, please wait for one moment.” Said Von Braun. The voice of Major General Aldridge then took over on the radio.

“STARBLAZER, this is General Aldridge. I counsel that you play it safe for the moment and that you concentrate on putting your space plane down in one piece. I will

pass the word to our bases overseas and to our allies to be ready to welcome you if need be. At the worst, land at any civilian airport in an allied country. We will put the XC-200 on standby to go get you wherever you land, over.”

“I already feel much better, General Aldridge. Thanks for the counsel.”

“Hey, there are a few advantages to having gray hair in a general.” Joked Aldridge before giving back the microphone to the mission controller.

Twenty-eight minutes and thirteen skips later, Ingrid was finally able to ease down her over performing space plane through the stratosphere. By that time, however, she was crossing the coast of Morocco in Northwest Africa and still going at the merry speed of 8,900 kilometers per hour, or Mach 8, on a northeasterly heading.

“Hell, this is like driving a Ferrari without brakes! It goes like a bat out of Hell but there is no way to stop it. Now, if I land in the wrong country I could either be jailed, tortured, executed or all of the above. Time to find out where my allies are in this part of the World.”

Ingrid analyzed her present flight path while keeping the capabilities of her space plane in mind. While going much slower now than half an hour ago, any radical turn at hypersonic speed that would not crush her flat in her seat from the centrifugal force would take hundreds of kilometers to complete. That in turn could put her anywhere over Europe or the Middle East before her speed dropped to supersonic, then to subsonic levels. On the other hand, if she performed a very gradual turn and bled as little speed as she could, she stood a chance of returning to the United States and not having to land a highly classified prototype in a potentially hostile country. She liked that option at once but grimaced when she figured out over where such a turn could put her: Great Britain, which was not exactly the best friend of either the United States or of her personally. It however was the shortest route back to America. Her mind made, she altered slightly her course in order to keep overflying Morocco while approaching the Western Mediterranean. While staying at high altitude in order to both keep her speed high and to avoid any anti-aircraft fire from any of the countries she would overfly without prior flight clearance, she switched one of her two radios to the international distress frequency.

“To all listening on this frequency, this is the United States space plane STARBLAZER. Be advised that I am presently overflying Morocco at a speed of 5,500 miles per hour after returning from orbit and have little maneuver capability and thus

minimal control over my flight path. I should pass near or over Spain and then France in the next few minutes. Please refrain from hostile actions against me, as I am on a strictly peaceful space exploration mission and only wish to fly back home.”

By the time that someone answered her after her third call, she was skirting the eastern coast of Spain at an altitude of forty kilometers and a speed of 8,300 kilometers per hour.

“United States space plane STARBLAZER,” said a male voice in English, “This is the French Air Force Territorial Defense Center. You are cleared through French airspace. We will advise the Belgian, Dutch and German authorities of your imminent transit.”

“Thank you very much, French Air Force.” Replied happily Ingrid in French. “I will stay well above any commercial air routes during my transit, over.”

“Then good luck on your trip home, General Dows. French Air Force out.”

Now feeling much better, Ingrid was able to concentrate on her flying and her navigation. As an hypersonic glider, the SPS-10A was proving to be a first-class machine, having plenty of aerodynamic lift from its lifting body shape while having minimal drag, something that allowed her to keep flying hypersonic for long distances without any engine thrust. However, it was no dogfighting aircraft and once out of the hypersonic domain would be at a clear disadvantage if challenged by missiles or fighter aircraft. She thus had to stay above Mach 4 at a minimum in order to avoid hostile actions. That meant that she would have to keep her present turn very wide, thus nearly ensuring that she would overfly soon some part of Great Britain. The big question now was whether the British would be reasonable and forget that she had sunk a British nuclear cruiser off the coast of Israel four years ago. To show her good faith, Ingrid resumed repeating her message on the international distress frequency, this time targeting in particular the British.

The British finally responded as she was starting to overfly Belgium, with a man speaking in a strong British accent and a frosty voice.

“United States space plane STARBLAZER, this is the United Kingdom Southern Air Defense Zone Control. Identify your precise registry. Are you civilian or military, over?”

Ingrid knew at once that things were going to become sour. On the other hand, she was not ready to lie about who she was.

“U.K. Air Defense Control, this is Lieutenant General Dows. My space plane belongs to the United States Military Space Command. I request safe passage through your airspace, over.”

There was a delay of over twenty seconds before someone replied to that.

“STARBLAZER, this is U.K. Air Defense Control. Your request for safe passage is denied. If you enter British airspace, you will be fired upon. Do you understand, over?”

“I understand, U.K. Air Defense Control, but understand this in turn: my capacity for maneuver at my present speed is limited. I may thus not be able to choose exactly where I go, over.”

This time the reply was immediate and firm.

“STARBLAZER, you have been warned. Do not enter British airspace, out!”

“Stuffy bastard!” Said to herself Ingrid before looking at the screen of her inertial navigation map display. She still could avoid overflying most of Great Britain but she would not be able to avoid completely the chain of small British islands to the North without going too much out of her way and possibly falling short of the American coast. Ingrid thus decided to keep to her intended trajectory and damn the consequences.

Passing the Dutch coastline at Mach 6.1, Ingrid kept to a very large but constant radius turn that made her pass within 160 kilometers from the eastern-most tip of the main land mass of Great Britain. While her space plane was not equipped with radar warning receivers or other defensive avionics, Ingrid could bet right now that at least a few British military radars were tracking her very closely. That became a near certainty six minutes later as she approached the Orkney Islands, home to a large naval British base. From her actual altitude of 25,000 meters she could even see a formation of three ships sailing below her, heading towards the Orkney Islands. As she was about to overfly one of the smaller islands of the Orkneys, her keen eyes caught a pair of small puffs of smoke on the ground. Those puffs quickly turned into trails climbing vertically towards her at high speed.

“Missiles! The bastards!”

Four more puffs then appeared from about the same location: the British were firing a whole battery of surface-to-air missiles at her. That prompted her into emitting at once

on both the international distress frequency and on the operational frequency of the day for the United States Navy, in the hope that some ship would be within radio range.

“This is the United States space plane STARBLAZER, returning from a space exploration mission. I am being fired upon by six British surface-to-air missiles over the Orkney Islands. Any ship or aircraft that can hear me, please relay this information to Washington.”

She had only time to say this once, as the missiles were closing in on a collision course and at a speed she didn't like. That forced her in doing something she had hoped to delay for many more precious minutes. Flipping a few switches, she opened the panels covering the inlets and outlets of her ramjet engines and lit them up. With her space plane being nearly empty of fuel and now weighing only about forty tons, versus over 200 tons when fully fuelled, the thrust from her ramjet engines were enough to make the SPS-10A rocket again towards the sky and outrun the missiles. Ingrid however allowed herself to breath easier only after leaving the Orkney Islands well behind her. Now over international waters, she endured a crushing turn towards the West-Southwest that put her on the most direct line to the American East Coast and kept her ramjets on until they ran dry. Apart from making her gain altitude that would help her glide much longer, that also brought her more than halfway towards the American coast on ramjet power. Ingrid could now nearly smell home.

**07:45 (New York Time)**

**Monday, March 25, 1957 'C'**

**La Guardia Airport, New York City**

**United States**

“Miss Monroe, what are your film projects for this year?” Asked one of the dozen plus reporters and photographers surrounding the movie star in the departure lounge of La Guardia Airport. Marilyn Monroe, as pulpous and sexy as ever, smiled mysteriously to the cameras as she answered.

“I have actually received an interesting offer to star in an action drama. I am going to Hollywood to go see the script of that film.”

“An action drama, Miss Monroe?” Said in a disbelieving tone another reporter, forgetting like most of the others that her proper title would be 'Misses Miller', as the star



had been married for over a year already with the famous playwright Arthur Miller. "Isn't that a bit out of your usual acting range?"

Marilyn gave the man a less than friendly look, clearly offended by his remark.

"Mister, a good actress should be able to play any type of role. I have been studying for years now at the New York's Actors Studio and I feel ready for some changes to my repertoire."

"Can you tell us about that new film, Miss Monroe?"

"Well, I can't say much really since I haven't read yet the script but I could be playing the role of a beautiful spy in a nest of bad guys."

That made most of the reporters smile in understanding, as they thought at once that this would mean that Marilyn would use the 'pillow talk' method to spy on the bad guys. If that was the case, the bad guys didn't stand a chance.

"Will you be doing some true action scenes yourself, Miss Monroe?"

"I don't know that yet but I sure would like to try that. I once had a taste of real war action in Vietnam in 1953 and they were the most intense moments of my life ever."

"Are you referring to that ride in a fighter-bomber with the celebrated General Dows, when she fought off a bunch of Chinese Migs and gunboats to defend one of our destroyers that was sinking?"

"That case exactly, mister."

"Talking of General Dows, have you heard the news about her trip into space, Miss Monroe?"

Marilyn grinned at that question and pointed the large television set suspended high in a corner of the departure lounge and showing a morning news program.

"How could I not hear about that? It has been in all the news since Saturday afternoon. I am very proud of my friend Ingrid. She is an extraordinary girl and a genuine hero."

"Do you know her well, Miss Monroe?"

"Not as well as I would wish. I can however say that she has a heart of gold and is a really fun girl to know. She is also very professional about her work."

The interview went on for another couple of minutes until the wailing of numerous sirens outside the passenger terminal building made everybody look outside through the large windows giving a view of the parking aprons and runways of the airport. Marilyn and the reporters were then able to see a number of fire trucks and one ambulance rush towards the main runway.

“Oh dear!” Said softly Marilyn. “I hope that an airliner is not in serious trouble right now.”

The reporters and photographers, smelling an instant news opportunity, deserted her at once and ran to the windows, searching the sky for some crippled passenger aircraft. Marilyn joined them, as curious as them but not for professional reasons. While well known as an actress, few really knew her as a person. Marilyn was in fact a woman of high sensitivity and humanity and cared for the people around her, especially for children. One of the photographers with a zoom lens on his camera suddenly shouted while pointing towards the Northeast.

“THERE! A PLANE IS APPROACHING VERY FAST!”

Everybody looked in that direction at once and saw a single dot in the sky that was approaching one end of the main runway while going down.

“HEY, THAT’S NOT AN AIRLINER! IT IS TOO SMALL FOR THAT!”

“Maybe a private plane?” Proposed another reporter. A press photographer who had served as a war correspondent squinted his eyes and shook his head.

“That would be the strangest looking private plane I would have seen. It actually looks like a military jet.”

“A military jet in trouble making an emergency landing at La Guardia?” Said a photographer, ecstatic, as he raised his camera. “That should make a nice story.”

Marilyn’s heart tightened at those words. Her service during World War Two with the 99<sup>th</sup> Wing and her trip as part of an entertainment tour to visit the American troops in Vietnam in 1953 had given her an affinity with the men and women serving in the American armed forces. She started silently praying for that pilot to come out of this safely.

A concert of surprised exclamations came out as the unknown plane came closer and could be better detailed. One photographer looking at it through his long-range lens suddenly shouted excitedly.

“IT HAS THE WORDS ‘MILITARY SPACE COMMAND’ PAINTED ON ITS SIDE!”

While that stunned the reporters into silence for a few seconds, it also made Marilyn exclaim emotionally.

“MY GOD! INGRID! IT MUST BE HER RETURNING FROM SPACE!”

Her words instantly started a real pandemonium around her, with both reporters and other passengers present in the lounge rushing to better watch the incoming plane land.

Marilyn had to literally fight her way to the windows to gain a place where she could see as well. Under her anxious eyes, a fantastic-looking craft with short, stubby wings and a sort of large belly keel finally touched down at the very start of the main runway, visibly trying to use as much of its length as possible. It still was going very fast when it settled down on all its wheels. The ex-war correspondent shouted as the plane was passing from right to left on the runway.

“IT’S GOING TOO FAST! IT WILL CRASH AT THE END OF THE RUNWAY!”

A thunderous roar then covered everybody’s voices as a long flame erupted from the nose of the plane. Under the mesmerized eyes of the civilians watching it, the craft then decelerated quickly, with the nose rocket shutting down when the plane was nearly stopped. It then veered on one of the taxiways leading to the passenger terminal building, followed by a half dozen fire trucks and the single ambulance. By then Marilyn was sure that this was Ingrid Dows arriving from space: only Ingrid could pilot such a fantastic craft. Her heart beat furiously as she watched the space plane, with the name ‘STARBLAZER’ now visible on its nose, roll towards the terminal building under jet engine power. One of the reporters then pointed at one of the emergency fire exit stairwells of the departure lounge.

“LET’S GO TO THE TARMAC TO GREET THAT SPACECRAFT!”

The rest of the reporters and photographers then rushed to follow him, with Marilyn at the tail end of the pack. Airport security in the 1950s was a far cry from what passengers of the 1990s and later would expect, with precious little control of who had access to the parking aprons or baggage handling areas. Marilyn and the crowd of reporters were thus able to go down the emergency fire stairwell and come out outside on the tarmac despite the protests of a single airport female employee. The STARBLAZER was barely coming to a stop between two jet airliners when the reporters approached it. Four airport security officers coming at a dead run then belatedly stopped them from coming closer than twenty meters from the space plane. Running slower than the reporters with her high heel shoes, Marilyn arrived on the scene as the four security officers were already fully occupied trying to contain the excited reporters and was thus able to slip behind them. She then waived happily at the pilot visible through the canopy of the space plane. The pilot waved back at her, making Marilyn jump up with joy and anticipation. The crowd now assembled around the space plane then fell silent as a trap opened under the belly of the craft and Ingrid came down on a lift platform supported by a telescopic arm. With the photographers taking picture after

picture of a scene worthy of a science-fiction movie, Marilyn ran to Ingrid, who had raised open the visor of her spacesuit, and happily exchanged a warm hug with her.

“Ingrid, I’m so happy to see that you are okay after this fantastic trip of yours in space.”

“And it is nice to having you here to greet me, Marilyn. Let me just step off this lift platform first.”

“Sure! Need a hand? This suit looks heavy.”

“Thanks but I will be alright.” Replied with a smile Ingrid before cautiously stepping down from her lift platform. She was now standing next to Marilyn on the tarmac when a photographer shouted at her.

“GENERAL DOWS, GIVE US A PICTURE OF THE TWO HOTTEST WOMEN IN THE WORLD STANDING TOGETHER.”

“That I will do with pleasure, gentlemen.” Replied Ingrid, not a little proud of her unexpected publicity coup. After all, part of her mission was to boost the national prestige of the United States as long as classified secrets were not endangered. She thus smiled to the cameras while holding Marilyn’s waist, posing for what would become the cover page of the next edition of the NEWSWEEK and TIME magazines.

## **CHAPTER 15 – VILLE-MARIE**

**08:52 (Paris Time)**

**Tuesday, June 16, 1654**

**Harbor of La Rochelle**

**Atlantic coast of France**

The clerk sitting at a small table set on the quay in front of the three-mast cargo ship 'L'ARC-EN-CIEL' watched with curiosity a large chariot approach him. Driven by a mature man, the chariot carried as well three men and three women, along with a goodly number of wooden chests, canvas bags and a few wooden kegs and barrels. The driver stopped his chariot in front of the ramp giving access to the ship, with the men and women jumping down except for two of them, who stayed aboard to start passing down the luggage and barrels in the chariot. The clerk was soon joined by the captain of the ship, who eyed critically the newcomers before going to their apparent leader, a tall man in his thirties. The latter saw him approach and turned around to tip his hat to the captain.

“Good morning, Captain. I hope that we are neither too early nor too late.”

“You are just fine as timing goes, Monsieur Bonnet. As you can see, your whaler boat was winched aboard and stored on deck yesterday, as you requested.”

The said Bonnet glanced briefly at the nine meter boat lashed to the weather deck of the cargo ship and nodded with satisfaction.

“Excellent! With all the luggage my group is bringing, that boat will be mighty useful to get us from Quebec to Ville-Marie. Talking of luggage, could I abuse the muscles of your sailors in order to store all this between decks? You can tell them that I will be distributing a few deniers in compensation.”

The captain laughed briefly then and grinned to Bonnet.

“You just said the right words to wake up those lazy bastards, Monsieur Bonnet.” A few shouted words from the captain then made eight sailors run down the access ramp and start hauling aboard the group's possession. The captain patted one of the wooden barrels as it was being rolled past him and up the ramp.

“I see that you brought your own travel provisions with you, monsieur.”

Bonnet shrugged then while smiling to him.

“Why travel across the ocean while living solely on sea biscuits and salted fish? Let’s say that I like setting a good table.”

“You will probably make the other seven passengers I have jealous, monsieur: all peasants, including five young women and girls, and as poor as they come.”

Bonnet’s smile faded somewhat at those words, his jovial air replaced by a look of concern.

“If they are in need, we will be more than happy to help them out. Are those seven others aboard yet?”

“No! I am expecting them between now and noon. You should have plenty of time to store away all your things before they show up. You talk like a good Christian, monsieur.”

“Hey,” said Bonnet, a smile returning to his face, “one can be a merchant and businessman and still be a good Christian, even if that’s rare.”

The captain roared in laughter with Bonnet, then walked back on his ship to supervise the storing away of the cargo.

As soon as the chariot was completely unloaded, Bonnet dismissed the chariot’s driver, giving him a gold coin, then went with his five companions to see the clerk still sitting at his table. The latter grabbed his pen and opened his ink bottle and bowed politely his head at Bonnet.

“Good morning, monsieur. May I have your name, occupation and destination?”

“Certainly, my good man! I am Fernand Bonnet, merchant and businessman on my way to New France to open an inn in Ville-Marie. I am from Tours.”

Bonnet then passed his right arm around the waist of one of the women, a pretty brunette in her mid-twenties.

“This is my wife, Claudette Bussière, who will help me run my inn.”

The clerk noted down their two names and occupations, then looked up at another couple that had approached his table. The man was tall and athletic and looked like he could be a tough customer indeed, while the young blonde beauty besides him could have made most men mad with desire.

“And you are?”

“Henri Bruage and Françoise Vinier. I am an associate of Fernand Bonnet, apart from being a handyman. Françoise will work at our future inn as a maid. We are from Strasbourg, in Alsace.”

The Alsatian couple was followed by the younger man of the group, who was however as fit-looking as the two other men. His clothes showed that he was not as wealthy as the two others.

“My name is Michel Lorrain. I am a hunter and am working for Monsieur Bonnet. I will provide venison and furs to his inn. I am from Haguenu, in Alsace.”

The clerk nodded his head at that while scribbling down that information. To have a professional hunter at your service while maintaining an inn in such a wild country as New France made a lot of sense. On the other hand, if all the stories about the ferocious local inhabitants were true, that young man was going to have one dangerous job indeed. The last person of the group turned out to be by far the most interest. Nearly as tall as Henri Bruage and apparently as athletic as him, the young woman was beautiful and sported long black hair. She was dressed in a simple enough dress, linen cap and soft leather shoes but those clothes were brand new. Even more, a large hunting knife and a pistol were holstered from her belt, which also supported a large leather purse, a water bottle and a gunpowder flask. Her tone of voice was friendly enough but the clerk understood that this girl would not stand for any nonsense.

“I am Nancy Laplante, born in New France. I am employed by Monsieur Bonnet as a guide and translator.”

“You were born in New France, mademoiselle?” Said the clerk, frankly surprised. This had to be the first native from across the ocean he had ever met. On second look, the girl did have a deep tan and had the look of an outdoors person.

“My grandmother was an Amerindian.” Replied laconically the girl. The clerk let it at that and scribbled her name in his registry. As the three men and three women were grabbing their personal bags and bedrolls to board the ship, two teenage girls dressed in near rags and carrying each a small bundle showed up at the registry table. One was around eighteen, the other maybe fourteen. The older one then spoke anxiously to the clerk.

“Is this the ship for Quebec, monsieur?”

“It is! Do you have a place reserved aboard?”

“Yes! Me and Marie signed a contract with the Notre-Dame Society to go to New France and find husbands there.”

“And your name is?” Said patiently the clerk, accustomed to deal with poor peasants who had never traveled far before.

“Catherine...Catherine Lorion, from Saint-Soufle.

The clerk wrote that down, then looked at the younger girl, a pitiful-looking and thin one.

“And you, my child?”

“Marie Renaud, monsieur. I am from Saint-Paul d’Orléans.”

“Very well! You are both in fact on the list of expected passengers and your passage and rations for your trip have already been paid by the Notre-Dame Society. In return, I have to remind you that you are both expected to find a husband in Ville-Marie within a reasonable delay.”

“And once in New France, where do we stay? Who will feed us?” Asked in a tiny, timid voice Marie Renaud. The clerk shrugged his shoulders in answer.

“That I don’t know, mademoiselle. I believe that there are some nuns in Quebec. If you run into trouble, you can always go see them, I guess.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Suddenly declared the tall Nancy Laplante, who had listened to the exchange and had approached the table discreetly. She then draped her arms around the shoulders of both poor girls. “I will make sure that they arrive safely in Ville-Marie.”

“Uh, you should ask your employer first about that, mademoiselle.” Said the clerk, not accustomed to see a girl take decisions like this. As if he had heard him, Fernand Bonnet came as well to the table and, after whispering with Laplante, faced the clerk.

“Nancy was correct, monsieur. My group will protect and provide for those two girls until we arrive in Ville-Marie.”

“As you wish, monsieur.” Could only reply the clerk. Bonnet and Laplante then escorted Marie Renaud and Catherine Lorion up the access ramp, presenting them next to the four other members of their group. Still unable to believe her luck, Catherine Lorion eyed the six strangers, all taller and stronger than the average person in France.

“Why such generosity towards us? You don’t know us and we have nothing.”

“Wrong on one count, Catherine.” Replied Fernand Bonnet while smiling to her. “You now have a job at my future inn as a maid if you accept it. I offer food, lodging, basic clothing and three sols a day. The same goes for you, Marie.”

The younger girl couldn’t help shed tears then, so unexpected this was.

“Why do you help us like this, monsieur? We are strangers to you.”



“But you are also good Christian girls in need, which is enough for me.”

Claudette Bussière, who was looking out towards the quay, then smiled and spoke to her husband.

“How many maids are you ready to take in, Fernand? I see two more prospects approaching the ship.”

All heads snapped in that direction and targeted two young women in poor, tattered clothes heading towards the table of the registrar clerk. Next thing Catherine knew, Fernand Bonnet was walking down the access ramp, returning a few minutes later with the two newcomer girls.

“Say hello to Mesdemoiselles Marie Lorgueil and Jeanne Rousselier, guys!”

A new round of introduction was then made, after which the four destitute girls were led by Claudette Bussière to a quiet corner of the ship’s deck, where she spoke to them in a low voice.

“Look, girls. Some of you may be wondering about this being too good to be true, so I will tell you what we are about. Me, my husband and our four associates are heading to Ville-Marie to open an inn there. I understand that there are none there at the moment so competition will not hurt our business. On the other hand, a good inn needs a fair number of hands to run it properly. Michel Lorrain and Nancy Laplante will be busy most of the time hunting, fishing and trapping to provide fresh food and furs to our inn, while Henri Bruage will take care of the building’s maintenance and of constructing more annexes as we go, so that left only me, Fernand and Françoise free to work inside the inn. Believe me, your help will be more than appreciated. Now, you may have heard some awful stories about traveling conditions on ships, which are mostly true. However, we have brought some provisions of our own to supplement the ship’s reserves, so at least the food won’t be that bad. Our biggest problem will probably be personal hygiene, due to the lack of facilities on ships. Me and my husband are however experienced travelers and have some tips that should help you stay healthy. If you all follow our counsels, then your trip should be bearable.”

“Mon Dieu, madame, you make it sound as if such trips are like traveling to Hell.” Exclaimed Jeanne Rousselier. Claudette eyed her somberly.

“They could be, for the travelers who don’t know what they do. Now, let’s see what kind of quarters we will live into on this ship.

Followed by the four girls and enlisting the guidance of a senior sailor, Claudette then went down one deck to a dark, stinking space where a number of rickety wooden bunk beds were lined up. The head clearance was also strictly limited, adding to the claustrophobic nature of the passengers' quarters. Claudette, using a lantern to help her see around, folded away one of the straw mattresses of the bunk beds and swore when she saw a number of crawling insects that had been lying under and on the mattress.

"Damn! Lices! This is a nice start indeed."

She then turned to face the senior sailor, showing him the critters.

"Hasn't this ship been washed and scrubbed after its last trip?"

"Of course it was!" Lied the sailor. "We however can't guarantee that vermin will not come back while at quay."

"Great!" Said Claudette, who then sighed. "Alright, girls, we will have to initiate a complete scrub down of our quarters. First, though, we get rid of those infested mattresses."

"What do you mean, madame?" Said the sailor, suddenly alarmed. "You are not going to throw away all those mattresses? They belong to the ship's owner."

Claudette gave him a no nonsense look.

"Maybe we should bring them to the house of your ship owner, monsieur. Don't worry, though: we will simply pile them somewhere away from our quarters. First, I will have to go buy some cleaning stuff in town before departure."

True to her word, Claudette went off the ship at once with Françoise Vinier and Henri Bruage, returning one hour later with two kegs of vinegar, extra buckets, mops and brushes. By then, another teenage girl and two young peasant men had joined the other passengers of the ship. While Jeanne Merrin, Jacques Morin and Jean Simon proved to be as poor as the four single girls that had first arrived after Bonnet's group, they were seemingly good people and connected well with the others. All of them, including Fernand Bonnet, then worked hard to clean the passengers quarters and make them as livable as possible, which was still not much. They ate collectively lunch out of a pot of pork and vegetable stew Claudette went to buy at a nearby inn, washed down with cider, then resumed their cleaning work until the ship undid its mooring lines and started moving from the quay. All the passengers then lined up on the weather deck to have one last look at France. Seeing young Marie Renaud quietly crying as the ship left port,

Nancy went to her and gently wrapped her arms around her, resting her chin on the girl's head.

"Don't cry, Marie. You may be leaving France for good but you are about to find a new, fascinating country."

"But I know nothing about that country and I'm scared." Wailed Marie before turning around to face Nancy and clinging to her, tears on her young face. "I also don't know what kind of man I will meet there, if he will be kind or mean with me."

"Marie," said Nancy softly, "if it can reassure you, know that I was born in New France and that I know it well. I can tell you about it."

"You...you were born there?" Said in a strangled voice Marie, looking up with surprise at her. Nancy nodded once while smiling.

"Yes, I was. My father was a trapper and his own mother was an Amerindian."

"An Amerindian?"

"The correct name for the original local inhabitants. "

"Please, tell me more." Pleaded Marie, her tears drying somewhat. Nancy patted her back.

"I will, later. I might as well tell my stories to all our group, so that all could learn about New France. Now, let's keep watching France one last time together."

## **07:22 (Paris Time)**

**Thursday, July 16, 1654**

### **L'ARC-EN-CIEL, middle of the Atlantic**

Françoise Vinier, a.k.a. Frida Winterer, stepped out of her bunk in the dark. The way the ship was rolling and the pounding noise of the waves told her that the sea was rough today, again. With the rare skylights closed tight to prevent seawater from pouring in, the stench of the crowded compartment was too much for her. She could barely stand herself by now as well, being mostly unwashed for a month and wearing day and night the same dirty clothes. She had tried at first to wash at least her underwear with seawater but had then quickly developed painful rashes from the salt left in them, which had started to rub against her groin and inner legs, so that solution towards staying clean had gone out the window quite fast. Swearing to herself, Frida grabbed her cape and found her way in the dark to the steep ladder leading up to the open deck. The fresh sea wind that greeted her was like perfume for her compared to the stale air in the

passengers quarters. She found Fernand Bonnet, a.k.a. Fernand Brunet, her 'husband' Henri Bruage, a.k.a. Henrik Braun, Nancy Laplante, Catherine Lorion, Jeanne Rousselier and Marie Renaud already on deck, watching the rising Sun and the sea. Joining them at the ship's side, Frida watched for a moment the sea with them, finally looking at Fernand.

"Is Claudette up yet?"

"Yes, she is. She just went to the ship's galley to get our rations of sea biscuits and water for our breakfast."

Frida wrinkled her nose at that: the so-called fresh water had been on the brown side lately. Soon they would be down mostly to cider, beer and the occasional cup of wine. Claudette Bussière, a.k.a. Claudette Besson, then came back on the weather deck, a pile of large biscuits and a jug of water with a cup overturned on top of it in her hands. Her companions took one biscuit each and were about to bite in them when young Marie looked wide-eyed in horror at her biscuit and threw it on the deck.

"It...it's full of maggots!"

Frida froze immediately, her mouth open and a biscuit in front of her face. Examining her own biscuit, she saw with a jump of her stomach a few small white maggots moving on it. Nancy Laplante 'B', all of eighteen years old now, then attempted a sick joke, beaming and exclaiming with false joy.

"Goodie! Proteins!"

She then bit heartily in her biscuit, making Jeanne Rousselier and Marie Renaud turn green. Frida gave a dubious look to Nancy as Jeanne ran to the ship's side to throw up. Frida knew that Nancy's spirit had once been that of a British boy named James Sommers, who had served at the end of this century as a ship's boy on a Royal Navy frigate and thus had extensive experience of life at sea, but her joke was still hard to swallow.

"Nancy, stuff it!"

"Well, that's what I am doing!" Protested Nancy, her mouth full. Fernand smiled to her while presenting her the pitcher of water and the cup.

"Well, if you like sea rations so much, how about being the first to drink today's water, Nancy?"

"Sure!" Replied the tall teenager. She then pulled out a handkerchief and placed it over the top of the cup, holding it there as a filtering membrane while pouring herself a cup of water from the pitcher. Frida looked with disgust at the maggots now twisting and

moving on top of the handkerchief and turned green. The water in the cup was also brownish in color.

“We...we are not going to drink this, are we?”

Nancy, now most serious, looked at her companions with resignation.

“This is the only water available for the rest of our trip, my friends. I know that this is disgusting but we can’t drink only beer and cider for another month, or we will dehydrate.”

Then giving the example, Nancy pinched her nose and drank her cup of water quickly. The horrible grimace she made did nothing to encourage her friends, but they all drank their water in turn, with Nancy’s hidden headband camera filming their reactions. Frida beat her chest once to make the water pass, her stomach churning around in protest.

“God, this is vile! I will never make a good sailor.”

“You haven’t eaten your biscuit yet, Françoise.” Nancy then reminded her. “Just knock your biscuit hard a couple of times against the deck: it will make most of the maggots fall out.”

Throwing Nancy a murderous look, Frida did do as she had been told, knocking her biscuit a few times and then biting in it while closing her eyes. Surprisingly, the taste was not really bad. Her surprised expression as she munched on her biscuit made Nancy ‘B’ beam at her.

“You see? It ain’t as bad as it looks.”

“Claudette, do you have a frying pan nearby with which I can beat Nancy on the head?”

Frida’s retort made young Marie laugh just as she had swallowed her water ration.

“You girls are crazy!”

“Of course we are!” Replied Nancy with a big grin. Shouting a whoop, she jumped up and did a full back flip, landing upright on the deck with the grace of a cat. Everybody then broke out in laughter, including the few sailors and the captain present on the deck. With the spirits now back up, Claudette searched in a little purse hooked to her belt and produced a few orange pills.

“Well, how about some fruit-flavored candies to make you forget the taste of that water?”

“Yes, I like them!” Exclaimed Marie, eagerly taking one orange-flavored vitamin C pill and chewing it down. Claudette had been distributing such vitamin pills at intervals, passing them as candies, in order to avoid cases of scurvy on their ship. After

they had all chewed on their 'candies', Nancy looked at her travel companions while smiling.

"How about some more lessons in Algonquin language and customs to keep us busy?"

"I suppose that it beats scrubbing decks." Replied Jeanne Rousselier with little enthusiasm. Claudette, seeing the faked look of indignation that came to Nancy's face, slapped lightly her bum before she could say something.

"Come on, you tall boy chaser, we will pretend to listen to you. Right, girls?"

### **12:46 (Quebec Time)**

**Wednesday, August 5, 1654**

**Grand Banks, South of Newfoundland**

"LAND! LAND!"

The yell from the topside lookout made the passengers and crewmembers not already on the weather deck rush out through the deck hatches.

"At last!" Exclaimed happily Jeanne Rousselier as she stared at the brown line on the horizon. "We will soon be able to get off this damn ship."

"Yes, that and finally be able to wash." Replied Claudette Bussière, standing besides her along with Françoise Vinier and Catherine Lorion. Françoise scratched her head vigorously, trying to get rid of some of the lice infesting her hair.

"I hate this! It's making me crazy!"

Claudette looked at her sympathetically: every passenger on the ship had been infested by lice and other parasites for the last two weeks despite all their precautions and scrubbing. That was probably thanks to their contacts with the sailors of the crew, who had been infested from the start of the trip and had passed on their parasites to the passengers.

"Be patient, Françoise. Once in Quebec and off this parasite box we will be able to boil our clothes and thoroughly delouse ourselves."

Catherine Lorion then cut in hesitantly.

"What do we do when we have no spare clothes to wear while our clothes are being cleaned?"

By the expression on Jeanne Rousselier's face, Françoise could guess that she was in the same predicament as Catherine.

“Don’t worry, Catherine. You too, Jeanne. Me and Claudette can lend you something to wear once in Quebec.”

Instead of replying with words, Catherine started crying quietly, prompting Claudette to come close to her.

“What’s wrong, Catherine?”

The teenager shook her head slowly then.

“Nothing is wrong. It is just that nobody has been this nice to me in a very long time.”

“Catherine,” replied softly Claudette, “I am sure that a nice girl like you will find a kind man to marry in Ville-Marie. In the meantime, let’s watch our new country together.”

A few minutes later, both Michel Lorrain and Nancy Laplante went briefly down to the passengers compartment, to return topside with fishing rods in their hands. The others watched them stick pieces of meat on their hooks and then throw their lines over the side, with Jeanne Rousselier going to Nancy, curious.

“Uh, why are you confident that this would be a good time and place to fish, Nancy? I didn’t see the sailors of our ship fish yet during our trip.”

“First, Jeanne, the sailors on this ship are on the lazy side, if you haven’t noticed. Second, this is the Grand Banks, the richest cod grounds in the World. Also, with the low speed we are traveling at now because of the weak wind, our ship’s wake is not strong enough to disturb the fish around us. I thus have a good hope that...”

A sudden jerk on her fishing line then interrupted her and made her pull up her rod.

“I think that I have one already! Hold firmly my fishing rod while I pull in my line, quick!”

Nancy handed Jeanne her rod only after grabbing with one hand the fishing line, not trusting Jeanne’s strength at this time. She then pulled quickly on her line with both hands until she grabbed and threw on the deck the biggest fish Jeanne had ever seen.

“My God, what is that?”

“A Grand Banks cod. FRANÇOISE, GRAB MY CATCH AND GUT IT WHILE I TRY FOR ANOTHER ONE.”

Reacting speedily, her companion took out the knife she was always wearing at her belt and stuck it in the 150 centimeter-long cod, then expertly gutted it while it was still thrashing around. In the time it took her to do that, Michel Lorrain had also caught and pulled in a big cod, while Nancy’s line was back overboard. Two sailors ran to help,

gutting the second fish as Nancy was already pulling out a third fish. Under the disbelieving eyes of Jeanne, Catherine and now Marie Renaud and Marie Lorgueil, Nancy and Michel ended up catching nine big cods before they decided that they had more than enough to feed well everyone in the ship for supper and stopped their fishing. Jean Simon, the young peasant land clearer, came on the deck as the nine cods were being proudly lined up by Nancy and Michel in front of an ecstatic ship's cook. The young man looked at the fish with wide eyes.

"Tudieu! If the trees of New France are as big as those fish are, then I will have one tough job ahead of me."

"They are, Jean." Replied Nancy. You will see that soon."

The next days saw the passengers stare tirelessly at both coasts of the Saint-Laurent River, marveling at the thick, ever-present forests and at the rich animal and marine life visible around them. Jean Simon in particular seemed enthusiastic about the land he was now admiring.

"This is the richest land I have seen yet in my life. We should be able to make a good living out of it."

The big ploughman, Jacques Morin, standing besides him against the guardrail, nodded his head in approval.

"The first years will make for hard work, what with all those trees to clear first, but it will be worth it. We certainly will have all the wood we will ever need. As for fishing and hunting, this land seems to be made for that."

"They say that there is good money to be made with the fur trade."

"You can try it if you want, Jean. There is no way I'm running around those woods, not with those blood-thirsty savages that are killing our people living in those same woods."

Jean looked nervously around at those words, then spoke back to Jacques in a low voice.

"Be careful about that. We have one of those savages traveling with us, remember?"

"Ha! Nancy, a savage? Come on, Jean! Yes, she was born here but she still is French."

"What about all her knowledge about the local savages? She didn't pick that up while living with Frenchmen. She said herself that her grandmother was a savage."



“Jean, you should know Nancy better than that by now. Now, relax and just enjoy the view.”

### **10:16 (Quebec Time)**

**Monday, August 10, 1654**

**Quebec Harbor, New France**

The passengers were greeted on the quay by a crowd of curious onlookers as they walked down the access ramp of l'ARC-EN-CIEL. The crowd was predominantly male, with the female passengers being immediately targeted for close visual scrutiny. There were more than a few admiring gasps on the passage of Françoise Vinier and of Nancy Laplante. A nobleman and his retinue of followers who were waiting on the quay saluted them, bowing down and waiving their wide felt hats.

“Welcome to New France, good people! I am Jean de Lauzon, Governor of this colony.”

Françoise, who was in the lead with her husband Henri, made a curtsy and smiled to the governor.

“Thank you, Your Excellency. You will excuse us if we stay out of flee-jumping range from you and your officers.”

The governor laughed and smiled back to her.

“Your attention is commendable, madame. Since you must be anxious to clean up and rest after such an arduous trip, I will not delay you and your companions further. My Aide will escort you to an inn at once. Do not worry about your heavier baggage: soldiers will be posted on this quay overnight to protect your ship from any possible thieves.”

“You are too kind, Your Excellency. It was truly an honor to meet you.”

Françoise, like the other women and girls, curtsied again before following the governor's aide, the rest of the passengers in tow. Jean de Lauzon, spotting the captain of l'ARC-EN-CIEL on the quay, signaled him to join him. The merchant marine officer came at a run, bowing deeply and waiving his hat once in front of him.

“Captain, I was led to believe that we could expect more passengers from your ship.”

The tone of the governor's voice clearly showed his displeasure, making the captain reply meekly.

“I know, Your Excellency. Unfortunately, a number of scheduled passengers either didn't show up at all or changed their minds at the last moment.”

De Lauzon tightened his fists in frustration at those words.

“This is nonsense! We are trying to settle an immense, rich land and France keeps sending people here drop by drop.”

Shaking his head, the governor then stormed off the quay, realizing that there was little he could do to change the present policies, which were set by the King's ministers.

## **12:09 (Quebec Time)**

### **Inn of Lower Quebec**

#### **New France**

“God, I never thought that I would enjoy a simple cabbage soup this much. Said Françoise Vinier between spoonfuls. The other passengers of her ship, sitting around her in the hall of the inn, all nodded their heads while slurping their own soups. They were already wearing clean clothes, their dirty and lice-infested clothes being washed in hot water by the maids of the inn in exchange for a few extra coins. Their next move would be to start the involved process of getting rid of the lice still infesting their hair, something that could take days. The only one not present in the main hall was Nancy, who had insisted on starting right away to wash with vinegar her long, flowing hair while taking a hot bath. The unloading of their whaler boat and of their heavy luggage would start as well no sooner than tomorrow.

Nancy joined them half an hour later, her hair wrapped in a long towel that smelled strongly of vinegar. She sighed as she sat at her group's table, wearing a very simple peasant's dress and sandals.

“I feel like a pickled herring right now. So, how's the soup?”

“Great!” Replied Michel Lorrain, a.k.a. Michel Hofmann. “You have to try some.” Nancy nodded, then ordered soup as well from the waitress. Pork ribs were next on the menu. Fernand Bonnet looked at the five girls and two young men who had traveled with his group and spoke to them.

“Our boat and heavy baggage will be unloaded tomorrow and we should depart early the next day. You are still welcome to travel with us to Ville-Marie, all of you.”

The seven looked at each other, then quickly accepted Fernand's offer, prompting a toast from Claudette.

"To our new country! For Christ and the King!"

"For Christ and the King!" The seven replied, downing their cups of wine afterwards.

The group was about to finish their meal and go delouse themselves when a tall, thin man in his forties approached their table timidly. He was dressed in well cut but worn clothes and saluted them, looking at Fernand Bonnet.

"Please excuse my indiscretion but I couldn't help overhear your plans to leave for Ville-Marie in two days in a boat. Would you have enough space left for three extra passengers?"

Fernand looked briefly at the others, then smiled to the man.

"I don't see a problem with that, monsieur, as our boat is a thirty foot whaler able to take quite a heavy load. Do you have much luggage with you?"

"Only three bags and a travel chest, monsieur. My wife Marguerite and our five month-old son are traveling with me. My name is Nicolas Hubert, master tailor, also known as Lacroix."

"Then consider yourselves included on the trip, Monsieur Hubert. I am Fernand Bonnet. This is my wife Claudette and these four others are my associates and employees. I am going to Ville-Marie to open an inn there."

Fernand then saw Nicolas Hubert hesitate.

"Uh, Monsieur Bonnet, how much would you charge us for our passage to Ville-Marie?"

"The same as to those seven other passengers, monsieur: nothing! I will be content with your labor as a rower during our trip. Since my boat has a mast and sail, I may not be asking much of even that. As for food, we intend to hunt as we go up the river. Feel free to bring some provisions if you like, though."

Nicolas Hubert couldn't repress a smile of satisfaction at those words. While not penniless, he was not exactly rich either.

"Then we have a deal, monsieur. Where should we meet for the departure?"

"Right here after breakfast in two days."

"We will be here then. Thank you again for your generous help."

Nicolas Hubert then left them, going upstairs, probably to his room. Fernand finished his meal, then paid for the whole group, making Jacques Morin protest meekly about that. Fernand dismissed his objections with a friendly wave of the hand.

“Do not worry about my purse, Jacques: I have ample funds with me. Now, if you will all excuse me, I will go bathe my hair in vinegar.”

“Me too!” Echoed his wife Claudette, imitated soon by all the others except for Nancy, who had taken some advance in that matter.

### **05:41 (Quebec Time)**

**Wednesday, August 12, 1654**

**Inn, Lower Quebec**

Frida was awoken by a vigorous shake from Claudette. Opening her eyes with difficulty, she saw that Claudette was already fully dressed. As for Catherine Lorion and Jeanne Rousselier, they apparently had left already their small room.

“Come on, you sleepyhead!” Said Claudette. “You better get up if you want to have time to eat breakfast before leaving Quebec.”

“Yeah, yeah!” Replied groggily Frida before pushing away the rough woolen blanket covering her, then swinging her legs out of the straw mat bed. Once up, she grabbed the gray wool gown lying on top of a nearby stool and slipped it over her linen shirt. Woolen socks and brown leather shoes went on her feet, while an Alsatian style white linen cap went on her head. Her leather belt was last on, with its belt purse, knife and pistol hanging from it. Packing up the rest of her things in her leather travel bag, she then went down to the inn’s main hall, where she joined the others for breakfast. Nicolas Hubert and his wife, Marguerite Landreau, were there as well as promised, with Marguerite holding her son Jean in her arms while eating. As Frida served herself some bread and cheese, young Marie Renaud looked towards the stairs leading up to the rooms.

“Nancy is not coming down yet?”

“She is already out of the inn, Marie.” Answered Fernand. “She took the last watch of the night to check on our loaded boat.”

“Is that a proper job for a woman?” Said Jacques Morin, snikering, making Fernand raise an eyebrow.

“When we are talking about Nancy, yes! She may be young and female but there is a lot you don’t know yet about her.”

“Like what, Monsieur Bonnet?” Asked Jeanne Merrin, curious. Fernand smiled enigmatically at that.

“You will see. By the way, we bought an Amerindian birch bark canoe yesterday to supplement my whaler boat. The whaler is fine for heavy loads but we needed as well something lighter, something that is easy to take in and out of the water and to carry on one’s back when crossing rapids. Nancy and Michel, being the designated hunters of our group, will travel in that canoe alongside our whaler boat.”

“That girl is a hunter, Monsieur Bonnet?” Said Nicolas Hubert, surprised.

“She is! Furthermore, she has experience of hunting here in New France, or Canada as she prefers to call this country. Her father was a coureur de bois<sup>27</sup>.”

“A girl coureur de bois? That’s a new notion to me.”

“And it is only one part of her story, monsieur. Now, I need to know who here doesn’t know how to swim.”

All of the people following his group raised their hands except for young Marie Renaud and Catherine Lorion.

“Uh, I see. Who here knows how to fire and reload a musket or a pistol?”

This time Nicolas Hubert, Jacques Morin and Marguerite Landreau raised their hands, bringing some relief to Fernand.

“That’s better! We are now heading in potentially hostile territory, where bands of Iroquois warriors could be roaming, so we will need to be vigilant at all times and be ready to defend ourselves. If you have weapons, have them handy during our trip. If you are all ready, then let’s go down to the harbor.”

The walk to the harbor area was short indeed, Quebec still being only a big village. Fernand’s passengers opened wide their eyes when they saw Nancy, who was sitting in the whaler boat, a musket in her hands. Apart from her customary embroidered headband, she wore leggings and a sleeveless short top made of buckskin, a red linen loincloth and soft leather moccasins. She also had a leather haversack and a water

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<sup>27</sup> Coureur de bois: Popular name in New France for the French who practiced trapping and the fur trade. Those men in turn were known to have frequent contacts and interactions with local Amerindians.

flask slung over one shoulder and a leather belt around her waist that supported a steel war axe, a gunpowder flask, a hunting knife, two pistols and two small belt pouches. A very long bow and a quiver full of arrows sat in the boat besides her. On the approach of Fernand and his group, Nancy got up and climbed out of the boat to greet them, making the twenty or so curious people staring at her from the quay step back from a mix of fear and suspicion. She ignored their stares and greeted her companions with a smile.

“Weather is cooperating with our trip today: there is a good wind blowing upstream that will nicely fill our sail.”

“Then, you and Michel will ride in the whaler and we will tow your empty canoe.” Decided Fernand. “No sense in making you row while we all sit down and relax.”

“A fine idea with me, Fernand. Nobody approached our boats during the night.”

“Good!” Replied Fernand, eyeing the many crates, wooden chests, kegs and bundles already loaded in the whaler boat. “Then let’s load up and go, my friends.”

Fernand had each person step in turn in the whaler boat, making sure to distribute the load as evenly as possible. An intrigued Nicolas Hubert pointed at three wooden crates that took a fair portion of the space aboard the boat.

“What is in those crates, Monsieur Bonnet?”

“A dismounted still and two iron stoves for my future inn.” Replied proudly Fernand. “I brought with me many luxury items needed for my inn that are not available here in New France, including quite a few well wrapped glass plates for the windows.”

“Well, if you always plan this well, Monsieur Bonnet, your future inn should be a success.”

“I do hope so, Monsieur Hubert.” Replied Fernand with a grin.

With all fifteen persons and one baby aboard and in their place with their luggage, Fernand untied the rope tying the boat to the quay and pushed, making the boat separate from the quay. With the other five men and Nancy manning oars and with Claudette at the rudder, the whaler backed off from the quay and pivoted on the spot to head upriver, the empty canoe trailing behind a short rope. As soon as their boat was well on its way, Fernand raised the sail of its single mast. The sail filled with wind at once, accelerating the whaler to a most decent speed within a minute and allowing the oars to be stowed away for the time being. While most watched with intense curiosity

the scenery of their new country, Nicolas Hubert, who had been in New France for two years now, started conversing with Fernand.

“Monsieur Bonnet, you said that you had a still for your inn but what will you use to produce alcohol?”

“Wild berries. Someone who came back recently from Ville-Marie to France told me that berry bushes abound around this country.”

Nicolas made a grimace at those words.

“Yes, and so do Iroquois warriors. Berry picking in the woods could be dangerous business. A goodly number of our people who went in the woods for various reasons were either killed or taken captive by those savages, with those captured destined to be tortured slowly to death. Be careful when you or your people will venture away from your inn or from the fort.”

“We intend to be careful, Monsieur Hubert. As you could see, we are well armed and know how to use our weapons.”

“Including your young Nancy?”

“Especially Nancy.” Replied firmly Fernand. As leader of one of three ground assault sections of the Time Patrol, he had helped train and form Nancy ‘B’ and rated her as a true elite trooper with tremendous potential. Nancy was further assisted by her unusually high number of previous incarnations as a warrior through her 9,000 years of past lives, something that gave her a vast experience of war and combat for her tender age. Adding Nancy’s top physical fitness, stamina, agility and courage to all that made her one dangerous girl indeed in combat. He however couldn’t tell that to Hubert, of course, so he kept it at that.

They sailed up the river until noon, passing an unbroken and dense forest on both shores, with much evidence of a rich animal and marine fauna to be seen all around them. At about noon, Fernand had the whaler boat close in on the North Shore, finally making it run safely aground on a small pebble beach where they tied the boat to a dead tree trunk on the shore. Nancy, Michel and Henri ran at once inside the forest bordering the narrow beach, their muskets at the ready, prompting Jean Simon to question Fernand.

“Where are they going?”

“They are making sure that no Iroquois party is nearby in the woods, Jean. Once they declare the surrounding area safe we will eat lunch. For those of you who need a

comfort break, Françoise will escort the women inside the woods, where you will have some privacy. As for the men who need to go, follow me! Claudette, you may start setting lunch. No fires!"

"Understood, Fernand." Replied Claudette. She had time to prepare portions of cheese and bread bought in Quebec, while the others who needed to had the chance to go relieve themselves in the woods before their three scouts came back at a walk. Henri reported at once to Fernand with military precision.

"Nothing within 300 meters, Fernand, except for one black bear heading away from the shore. I will post Michel out as a sentry during lunch."

"Good! Come eat with us, then."

After a quick, frugal lunch, the sixteen travelers went back in their boat and rowed away from the shore before raising again their sail and resuming their course towards Ville-Marie. After five more hours of navigation and with the Sun low on the horizon, Fernand made the whaler boat beach again, this time for the night. Again he sent Nancy, Michel and Henri check the woods first, then had his two tents put up just inside the tree line, where they would be less visible to someone on the water or the opposite shore. By then Catherine Lorion, like many of the other teenage girls, was starting to think of Fernand Bonnet and of his associates as soldiers rather than merchants. Nancy, with her past as daughter of a coureur de bois, could be explained to a point but Françoise and Claudette were showing themselves experts at many things that were atypical of the common French housewife. At one point, Catherine couldn't resist asking Françoise later in the evening about that, getting an amused look from her friend.

"Catherine, France just came out of years of civil war and is now at war with the Spaniards. Me and Henri are from Alsace, where mercenary companies and other various groups of soldiers have been constantly marching through, looting, raping and murdering their way as they went. Henri was part of our local militia defense force, while I had to learn how to shoot and reload a musket just to protect our home from marauding soldiers and deserters. I even got to shoot one such deserter as he was trying to break down our door while Henri was absent. You can't simply play the timid housewife and pretend that nothing is happening around you in those conditions, so I got an uncle of mine who was a soldier to show me a few tricks that would help me survive. They did help me and now I'm here, trying to find a better life in this new country with Henri."



“And Claudette and her husband?”

“You will have to ask them but I suspect that their story will sound much like mine. Catherine, aren't you tired of having about everyone push you around and either exploit you or outright steal from you while you have to meekly accept all that without fighting back? I certainly was. Here, we may have to face the Iroquois but at least we have the full right to defend ourselves from them and don't have to worry about whole armies repeatedly marching through. Also, you won't have the soldiers of our own French nobles loot and rape at will here, the way they did all the time during the Fronde in France.”

Catherine instinctively looked around her, as if looking for spies, then looked back at Françoise, speaking in a low voice.

“Be careful about what you say, Françoise. If the Governor gets word of the way you speak, he could have you flogged for disrespect towards the nobility.”

“Ha! I only said the truth and he would know it. The King certainly knows what his nobles are capable of, since he had to beat them into submission.”

Catherine was silent after those words, troubled. An uneducated girl from a poor family, she had taken for granted the authority of the nobility and of the King to do as they wished all her life. To hear someone mock like this the nobility was most disturbing to her. Her friend was however right, which made things only more disturbing. With her mind in turmoil, Catherine went to help Jeanne Rousselier collect dead wood for their fire, escorted by Nancy Laplante.

### **18:35 (Quebec Time)**

**Thursday, August 13, 1654**

**Six kilometers downstream from Trois-Rivières**

Fernand was getting increasingly worried as the Sun was getting lower and lower on the horizon: they were still not in Trois-Rivières, even though he knew that they were close to it, and darkness was about to fall. If they arrived at night at the French outpost, that would represent a tempting opportunity indeed for any Iroquois war party wanting to attack them. Musket fire would in fact become mostly ineffective at night due to the lack of proper sights on them and would thus permit the Iroquois to engage at once in hand-to-hand combat, something they excelled in. Nancy seemed to think likewise, as she looked at him with concern visible on her face.

“The Sun will set in maybe half an hour, Fernand. We will soon need to take a decision about whether we continue towards Trois-Rivières or if we stop now for the night.”

“But, camping overnight in the wild could be dangerous.” Objected Nicolas Hubert. Fernand nodded grimly.

“True, but not as much as doing it close to Trois-Rivières. That outpost is one of the places where you could strongly expect parties of Iroquois warriors to lay in ambush, waiting for an easy prey to show up. A group of Frenchmen arriving at night would constitute such a prey. We either go all the way to the outpost before nightfall or stay away from it overnight. Monsieur Hubert, you have been to Trois-Rivières before. How far from it do you think that we are now?”

The tailor thought furiously as he surveyed visually the nearby shores, looking for landmarks he remembered.

“We must be no more than a few miles, five at most, from the outpost. In fact, I believe that we should see the fort past that next bend in the river.”

“Then we press on with all haste.” Decided Fernand at once. “Take out the oars, people! The wind is too lazy to my taste right now.”

The others didn’t waste time obeying him, spurred by the fear of an Iroquois attack. They had barely started rowing in cadence when Claudette, still manning the rudder, shouted a warning.

“FOUR CANOES HAVE JUST LEFT THE SOUTH SHORE TO OUR LEFT!”

Fernand, who was rowing with the other men and with Nancy, eyed quickly the four canoes now visible: they contained a good dozen Amerindian warriors who were paddling hard towards the whaler boat. He doubted very much that their haste was motivated by the wish to welcome them.

“FRANÇOISE, REPLACE NANCY AT HER OAR! NANCY, START ENGAGING THOSE CANOES FROM LONG DISTANCE! THE REST OF YOU, ROW LIKE HELL!”

The five French teenage girls and Marguerite Landreau couldn’t help whimper in fear at the sight of the warriors approaching them: the Amerindians looked as fierce as their reputation had made them. Furthermore, it was already evident that the light canoes, each with four paddlers, would easily overtake the heavily loaded whaler boat. Nancy surprised the girls by grabbing her big bow and quiver instead of her musket. She then transferred to the rear of the boat, next to Claudette, standing fully up in the boat and shouting to her friend.

“CLAUDETTE, HOLD ME BY MY BELT AND KEEP ME STEADY!”

Claudette obeyed at once, grabbing with one hand Nancy's belt while still holding the rudder with her other hand. Thus secured, Nancy quickly placed an arrow on her English longbow and, in one smooth motion, raised her bow over her head and then lowered it to her front while pulling its string at the same time, using the same technique used by the English archers that had defeated the French knights at Crécy and Poitiers. With the 55 kilos of pull of her longbow she could reach a maximum effective range of nearly 250 meters and thus easily outranged the short bows used by local Amerindians. She could even shoot accurately past the effective range of most muskets. The great advantage of her longbow right now was however its rate of fire. A well-trained archer, which she was, could sustain a rate of fire of up to fifteen arrows per minutes, compared to the two shots per minute delivered by a good soldier armed with a musket. Her first arrow flew off as the nearest Amerindian canoe was still over 200 meters away. A second arrow was already on its way when the first arrow penetrated the thin birch bark bow of the leading canoe, not wounding any of the four warriors aboard but unsettling them while creating a minor water leak. The Iroquois, as Nancy was now sure that they were, whooped war cries and redoubled their efforts in closing in with the whaler. The second arrow then struck a warrior in the leading canoe, wounding him in his left shoulder and making him shout with pain. Twelve more arrows followed in the first minute of shooting, killing or wounding five more warriors and damaging three of the canoes. One warrior then tipped overboard, an arrow in one eye, upsetting his canoe and sending his three companions in the water. With the whaler boat still out of effective range of their own weapons, the surviving Iroquois soon gave up the chase in disgust, turning around to help their comrades in the water. That prompted a round of triumphant cheers from the French, who were however reminded at once by Fernand Bonnet that they were not safe yet.

“RESUME YOUR ROWING AT ONCE! WE DON'T KNOW HOW MANY MORE IROQUOIS ARE AROUND.”

That was more than enough to entice everyone in rowing even harder. The rowers were nearly spent physically when Nancy, who had moved to the bow, shouted happily.

“I SEE THE FORT OF TROIS-RIVIÈRES LESS THAN A MILE AHEAD. WE WILL SOON BE SAFE.”

Despite their fatigue and being covered with sweat, the six men and two women manning the oars kept on, rowing hard until the whaler boat entered the mouth of the

Saint-Maurice River and beached itself on a sandy beach less than fifty meters from the wooden palisade of the French outpost of Trois-Rivières. By then the Sun was gone and only the poor light from the dusk illuminated the area. As Nancy, who had jumped out on the sand first, was helping the girls get out quickly from the boat, a party of nine armed Frenchmen coming from the fort joined them, led by a solidly-built man with long curly black hair. The latter stared for a second at Nancy, apparently put off by her Amerindian outfit, then pointed the open gate of the fort to the girls coming out of the boat.

“Follow my men inside, mesdemoiselles: they will escort you.”

He then went to Fernand, who was giving directives to the men in the boat about what to carry out. Fernand stopped speaking when he approached and eyed him calmly.

“I am sorry to bring this much excitement to this place, monsieur. However, the Iroquois didn’t give us much of a choice.”

“Don’t be sorry: we go through this constantly. I am Pierre Boucher de Grosbois, Governor of Trois-Rivières. Were any of your people hurt?”

“Fortunately no, monsieur. They chased after us on the river but Nancy was able to keep them at arm’s length with her longbow.”

“Who?” Said Pierre Boucher, thinking he had misunderstood. Fernand smiled to him in the growing darkness.

“Nancy is the tall girl you just passed by, the one in Amerindian clothes.”

“Is she French?”

“Half French, half English, with a bit of Huron thrown in, but you can count on her fully, monsieur. She is also one of my associates. By the way, I am Fernand Bonnet, future innkeeper in Ville-Marie.”

“You are not under contract from the Notre-Dame Society?” Asked Pierre Boucher, referring to the society that was sponsoring the settling of Ville-Marie with the avowed goal of evangelizing the Amerindians living in that area.

“Of course not! I love too much making good business. Me and my five associates, which include my wife Claudette here, are however escorting to Ville-Marie five single teenage girls, a couple with a baby and two young single men, all under contract from the Notre-Dame Society.”

Pierre Boucher politely bowed to Claudette, then returned his attention to Fernand.

“We will talk more at length once you are safely inside the fort. Your boat should be safe overnight this close to the palisade.”

“Then just give me ten minutes, monsieur, time for us to get our personal luggage out and to cover our boat and canoe.”

Pierre Boucher nodded in understanding, then helped a beautiful young blonde get out of the boat with her canvas bag. To his shock he saw that she had a knife and a pistol at her belt, like the wife of Fernand Bonnet.

“My God! Is this an Amazon invasion?”

The blonde grinned to him as she jumped down on the sandy beach.

“Let’s just say that we put all the chances on our side for this trip, monsieur. I am Françoise Vinier, associate and maid of Monsieur Bonnet for his future inn. This big guy there is my husband, Henri Bruage.”

“Pleased to meet you, madame, and you as well, monsieur. I will be most happy to offer you the hospitality of my outpost for the night.”

The blonde smiled as he gallantly kissed her hand.

“Hmm, I love gallant men, monsieur, and you certainly appear to be one.”

“You will be able to repeat that to my wife later on, madame.” Replied the governor, malice in his voice.

As the newcomers followed Pierre Boucher and his men towards the fort’s gate, they passed in front of a cemetery located just outside of the palisade. Françoise hesitated and stopped then, staring at the dozens of crude wooden crosses lined up in the plot.

“My God! So many dead for such a small community.”

Boucher’s face filled with momentary sadness as he reviewed the names on the nearest crosses.

“Life has indeed been harsh at the hands of these damn Iroquois. We lost 22 people to them in the last two years alone, but we intend to stay and prosper.”

“Monsieur,” replied Françoise in a subdued voice, “with people as brave as the people of Trois-Rivières, I am certain that you will build a great city here.”

The governor bowed, saluting her with his hat.

“Your compliment truly warms my heart, madame.”

Resuming their walk, the group entered the gate of the fort. Inside, the newcomers saw that the palisade actually enclosed a full blown village, with maybe forty houses lined along a few streets running in a checkerboard fashion. A growing crowd of men, women and children stared in turn at the newcomers. Catherine Lorion suddenly jerked back in

fear as an Amerindian man started detailing her from up close. Pierre Boucher made a reassuring gesture to her then.

“Do not worry, mademoiselle. Attikwata here is an Algonquin, an ally of us. The Algonquians have suffered as much as we did from the Iroquois. The Huron, another nation of good allies, have unfortunately been massacred and dispersed by the Iroquois in the last few years.”

Reluctantly at first, Catherine let Attikwata touch the fabric of her dress, then the small silver chain around her neck which had been given to her as a gift by Françoise Vinier. Nancy Laplante then stepped forward and said a few soft words in Algonquian to Attikwata, who nodded in understanding and left Catherine alone, instead starting a conversation with Nancy. Pierre Boucher eyed for a moment Nancy as she spoke with Attikwata, then spoke in a low voice to Fernand.

“Your Nancy can speak Algonquian?”

“Along with Iroquois and Huron, monsieur. I use her as interpreter and hunter, as she is the daughter of a coureur de bois who was the son of a Frenchman and of a Huron woman. She was in fact born here in New France.”

Boucher looked at Nancy with wide eyes.

“This girl is decidedly fascinating. You will have to tell me more about her.”

“Uh, I would rather let her tell her own story, monsieur. She is a bit touchy about her private life.”

“As you wish, Monsieur Bonnet.” Said the governor while watching Nancy show her longbow to a fascinated Attikwata.

## **20:13 (Quebec Time)**

### **South shore of Saint-Laurent River**

#### **Near Trois-Rivières**

Tsinapas, himself wounded to his left shoulder, could only watch helplessly as his brother and companion, Kahnehadas, breathed one last time and died, surrounded by his comrades. A lump in his throat, Tsinapas then started singing a song for warriors killed in combat, accompanied by the other eleven survivors of his group. As a result of their disastrous encounter with the French in the big boat, two warriors were now dead, while four more were wounded to various degrees, including Tsinapas. Once they had finished their song, the Agniers Iroquois took the time to hastily bury their dead, hoping

to be able to return later to collect their bones and return them to their clan. Sitting back around their campfire, they looked at each other in silence for a moment, with a warrior finally addressing Tsinapas, who was their leader.

“What do we do now, Tsinapas? With four of us wounded, we are not in a state to attack again the French. In fact, we should bring Kehkakwitas back home if we want to see him survive.”

Tsinapas eyed briefly Kehkakwitas, who was resting besides the fire, a nasty chest wound making his breathing laborious.

“You are sadly right, Tsotehaka. As much as I wish that I could avenge my dead brother, our warring season is over for this year, at least for many of us.”

Tsinapas then grabbed the long arrow extracted from his shoulder and made a point of examining it.

“I have never seen arrows reach this far before, nor have I seen a bow as tall as the one handled by that Frenchman, or was it a Frenchman?”

“I could swear that it was actually a woman,” volunteered Tsotehaka, “a woman wearing traditional clothes. I don’t think that she was French. The French don’t let their women fight.”

“Neither do we! Nor do the Huron or the Algonquians.”

“A metis then?” Proposed another warrior. “She was taller than normal French women or even men, as tall in fact as most of us. Half-breeds sometimes result in persons outside of the norms.”

“Your idea has merit.” Recognized Tsinapas. “That woman, whoever she is, is however a clear threat to our warriors with her giant bow. Niotsaeton and his group of warriors are operating upstream, near Hochelaga<sup>28</sup>. They have to be warned about these French and that woman. Kenawanda, Tsotehaka, I want you to take our remaining intact canoe and to leave now for the prearranged meeting point with Niotsaeton’s group. Paddle hard and get there as quickly as you can to pass the word to our fellow warriors, then stay with them to reinforce their group. As for the remainder of us, we will head back home with our wounded as soon as our canoes are repaired.”

The two designated warriors nodded and got up to gather their meager personal things. The remaining warriors accompanied the two men to the shoreline, wishing them well

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<sup>28</sup> Hochelaga: Iroquois name for Ville-Marie/Montreal

before they departed in their canoe. Tsinapas, his left arm immobilized in a sling, then looked at the seven warriors surrounding him, two of which also sported arrow wounds.

“Let’s not lose any time, my friends. We better start repairing our canoes tonight.”

### **14:23 (Quebec Time)**

**Sunday, August 16, 1654**

**Saint-Laurent River, three kilometers downstream of Ville-Marie**

Frida, squinting her eyes to look at something in the distance, then screamed out in joy, making young Marie Renaud jump nervously.

“VILLE-MARIE! WE ARE FINALLY ARRIVING!”

Catherine Lorion, her heart beating faster now, strained her eyes to see their new home. A wooden fort was the most prominent sight along the shore of the river, with a few houses dispersed between the trees of the forest surrounding the fort. A few clearings marked cultivated fields, while a windmill stuck out of the trees at a short distance from the fort. She could still see no quays or other obvious place to land their boat and canoe. Her companions cheered as well at the sight of the fort and proceeded to put the oars in place in order to row to the shore.

On the same shore, level with the whaler boat and hidden in the bushes and trees lining the riverline, Niotsaeton and his group of eight warriors watched with interest the French boat as it passed in front of them, towing behind an empty canoe. The boat was too far for either musket or bow shot, so Niotsaeton took out a telescope he had bought at a high price from Dutch merchants in Fort Orange and examined in turn the sixteen occupants of the boat. One young woman near the bow attracted his fancy for a moment: apart from being beautiful, she sported the longest blond hair he had ever seen. Her scalp would make a prized trophy indeed on his return from this scouting and raiding expedition. Looking then at the remaining occupants, Niotsaeton saw a tall teenage girl dressed in buckskins. Examining her in detail for a few seconds, he then passed his telescope to the warrior hiding next to him.

“Look at the third person from the front in that boat, Tsotehaka. Is she the one who shot the giant bow?”



Tsotehaka took only a moment before he nodded and gave back the telescope to Niotsaeton.

“It’s her alright! Her long black hair will make a fine scalp when I will get close to her. Even better, we could capture her and make her die slowly, to make her pay for the brothers she killed.”

“All in good time, Tsotehaka.” Replied calmly Niotsaeton. His face then reflected sudden dismay, prompting an alarmed question from Tsotehaka.

“What’s wrong?”

“One of the French girls, the one with the long blonde hair, is now looking straight at us with a telescope.”

Swearing to himself, Niotsaeton lowered his scope and looked at his warriors: they were all under cover and well hidden. How could the French girl have spotted his group? Completely spooked by this, he signaled his companions to retreat further into the woods, then followed them at a half-crouch.

“They are now retreating in the woods. The path to Ville-Marie is now clear for your group.”

Frida Winterer smiled as she silently received the radio message from the scoutship WALKÜREN, in which she normally worked as the copilot and weapons officer. The WALKÜREN was the ship charged to discreetly follow her research team under cloak and had detected the group of Iroquois warriors via its thermal imaging sensors. Frida thought her response, using the micro-radio implanted at the base of her skull.

“Thanks for the warning, Hanna. We will keep an eye out for these guys.”

A steadily growing crowd was gathering on the shore just outside of the fort as the whaler boat approached under oar power. A rudimentary wharf that had been hidden behind a dead, fallen tree, was now visible and Claudette, sitting at the rudder, steered for it at once. About a dozen men went down the embankment, using a rough trail, and helped tie the boat to a pillar of the wharf, to which a number of rowboats and canoes were already tied. A man wearing a sword and a pistol at his belt stepped forward as Frida got out of the boat but waited for Henrik to get out before going to him and shaking his hand.

“Welcome to Ville-Marie, monsieur! I am Lambert Closse, Sergeant-Major of the town’s garrison.”

“And I am Henri Bruage, associate of Monsieur Fernand Bonnet, who is the leader of our group.”

Closse looked at Fernand, who had been pointed to by ‘Henri Bruage’, and went to shake his hand.

“Monsieur Bonnet, I am happy to see you arrive with so many new souls for our small community. Are you all under contract from the Notre-Dame Society?”

“Not all of us, Monsieur Closse. Me, my wife and four associates came to Ville-Marie on our own to build an inn. The rest are however under contract.”

“Then we will sort this further after you are able to unload your things.”

“In that case, just let me unload what we immediately need. I will leave the heavier pieces for later, when I know where we will live.”

“Fair enough, Monsieur Bonnet.” Said Closse, who then watched the occupants of the boat disembark. While the five teenage girls in French dresses attracted a lot of attention from the numerous single men present, Nancy made many recoil with suspicion when she stood up in the boat and became fully visible. Seeing Closse’s hand instinctively go near his pistol, Fernand interposed himself and looked down into the eyes of the soldier.

“Nancy is one of my associates, Monsieur Closse. Furthermore, she has French blood in her veins. I use her as interpreter and guide, as she was born in this country.”

“A native white girl from New France? This is rare indeed, especially when that said girl is so heavily armed.”

“That girl already saved all our lives near Trois-Rivières, monsieur, when she kept at bay four canoes full of Iroquois with her bow. She is the daughter of a *coureur de bois*.”

“I see!” Said Closse, relaxing a bit then. The *coureurs de bois* were known around New France for associating with the local Indians and to also often dress and live like them. This was however the first time he had seen a female *coureur de bois*, something that was probably going to scandalize Father Pijart. Closse gave dubious looks at the two other women wearing knives and pistols, then looked back at Fernand.

“My men will guard your boat while I escort you to the governor’s office. Please follow me.”

Going up the small trail, Closse led them inside the fort, past a central courtyard with a pillory and a wooden head collar, then into a stone and wood building larger than the houses surrounding it. All along the way a crowd of curious but friendly people stared at

the newcomers, with a few shouting greetings as well. The inside of the fort was a crowded place indeed, with many apparently hurriedly built huts and houses lining the inside of the palisade.

Still led by Lambert Closse, the sixteen newcomers walked in a small, sparsely furnished office where a nobleman rose from behind his work table. In his forties, he had an honest, resolute face and a robust body. The nobleman scanned quickly the group, his eyes stopping for a moment on Nancy. That was when Closse whispered for a moment in his ear. The nobleman then spoke up in a firm voice.

“Welcome to Ville-Marie, good people. I am Paul Chomedey de Maisonneuve, Governor of this post.”

He then looked at Closse.

“Have my secretary report in at once.”

As Closse hurried away, the Governor came from behind his table and shook hands with the men of the group, who presented themselves in turn. De Maisonneuve next kissed the hands of the women and girls. Closse came back with a Jesuit priest as the Governor returned to sit behind his table.

“Father Pijart is my secretary, apart from being our community priest.” Explained de Maisonneuve. “I would like you in turn to state your full name, place and date of birth, your occupation and, if applicable, the date and place of your marriage.”

The newcomers, starting with the younger girls, executed themselves, with Father Pijart writing down that information. Fernand Bonnet’s declaration, which was second to last, made de Maisonneuve raise an eyebrow.

“Monsieur Bonnet, while we already have enough drinking places in this post, I agree that we could use an inn, especially to lodge passing travelers and newcomers in Winter. I will thus grant you a license to sell alcohol in your inn, as long as you don’t serve it to natives. Do you intend to cultivate land as well?”

“Yes, Your Excellency! My wife will grow vegetables around our future inn, to help provision it.”

De Maisonneuve nodded his head and referred to a rough map of Ville-Marie laid on top of his work table.

“Father Pijart, take note of this: I give to Monsieur Bonnet the lot along the shoreline to the southeast of the Hôtel-Dieu.”

“Thank you, Your Excellency!” Said Fernand as he bowed in salute. “Er, would you permit the production of alcohol as well, sire?”

“Production? How? With what?”

“I brought a small still with me, Your Excellency. I intend to pick wild berries at first to run it.”

De Maisonneuve smiled in amusement as he stared at Fernand.

“I see that you intend to make a generous profit by cutting the grass from under the producers in France who keep selling us Brandy at such dear prices. Very well, monsieur. As long as you pay the relevant taxes on the sale of your alcohol I will grant you a license to produce alcohol as well.”

De Maisonneuve looked next at Nancy, who was last in line.

“Time to present yourself to Father Pijart, mademoiselle.”

“Yes, Your Excellency! I am Nancy Laplante, daughter of Pierre Laplante and of Lady Suzanne Sommers. I was born in the month of June of 1636 along the south shore of the Saint-Laurent River, near the northern tip of Lake Ontario. I am the interpreter and guide of Monsieur Bonnet.”

“Your mother was a noblewoman, mademoiselle?” Asked Father Pijart, having a hard time believing his ears. Nancy nodded once, then looked straight at the Governor.

“Your Excellency, I would wish to wait until we are in private before going into more detail about me. By in private, I mean strictly you and me.”

De Maisonneuve looked back at her with suspicion: that girl was already too strange and her mother’s name sounded definitely English.

“What was exactly your mother, mademoiselle? Surely you can tell us that, if you don’t have anything sinister to hide.”

Nancy hesitated for a second, then answered de Maisonneuve.

“My mother was an English woman of low nobility that had been captured and taken as a slave by the Huron. My father, a coureur de bois, bought her from the Huron and married her.”

“And how did you end up in France, mademoiselle?” Asked the Governor, with the new settlers listening on with avid interest to this exchange, thirsty to know more about the enigmatic Nancy.

“When my parents died a few years ago, I took a ship to Europe in New Amsterdam and visited my mother’s family in England. From there I then crossed into

France, where I worked for the King's cause during the Fronde uprising. I came back to visit my land of birth."

From suspicious, de Maisonneuve then grew nearly hostile.

"You have English blood in your veins, mademoiselle? And what tells me that you are not a spy for the English?"

While Fernand Bonnet and his associates looked incensed by that accusation, Nancy simply searched in her haversack while staring back at the Governor, finally pulling out and presenting to him a leather folio.

"This should explain to you who I am, Your Excellency. I however ask that this information be kept from all others, even from your secretary."

Deeply suspicious, de Maisonneuve opened the folio, extracting from it a folded parchment bearing a large red wax seal and ribbon and reading it. His face reflected nearly at once surprise and he snapped his head up after a few seconds to stare with disbelief at Nancy, his face pale.

"You..."

"Don't say it, Your Excellency! The signature on this document should tell you what would be the consequences for you of being indiscreet about me."

De Maisonneuve swallowed hard, then folded back the document and slipped it back inside the leather folio before handing it to Nancy.

"Very well, mademoiselle. Your secret will be safe with me. Father Pijart, erase the entry concerning Mademoiselle Laplante from your registry."

The Jesuit looked at first as if he had just heard an heresy, then obeyed the Governor with clear reluctance as the teenage settler girls and peasant men watched on with disbelief. Still shaken, de Maisonneuve looked back at his map of Ville-Marie.

"Monsieur Jean Simon, I grant you the lot adjacent and to the north of Monsieur Bonnet's lot. Monsieur Jacques Morin, I grant you the lot directly to the northeast of the Hôtel-Dieu. I am confident that you will both be able to make those lands productive."

"Your Excellency, you can count on my arms and back." Said proudly Jacques Morin, who was finally seeing his dream of a land of his own fulfilled.

"On mines too, Your Excellency." Added Jean Simon.

"Monsieur Hubert," then continued the Governor, looking at the master tailor, his wife and his baby son, "since you have a young child with you, I believe that you are in a more urgent need of lodging than the others. However, with the large group of newcomers that arrived last year, all the housing in and near the fort is taken. The only

thing I can offer you is a damaged, abandoned house to the northwest of the Hôtel-Dieu.”

Nicolas Hubert raised an eyebrow in surprise at those words.

“If housing is so tight, Your Excellency, how come nobody grabbed that house yet?”

“Superstition, monsieur.” Replied de Maisonneuve, frustration on his face. “The previous occupant, Jean Boudart, was killed by the Iroquois three years ago, along with his two young children, while his wife, Catherine Mercier, was last seen being led away into captivity. Since then, nobody has accepted to live in their house, on pretext that Boudart’s ghost is in it.”

“Dear Mother Mary!” Said softly Jeanne Rousselier, touching the crucifix hanging from a chain around her neck. “What do you think happened to that poor woman, Your Excellency?”

Immense sadness seemed to fall on de Maisonneuve’s shoulders at that question.

“At best, the Iroquois made her a slave and will eventually make her die through overwork, employing her at the hardest and dirtiest work around their camp. At worst, they tortured her to death for their entertainment. She was a nice, brave woman. May God have mercy on her soul.”

The newcomers exchanged looks of sorrow and horror, then Nicolas Hubert cleared his throat.

“Your Excellency, I will take that house if it is still available.”

“Good man! There is also a four acres lot that comes with the house. It is yours as well, Monsieur Hubert.”

De Maisonneuve next smiled to the five single teenage girls that had come with Bonnet’s group.

“As you may have noticed from the lecherous looks around you, mesdemoiselles, there are a lot of single men around this post. I suspect that fending men off will be a main part of your occupations until you find a suitable husband for each of you. In the meantime, since you have no relatives here, I need to know where you intend to stay.”

The five girls didn’t take long to make their minds, having already discussed that subject during their trip from Quebec.

“I will live with the family of Monsieur Hubert, Your Excellency.” Announced Jeanne Rousselier. “I already worked as a seamstress and I could be of use for his tailoring business.”

De Maisonneuve nodded approvingly at that: with Nicolas' wife and child living in the same house, the risks to Jeanne's virtue were minimal.

"What about you, mademoiselle Lorion?"

"I will stay with Monsieur Bonnet for the moment, Your Excellency. He has two tents, one of which will be reserved for the women of his group. Monsieur Bonnet has offered us jobs as servants and maids in his future inn and we will also help his wife cultivate their vegetable plot until we each find a good man to marry."

"Excellent!" Exclaimed the Governor, rising from his chair. "Lambert, please go with our new citizens and mark with them the boundaries of their allocated lots of land. Now, if you will excuse me, I have some paperwork to do."

"Uh, what about Mademoiselle Laplante, Your Excellency?" Asked Father Pijart, clearly uncomfortable about Nancy. The Governor gave him a no-nonsense look.

"I am sure that Mademoiselle Laplante will manage by herself around Ville-Marie, Father Pijart."

Following that, the group left the Governor's office, then the fort, and was led through a half-deforested area by Lambert Closse. After a five-minute walk they arrived at a dilapidated house bordering a field overgrown with weeds. They were about to enter the house through its half-opened front door when a noise inside made everybody stop where they were. Nancy, who was closest to the door, drew her two pistols at once, cocking their hammers before pushing the door wide open and rushing inside. On their part, Fernand Bonnet, Henri Bruage and Michel Lorrain crouched down while also drawing their pistols without hesitation. A shout from Nancy then echoed from inside the house.

"CLEAR THE DOOR!"

Closse and the others with him had only time to react and step out of the way before a small animal ran out through the door, avoiding them and disappearing in the nearby bushes. Closse then broke out in laughter.

"A raccoon! We nearly got scared away by a raccoon."

They all laughed at that, then entered Nicolas Hubert's new home. The house clearly showed the three years of neglect it has suffered, having been opened to blowing winds and snow through the broken windows and door. Climbing to the attic via a ladder, Fernand Bonnet soon shouted from upstairs.

“THE ROOF SEEMS INTACT, AT THE LEAST: I SEE NO LIGHT AT ALL THROUGH IT.”

“That’s a start.” Said Nicolas Hubert, partly relieved. Testing the floor under him, the tailor saw that a few planks were half rotten and would need to be replaced soon. Marguerite Landreau looked around sadly at what had been the home of a now destroyed family.

“This place certainly can use some sweeping. Jeanne, pass me that broom.”

“Well,” said Closse after a last look around him, “I will let you to your cleaning job and will guide the others to their own lots, Monsieur Hubert.”

“Meet us at our tents for supper, Nicolas.” Added Fernand. “We can lodge you all until your place is livable. We will also lend you a hand in bringing your things to your new home.”

“That is most generous, Fernand. We will be there by six.”

Fernand then looked at Jean Simon and Jacques Morin.

“My offer stands also for you two: it will take you weeks before you can build a house of your own.”

“Fernand, you are a real friend.” Replied Jacques Morin, giving him a pat in the back that nearly toppled him.

Guided again through the forest to a less densely wooded area by Lambert Closse, the group was shown the boundaries of the lot given to Jacques Morin, with Closse planting improvised stakes to mark them. Closse then did the same with the lots given to Jean Simon and Fernand Bonnet. All three lots bordered the shoreline to the northwest of the point of land where the fort of Ville-Marie sat and were close to a stone house with a barely started wooden annex still under construction.

“What is that building, Monsieur Closse?” Asked Jacques, now standing with the others on the now marked lot of Fernand. “I saw very few houses made of stone here up to now.”

“That’s the Hôtel-Dieu hospital. Sister Jeanne Mance is doing admirable work there, taking care alone of our sick and wounded. A most exceptional woman indeed.”

“Maybe we should visit her later.” Suggested Claudette, getting a nod from Fernand.

“A good idea. Let’s get ourselves established here first, though.”



Going back to the wharf near the fort, they retrieved their boat and canoe and rowed them down the stream to the shoreline of Fernand's land lot, then solidly tied them to a large tree. The five men then started the arduous task of hauling the biggest and heaviest items from inside the whaler boat and up the riverbank to the chosen site of their camp, while the women took care of the smaller things. Everyone was sweating profusely in the hot, humid Summer air as they dropped their first loads by the camp site. Françoise Vinier looked at a young man cultivating his field in a nearby lot, dressed only in his linen shirt.

"The hell with it! I'm not going to dirty one of my only two nice dresses for nothing."

She then quickly removed her dress under the bulging eyes of Jacques Morin and Jean Simon, ending up only with her linen shirt and moccasins on. She however put back on her belt with knife and pistol before returning to the boat for another load. Fernand, Michel, Henri and Claudette quickly followed suit, prompting the others to look at each other in indecision. Catherine Lorion looked at Nancy, who was not shedding her clothes like her associates.

"You are not going down to your shirt, Nancy?"

"Hell, Catherine, I have no shirt under my buckskin tunic. Do you want me to go around topless?"

"Jean and Jacques would love that." Said Jeanne Merrin, giggling. Catherine Lorion then took a decision and removed her dress, followed in this by the four other teenage girls. They then continued their hauling work for half a hour, emptying completely the whaler boat before putting in place its covering tarp and overturning their canoe on the narrow beach. With both boats solidly tied in place, they returned to their camp site. By that time, everybody's shirt was clinging to their bodies, soaked with sweat. Jean Simon couldn't help have an erection at looking at Françoise Vinier, whose outrageously short shirt now stuck to her young, shapely body. Catherine Lorion blushed but kept silent on seeing Jean's reaction, while Jean eyed discreetly her breasts, which were clearly outlined by her soaked shirt. Fernand, apparently oblivious to this, looked at the pile of crates, barrels, kegs, chests and bundles.

"Alright, here is what we are going to do now: Nancy will go with Michel to the river to catch our supper, while Jean and Jacques will cut and collect small wood for our campfire. The rest of us will erect our two tents."

The two large canvas tents, with the campfire between them, were up and solidly fixed to the ground by stakes when Nancy and Michel came back, two big pikes in their basket fishnets.

“Ah, goodie!” Said Jacques Morin at the sight of the two fishes. “I’m starving!”

“Then you can cut and gut them while I go wash myself in the river.” Replied Nancy. “I can’t stand myself anymore.”

“I’m coming with you!” Said at once Françoise, grabbing a spare shirt from her personal bag. All the women and girls ended up following them to the river, leaving the men alone around the fire. Fernand then smiled to Jacques.

“You better stop thinking about the girls and start cutting up those fishes if you want us to eat, Jacques.”

“Uh, right!” Replied Jacques as the other men broke out in laughter. Fernand then spotted the Hubert family and Jeanne Rousselier approaching.

“Hey, Marguerite, how is the cleanup going?”

“Nearly done.” Answered Marguerite Landreau, her baby in her arms. Nicolas Hubert looked with amusement at the men wearing only shirts around the fire.

“I see that you adopted quickly one of the more popular customs of New France, despite the rantings of the Church against it.”

“I think that I should adopt that fashion while working tomorrow.” Said Jeanne Rousselier, making Jacques Morin raise an eyebrow in interest. “I didn’t expect this country to be so hot in summertime.”

“Then grab a spare shirt from your bag and go join the other girls in the river.” Offered Fernand.

“I’m coming too!” Said quickly Marguerite, handing her baby to Nicolas before searching in her travel chest and grabbing a folded shirt, then following Jeanne. Nicolas watched her walk away, then grinned to the men around him.

“Well, it seems that we have now firmly established who is in charge around here.”

A wail from his young son then made him sniff audibly.

“On the other hand, count me out for a while: I have a little boo-boo to take care of.”

“You’re in charge alright, Nicolas.” Said Jacques, laughing hard while gutting the pike in his hand.

**10:53 (Quebec Time)**

**Tuesday, August 18, 1654**

**Ville-Marie**

Lambert Closse did a last scan of the forest surrounding the fort, then gave back the telescope to the militiaman on lookout duty before climbing down from the southeast tower of the palisade and walking through the open gate. The day promised to be another hot, sticky one and he was already starting to sweat under his leather jacket. Holding the hilt of his sword with his left hand, he started doing his periodic roundabout inspection of the settlers living outside of the fort, talking briefly to each of them and exchanging greetings with the people he met on his way. The settlers appreciated those rounds of visits, being in need of feeling cared for and protected in this hostile land.

Arriving at the house assigned to Nicolas Hubert, Closse then had to repress a smile: Nicolas and his wife were clearing out wild growth from their field while Jeanne Rousselier was sweeping the front porch of the house. All three wore nothing but their shirts, which were sticking to their bodies because of sweat. Lambert admired for a moment Jeanne, who had her back to him and was bent over while picking up something. With her graceful body and agreeable face, she should have no trouble finding quickly a husband in the large pool of single men in the fort. Looking away from Jeanne with difficulty, Closse walked to Nicolas and Marguerite, who greeted him with wide smiles. He noticed with satisfaction that Nicolas had a musket slung across his back, while his wife had a pistol hanging from a strap passed across her chest. With the handful of soldiers and militiamen he had, Closse needed the settlers to be ready to defend themselves.

“Good day, Monsieur Closse.” Said warmly Marguerite Landreau.

“Good day, madame, monsieur. Is everything going well here?”

“Everything is just fine, monsieur.” Answered Nicolas. “I need only to repair the door and the windows before our house is fully fit to live in. Jeanne was of great assistance in helping clean it, while Monsieur Bonnet is feeding and lodging us in the meantime.”

“Feeding you? Did he bring so much provisions with him?”

“Oh no, Monsieur Closse! He and his associates are simply first class hunters and gatherers. If there is something edible around, you can be assured that they will either pick it or catch it. Nancy and Michel in particular are really good at it.”

“Really?” Said Closse, interested about the young but mysterious Nancy Laplante. That business of the secret document shown to the Governor had truly lit up his curiosity about that girl, who was quickly becoming the talk of the town in Ville-Marie, if only for her uncommon size and Amerindian clothes. “I have to say that this tall girl is a most strange one.”

“Not if you think of her as a true coureur de bois, monsieur. During my two years in Quebec, I saw quite a few male coureur de bois pass by and I have to say that some of them looked and acted quite strange. Mind you, if I had to go deep into the woods I would want one of them with me, and that’s not to warm up my bedroll.”

The last words opened a subject Closse exploited at once.

“And this Nancy, is she acting, uh, strangely?”

“It depends what you would qualify as strange, monsieur.” Said Marguerite Landreau. “She certainly cares about her physical fitness and can seemingly run forever. She also is obsessed about body cleanliness, bathing every day in the river. I tried to tell her that doctors say that contact with water can bring diseases, to which she replied to me that the doctors in France are ignorant incompetents. Monsieur Bonnet and his other associates also share that last opinion and bathe as frequently as Nancy. That in fact caused a small incident yesterday, when they had to chase away a young man from the fort who had tried to peep from behind a bush while Françoise and Claudette were bathing in the river.”

Closse’s smile disappeared at those words: one of his functions in Ville-Marie was to enforce the law and attempts against the modesty of a woman of good virtue was certainly covered by the law, with a fine being the normal punishment.

“Do you have the name of that young man, madame?”

Marguerite slowly shook her head, herself becoming serious.

“No, Monsieur Closse. I believe that Henri Bruage already dealt with the miscreant himself.”

“Did he beat him up?”

“I don’t believe so, monsieur. He told us that he simply scared him into not trying to peep again.”

Closse nodded at that: Henri Bruage, being a tall and strong man standing a good 185 centimeters, certainly could scare most men if he wanted to. Still, this business of young women bathing in the river could create a lot of social disturbances if the word went around about the habits of the female associates of Fernand Bonnet.

“Well, it seems that I better talk to Monsieur Bruage about this. I certainly don’t want the young men of Ville-Marie to make a habit of peeping at naked married women.”

“Can you really blame them for trying, monsieur?” Asked Marguerite with a malicious smile. Closse thought about that for a second.

“Not really, but social order must be kept. Maybe the female associates of Monsieur Bonnet could be more discreet too about their bathing habits. Well, I have to continue my inspection now. Have a good day, madame. You too, Monsieur Hubert.”

“And a good day to you, Monsieur Closse.” Replied Nicolas, pausing for a moment from his work.

Closse next visited two more families nearby before arriving at the lot given to Fernand Bonnet. He found the latter busy with Henri Bruage cutting down the trees that still cluttered his lot, while his wife Claudette and three of the teenage girls they had escorted to Ville-Marie were digging and turning over the top soil of a two-acre surface with spades. As for the young Marie Renaud, she was watching an iron pot set over the campfire by the group’s two tents. Everybody was wearing strictly shirts and moccasins or shoes, making Closse laugh silently at the futility of the priests’ rantings against that practice: Father Pijart was not the one who had to swing day-long an axe or a spade in the Sun of a hot, sticky day.

“Hi, Monsieur Closse!” Shouted enthusiastically Claudette, stopping her work on spotting his approach. Lambert licked his lips before answering: she was an appetizing young woman, while he had not touched a woman for over a year now. Dismissing the sinful thoughts from his mind, he waved back at her.

“I thought that I would pay a visit to see how you and your husband were doing on your new land, madame.”

“Everything is going fine, Monsieur Closse. It is hard work but it will pay off soon enough. We were about to have lunch. Would you care to join us?”

“I would be delighted, madame.”

Closse was in fact quite hungry by now, apart from being thirsty. Going to a wooden chest lying close to the campfire, Claudette took out a number of wooden bowls and tin

cups and told the other girls to break work for lunch. She then served Closse a goodly ration of some kind of meat stew, along with pouring him a cup of wine, before serving the girls. Closse had a taste of the stew and nodded his head in appreciation.

“This is good! Hare meat, I believe?”

“Mixed with wild roots, mushrooms and herbs.” Answered Claudette. “Nancy is very good at finding such edible roots and plants. Mind you, I added some salt and pepper to the stew for the taste.”

“And were is actually your Nancy?” Asked Closse, looking around him.

“Gone hunting with our Algonquin neighbor, Ononkapis. As for Françoise, she went into the woods to pick wild mushrooms, with Michel as escort.”

Closse nodded, knowing well Ononkapis: he was a lone Algonquin hunter who had lost his wife two years ago and who lived in a teepee in the woods, maybe 600 meters from here. Ononkapis was overall a good man who had made himself useful to Closse on a number of occasions.

“While I am here, madame, I would like to talk about an incident that I heard about. I was told that some young ruffian tried to play peeping tom at your expense.”

The teenage girls around him giggled as Claudette smiled to him and spoke calmly.

“That problem has already been dealt with, Monsieur Closse. I believe that the ruffian in question won’t come back.”

“But others could follow his example, madame. Maybe you should consider being more discreet about your bathing habits.”

Claudette’s smile faded somewhat at those words.

“Monsieur Closse, me and my husband believe strongly in cleanliness as a way to avoid diseases, contrary to the opinions of the so-called doctors in France. The spot we bathe in the river is surrounded on three sides by trees and bushes and one has to be quite deliberate to spot us there. If it can reassure you, we decided to keep from now on a woman out on watch when other girls are bathing, with that woman armed with a musket. Will that be enough to reassure you, monsieur?”

“That should be sufficient.” Recognized Closse before putting a spoonful of stew in his mouth. He then switched to small talk while eating his stew with the girls and Claudette as Fernand Bonnet and Henri Bruage joined them for lunch.

As they ate together around the fire, Marie Renaud suddenly beamed and waved her hand high while shouting.

“Nancy is back with Ononkapis. They got a deer!”

Everybody looked in the direction where Marie was looking and saw effectively Nancy and Ononkapis walking out of the forest, a pole on their shoulders and a dead deer hanging by its tied legs from the pole. As the two got closer to the camp, they saw that a few ducks and hares also hung from the pole. That sight made Fernand beam with satisfaction.

“It seems that Nancy and her new friend had a good hunting indeed. We will have plenty of meat for the next couple of days, plus a deer hide to scrape.”

“Maybe too much for us to eat all before it goes bad, unless we smoke some of it.” Said Claudette, prompting Henri to suggest something.

“Since Nancy is so successful with her hunting around here, we will probably end up constantly with surplus meat. While we can and should preserve some meat reserves for Winter, we could also give away what surplus are left to people that are in need in Ville-Marie. Would you have suggestions about that for us, Monsieur Closse?” Closse was thoughtful for a moment. While Henri’s idea was a credit to him, most people in Ville-Marie were eating quite well indeed, except maybe...

“How about giving your surplus food to Sister Jeanne Mance, at the Hôtel-Dieu. She is practically alone to help the patients there and mostly depends on donations from the families of the patients to run the place.”

“A very good idea, Monsieur Closse.” Agreed Claudette. “In fact, we could start right away, with the leftovers of this stew. Once Nancy and Ononkapis are served, I will go bring what’s left to Sister Mance.”

“Don’t forget Jean and Jacques, Claudette.” Cut in Catherine Lorion, making Claudette smile with embarrassment.

“You’re right, Catherine. Since you raised the subject, would you mind bringing a portion to both of them?”

“With pleasure, Claudette.” Replied Catherine, getting up and grabbing two bowls and two spoons, then filling the bowls close to overflowing with stew. That prompted Marie Lorgueil in getting up as well and hurry to her, taking one of the full bowls from Catherine.

“I’ll carry one, Catherine: you could spill the stew if you try walking with both full bowls.”

“Thanks, Marie! You are too kind.”

Closse watched both girls walk away as Nancy and Ononkapis dropped their load near the fire. Nancy sniffed at once the stew with delight.

“This smells good! I have to say that I and Ononkapis were getting quite hungry.”

“Then sit down and eat, both of you.” Replied Claudette, who fetched two more bowls for them, along with spoons. Once she had served them, she filled a small clay pot with stew and announced that she was bringing it to Sister Mance, then left the campsite. A few minutes later, the Hubert family and Jeanne Rousselier showed up and were promptly served by Fernand Bonnet. By now impressed by the Christian spirit of mutual help and charity of the newcomers, Closse finished his stew and, excusing himself, left to continue his inspection tour.

As the afternoon was getting quite advanced, Michel and Françoise returned from their picking excursion in the woods, tired but with their haversacks full of mushrooms. They made Claudette even more satisfied when they showed to her and Fernand one haversack full of wild raspberries.

“We found a large, albeit dispersed patch of raspberry bushes deep in the forest, near the river shoreline. Since our bags were already nearly full of mushrooms and we were about to turn around, we could pick only this much but there is much more left to pick. We would need to return in good numbers there tomorrow to do a decent harvest.”

“We will, Michel.” Replied Fernand after tasting one of the raspberries and finding it sufficiently ripe. “These berries could help us produce our first batch of locally-produced alcohol. Me and Henri will stay here to continue cutting down trees, while the rest of us will go pick raspberries. Well done, guys!”

Then checking that none of the contemporary French were close, he lowered his voice to a near whisper.

“Claudette, it is time we collect some data about Ville-Marie from inside the fort. Playing settlers may be interesting but it is not our primary goal.”

“I needed to go buy some bread anyway. Let me wash my hands and face quickly and I will go to the fort.”

“Good! Use your special cap.”

By that, Claudette knew he meant one of her linen caps that featured a micro-camera and microphone camouflaged in its front flap. That cap would allow her to film what she looked at inside the fort, thus supplementing nicely the spy probes already used and controlled by the scoutship WALKÜREN.



Half an hour later, clad in a red dress, brown corselet, white shirt, brown shoes and white linen cap, Claudette left the campsite for the fort, a covered wicker basket in one hand. In her basket were hidden a pistol and a knife meant for protection against the Iroquois. With those hidden away, Claudette was hoping to appear like a more run-of-the-mill French woman to the people of Ville-Marie, something Nancy was having a lot of trouble with due to her cover story. Claudette tried to think of a way for Nancy to blend in more while walking to the fort, some 500 meters away. She shouted greetings on her way to the few settlers living like her along the shoreline, with those settlers answering her politely. An idea about Nancy came to her just as she walked through the opened gate of the fort. Keeping that idea in the back of her mind, Claudette started going around the vending stalls dispersed around the central courtyard of the small fort, which sheltered maybe 120 people at the most. Making a point of trying to converse in turn with each merchant or vendor, Claudette did her best to get them to tell their names and identify themselves, something a spy probe couldn't do. This way, the Time Patrol would be able to put names on all the faces filmed up to now in Ville-Marie. While the people of the fort were a bit reserved with her at first, she being associated with Nancy, her easy manners and friendly chat soon broke the ice and she was able to talk and listen at length, playing the role of the bored housewife in search of the latest juicy or entertaining gossip while doing some shopping. The news from her that Fernand was planning to open an inn actually helped a lot to fuel the conversations.

By the time that she arrived at the baker's shop she had bought a dozen fresh eggs, bartered for with two cups of the raspberries just picked by Michel and Françoise. The baker, a jovial man, looked with hope at her basket.

"Excuse my indiscretion, madame, but I saw you sell some raspberries to Le Minime's wife. Would you happen to have some left still? I love raspberries but they are so hard to get with those damn Iroquois running around the woods."

"You are in luck, Monsieur...?"

"André Charly, also known as Saint-Ange, madame." Answered the man, shaking her hand.

"And I am Claudette Bussière, wife of Fernand Bonnet. We arrived on Sunday. To answer your question, I do have some raspberries left in my basket. They were picked just today."

Claudette then produced from her basket a large bowl covered with a piece of cloth. Uncovering the bowl, which was still half full of raspberries, she presented it to Charly.

“I wanted to buy a couple of loafs of fresh bread from you, monsieur. Could I use those raspberries as partial payment? I do have coins with me as well.”

“For those raspberries and two sols, I will give you your two loaves, madame.” Said the baker, an offer Claudette accepted at once. The pleased baker transferred the precious raspberries into a bowl of his own and took her money, then gave her two big loaves of bread still warm from the oven. Charly eyed Claudette with interest as she put the loaves in her large basket, lowering his voice next.

“That wild girl which goes around dressed like an Indian, she works for your husband, right?”

“Uh, yes.” Said cautiously Claudette. “She is actually more like an associate than an employee to us. She is our guide and interpreter around here and also hunts to provide us fresh meat. She is quite useful, actually.”

“And she has noble blood in her veins?”

“Only from her mother’s side, monsieur, which doesn’t make her a noblewoman according to French law. Mind you, she couldn’t care less about being a noble or not. Besides, she is planning to return to France next year.”

“She is not staying?” Said the baker, seemingly shocked by that news. “Then, what they say about her could be true.”

“Who is saying what?” Asked Claudette, playing ignorant. Charly in turn lowered further his voice, sounding conspiratorial.

“That she is a spy for the King. You didn’t know that?”

“Uh, no! For me she is just a métis girl who wanted to visit again her country of birth. Why would anyone think that she is a spy, and one working for the King on top of that?”

“But, you were supposedly there when she showed to Monsieur de Maisonneuve a secret document signed by the King, madame.”

Claudette shrugged at that, appearing to be lost by this.

“I only saw her show a document that seemingly made the Governor take notice but I didn’t know that it was signed by the King, Monsieur Charly. Besides, would the King really use a girl as a spy?”

“Hmm, true! Still, she is one strange girl, wouldn’t you agree?”

“That I can agree with but, as long as she makes herself useful the way she does now, I won’t care about that. In fact, I will miss her when she will go back to France.” Claudette then excused herself with the baker and walked out of the fort, her mind preoccupied. For the people of Ville-Marie to know that Nancy’s document had been signed by the King meant that the Governor had revealed at least that detail to someone else, a someone that was probably his secretary, Father Pijart. This was not good, as seeing such a juicy rumor appear in the historical archives from Ville-Marie would clearly go against the Time Patrol’s preference for discretion. The way things went, the Time Patrol was probably going to have to erase or rewrite a few incriminating documents from the archives of Ville-Marie at the end of their mission.

### **09:48 (Quebec Time)**

**Wednesday, August 19, 1654**

#### **Woods near Ville-Marie**

Niotsaeton repressed his frustration as he and his seven warriors watched from their hiding places the group of French that had now been picking raspberries for a good hour. He had to give to those French that they were fully alert and seemingly a lot more skilled in woodcraft than most other French people. For one thing, four of the eight settlers, including the tall girl in Huron clothes, were heavily armed and constantly sweeping visually the woods around them while staying behind good cover. Furthermore, they supported each other the way they were scanning the woods and, worst of all, for some reason kept returning their attention to the area where Niotsaeton and his men were hidden. Any attack in those conditions would guarantee that at least two or three warriors would be killed by the French, a scenario Niotsaeton found unacceptable. His war party was after all many days from Iroquois territory proper and he could not afford such heavy losses unless the gains were well worth the risks, which was not the case now. At one point, Niotsaeton thought that an opening would appear for him to attack, when the four French girls doing the picking moved to a new area to pick more fruits. Their four armed escorts however countered by moving their security perimeter accordingly, changing positions by pair under cover from the other pair. They were definitely a far cry from the usually sloppy and flatfooted French soldiers and militiamen from the fort. Their picking completed after two hours of work and with their bags bulging with raspberries, the seven French women and girls and one man retreated

in good order towards Ville-Marie, the tall girl with long black hair providing tail cover. Tsotehaka then looked at Niotsaeton, visibly frustrated and angry.

“Are we going to let them go like this, without trying anything?” He asked in a near whisper.

“And lose three or more braves before we could even close in on those French? Foolhardiness and bravery are not the same, Tsotehaka. We will find worthy but easier targets another time soon, I promise you.”

“The target I want is that tall girl, nothing else.”

“You will get your chance at that, my friend.” Said Niotsaeton while eyeing the girl in question as she kept covering the retreat of her comrades.

### **08:51 (Quebec Time)**

**Friday, August 21, 1654**

**Fernand Bonnet’s campsite**

**Ville-Marie**

Nancy watched for a moment the working still set over the campfire, its boiler full of raspberries mashed in water. Drops of liquid were already condensing and collecting in the still’s smaller pot, set off the fire. With any luck, their first batch of raspberry liquor would be ready for tasting this afternoon. She then went to Fernand, who was cutting the branches off a tree he had just felled. There was now a respectable amount of logs accumulated near the spot chosen for their future inn and they would soon be able to start the construction work proper. Fernand smiled on seeing Nancy’s dress: it was limited to a loincloth, a short and sleeveless buckskin jacket laced up on its front that left her belly button uncovered, plus a pair of moccasins and her leather belt. She also carried her haversack, water flask, longbow, quiver full of arrows, musket, two pistols, war axe, hunting knife and, last but not least, her blunderbuss scatter gun.

“Going for war or for hunting, Nancy?”

“For hunting, if Ononkapis feels like accompanying me, for war if the Iroquois provoke me.”

“Then let’s hope for the Iroquois that they don’t try to piss you off today: you have enough on you to repel a small army.”

“That’s the idea.” Replied with a grin Nancy before walking away from the campsite, heading towards Ononkapis’ own camp in the nearby woods.

Nancy was maybe 300 meters inside the woods and still about 200 meters from Ononkapis' camp when she received a radio message from the scoutship WALKÜREN via her implanted radio.

"Heads up, Nancy! We have eight thermal signatures converging on you from the West. They are now 110 meters from you and closing."

"Thanks for the warning, Hanna." Said mentally Nancy at the same time that she broke into a sprint across the woods. A quick glance to her left showed her movement between the trees: her pursuers were also running by now. Seeing Ononkapis' teepee through the trees, Nancy shouted a warning in Algonquin towards it.

"ONONKAPIS, IROQUOIS WARRIORS ARE APPROACHING!"

After a few seconds, she saw Ononkapis emerge from his teepee, a musket and an axe in his hands. To Nancy's shock, the head of a teenage Amerindian girl also came out, fright visible on her face.

"TELL YOUR FRIEND TO STAY INSIDE! WE WILL MAKE A STAND TOGETHER AT YOUR CAMP!" Shouted again Nancy as she was getting close to her friend's camp. Two musket shots rang out at nearly the same time a bullet whistled by her ear, while a second bullet splintered the trunk of a birch tree nearby. Crouching down while keeping running, Nancy arrived safely at Ononkapis' camp, dodging a third musket ball in the meantime. Ononkapis fired back with his own musket, downing the nearest Iroquois warrior, who was now less than thirty meters behind Nancy. Jumping behind the dead tree used by Ononkapis for cover, Nancy turned around and pointed quickly her musket, firing it at another Iroquois. Her opponent went down like a log, killed instantly with a ball in his head. However, six more Iroquois were still running straight at her and Ononkapis, wielding either axes or clubs while screaming ferociously, and were by now way too close to allow time to reload. While Ononkapis let go his musket and grabbed his own axe, Nancy switched to her blunderbuss and, pointing it at three closely grouped Iroquois running at her, discharged it in their faces. The blast and muzzle flash stunned everybody around her for a second, while her nearest opponent was literally projected backward, peppered by over six lead balls. A second opponent also went down with a ball in his groin, while a third screamed with pain, hit in his right upper arm. The three remaining intact Iroquois then fell on Nancy and Ononkapis, two of them concentrating on Nancy. She just had the time to pull out her war axe and deflect with it a tomahawk aimed at her head, then sidestepped her second attacker.

She grinned during the second or so she faced at a standstill her two opponents, speaking in Iroquois to them.

“Come on! Show me how good you are.”

Enraged by her taunt, one of the Iroquois stepped forward, swinging his axe at her while screaming a war cry. She jumped back, avoiding his swing, and slashed in a lightning-quick move at the second Iroquois, who was also coming at her. That warrior, his throat slit wide open, slowly fell to his knees, a gurgling sound coming from his mouth while he stared at Nancy with eyes full of surprise. The first warrior then swung his axe again, grazing Nancy’s belly and drawing blood.

“Looks like I’m good enough after all.” He said to Nancy, a fierce grin on his face. Nancy, facing him in a combat stance, laughed briefly to his face.

“Ha! One cut doesn’t make a victory. It is now strictly between you and me. What name should I put on your grave?”

“It will be Niotsaeton who will walk away with your scalp, girl.”

“You can call me Nancy...while you still can speak.”

“Then die, Nancy!” Replied the Iroquois before swinging furiously his axe, forcing Nancy to back off by a couple of steps before she could attack herself. Both axes clashed together, with Nancy and the Iroquois now one against the other in hand-to-hand combat. The Iroquois was a strong man but showed surprise at her own strength as she fought to keep his axe away.

“You would have made a good warrior, if you were a man.” He spat, his face mere centimeters from hers.

“I’d rather be a woman: men have weaknesses.” She replied, making Niotsaeton stare questioningly at her while still trying to overpower her.

“What weaknesses?”

“First of, they have testicles.” Answered Nancy just before kneeing the warrior hard in the groin. The Iroquois grimaced with pain but didn’t fall down. Nancy then rolled backward while planting her right foot in his belly, projecting Niotsaeton through the air and over her. The warrior fell hard head-down against a tree and slipped to the ground, half stunned and grunting with pain. One swing of Nancy’s axe projected Niotsaeton’s axe out of his reach, following which he found himself on his back in the grass, a pistol pressed against his forehead. Nancy took a fraction of a second then to check visually on Ononkapis. Seeing that her Algonquin friend had killed his opponent, she looked back down at the Iroquois.

“You have a choice, Niotsaeton: you can either die right now or vow that you will never come back to Ville-Marie or attack the French. In the second case, I will allow you to leave with one of your wounded.”

Niotsaeton took a deep breath, then stared directly in her eyes with resignation.

“I am a warrior. I would rather die in combat than return to my tribe like a defeated dog.”

“As you wish, Niotsaeton. May the Great Spirit be kind to you.” Said softly Nancy before pulling the trigger. Getting up, she looked down briefly at her dead opponent, then eyed Ononkapis, who was finishing off a gravely wounded Iroquois. The young teenage Amerindian girl she had seen at the start of the fight was now coming out of the teepee, dressed only in a loincloth. A burning pain then reminded Nancy that she had been wounded. Looking down at her belly, she saw that she sported a long but shallow slash that had not gone deeper than the skin. That slash could however get infected easily if she didn’t take some precautions soon. First, though, she had to do something else. Bending down and taking out her hunting knife, she scalped the dead Niotsaeton, then did the same to the four other Iroquois she had killed. She was tying the five scalps to her belt when Ononkapis joined her, two scalps of his own at his belt. His look to her was one of admiration and respect.

“You are indeed worthy of the title of ‘warrior’, Nancy. My tribe would be proud to have you in its ranks.”

“And I would be proud indeed to be an Algonquin, my friend. You should have presented your young friend to me before.”

Ononkapis smiled, then signaled the girl to join them.

“I have known Mistibis for only a few weeks now and can see her only on rare occasions, as she is employed by a Frenchman in the fort who leaves her little free time.”

Nancy eyed sharply Ononkapis at those last words.

“Is she a servant...or a slave?”

“A slave.” Answered Ononkapis, lowering his head. “She was at first a Huron, then was captured and adopted by the Iroquois five years ago before being again captured and sold as a slave. Right now, she is supposed to be gathering wild berries for her master.”

Nancy looked carefully at the Amerindian girl now standing besides Ononkapis. She was more than pretty and could not be more than maybe fourteen years old. While not

starving, she wasn't well fed either. Caressing the girl's hair with one hand, Nancy spoke gently to her in Huron.

"Who owns you in the fort, Mistibis?"

"Monsieur Charles D'Ailleboust, mademoiselle." Answered the girl timidly. Nancy nodded in understanding. Charles D'Ailleboust was a nobleman with the title of squire who had recently been the acting governor of Ville-Marie during a two-year absence by Monsieur de Maisonneuve.

"Then, Mistibis, you better put your clothes on: I am going to see Monsieur D'Ailleboust with you."

Before she or Ononkapis could ask why she wanted to do that, Fernand arrived at a run with Henri and Michel, their muskets at the ready. They made a show of relaxing once they saw that Nancy and Ononkapis were safe. In reality, Hanna Reitsch had already informed them by radio of the turn of events. Fernand, seeing blood on Nancy's belly, approached her and crouched in front of her to examine her wound.

"You were damn lucky, Nancy: a couple of centimeters deeper and that Iroquois would have disemboweled you. This will have to be cleaned and bandaged."

"Uh, could I ask you something first, Fernand?" Said Nancy before whispering into his ear. Fernand replied in the same way, conversing for a few seconds with her before nodding to something. He then took his flask of water out and rinsed Nancy's wound. While he treated her, Michel and Henri went deep into the wood, searching for the lone, wounded Iroquois that had managed to run away from the fight.

Mistibis was back by Ononkapis' side and Fernand had finished wrapping a piece of cloth over Nancy's superficial wound when a single musket shot rang from a distance, coming from inside the woods. Maybe two minutes later, Lambert Closse arrived on the scene, out of breath and with ten equally winded soldiers at his back. He looked first at Nancy, with her blood-stained bandage, then at the bodies of the seven scalped Iroquois that had been lined up by Ononkapis. His face paled when he finally noticed the five scalps hanging from Nancy's belt.

"Mon Dieu, mademoiselle, you killed five Iroquois?"

"And wounded a sixth one, while Ononkapis killed two more, Monsieur Closse. Henri and Michel went to find the wounded one but I think that they found him a moment ago. Don't worry about my wound: it is a superficial slash and Fernand already took care of it."



“What actually happened, mademoiselle?”

“I was coming to see Ononkapis and propose to him to go hunt together. Not far from his camp I found young Mistibis, who was searching for berries for her master. That was when eight Iroquois attacked us. We managed to run to Ononkapis’ camp and made our stand there.”

Closse nodded once, then went to examine the dead Iroquois. One of them attracted his attention and he pointed the body to Nancy.

“What did you use on that Iroquois? He looks like a sieve.”

Nancy answered by showing him her blunderbuss.

“I had my tromblon with me, the perfect weapon for a short range ambush. It was loaded with twelve lead balls.”

“Ouch! That would do the job. It was a good thing that you had this miniature cannon with you today.”

“It is effectively a practical weapon to have around, monsieur. Now, if you will excuse me, I will escort back Mistibis to the fort. I will go explain at the same time to Monsieur D’Ailleboust why Mistibis couldn’t get berries for him.”

“As you wish, mademoiselle.” Replied Closse, saluting her with his hat as she went to briefly speak in whispers to Ononkapis and then walked away with Mistibis. Closse next went to Fernand and spoke to him in a low voice. “That guide of yours fights like a demon, Monsieur Bonnet.”

“That’s alright with me, Monsieur Closse.” Answered with a smile Fernand.

While walking with Mistibis towards Fernand’s camp, Nancy explained to her what she wanted to do and what Mistibis would say to her master. The Huron teenager looked at her with disbelief, then started crying quietly, prompting Nancy to hug her tenderly for a moment.

“Everything will be alright, Mistibis. You will see. We will stop at my tent first before going to the fort.”

Claudette, Françoise and the other girls ran to them when they approached the camp. Nancy reassured them about her wound but couldn’t stop Claudette from insisting on disinfecting her belly slash with alcohol and putting a proper bandage in place. Only then was Nancy able to go inside the women’s tent and search into her personal chest. She took out a large, heavy purse and a leather folio from the chest before locking it back and put the purse and folio inside her haversack. Nancy next took ten minutes to

reload all her weapons, watched by a nervous Mistibis. Nancy felt the girl's anxiety and gave her a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry, Mistibis. I have no intentions to shoot your master. I just hate going around with empty guns. How was Monsieur D'Ailleboust as a master, Mistibis? Don't be afraid to tell me anything."

"He was correct, I would guess." Answered timidly the Amerindian girl. "He hasn't abused me or tried to get me into his bed, if that's what you were afraid of."

"That's a good point in his favor. He should thus be a reasonable man to deal with."

Not bothering to change or even wash her face, Nancy left for the fort with Mistibis once her weapons were reloaded, the five Iroquois scalps still attached to her belt: she was now more than ever ready to play her role of native girl to the hilt. History would be less likely to take notice of a métis girl in Ville-Marie than of a marquess.

Their entrance in the fort at close to noon hour didn't go unnoticed, far from it. Most settlers recoiled with horror or fear at the sight of the scalps at her belt, while some looked scandalized by her revealing Amerindian clothes. Guided by Mistibis, Nancy walked with her to a two-story house that looked better built than most other buildings inside the fort. A male servant answered her knocks on the door of the house, recoiling at first at her sight.

"Uh, what can I do for you, mademoiselle?"

"I would like to speak with Monsieur D'Ailleboust concerning young Mistibis. Tell him that Lady Nancy Sommers is asking for him."

"Lady Nancy Sommers?" Said the servant in a dubious tone while eyeing her from head to toe. Nancy gave him back a cold stare.

"That is right, monsieur. Please get Monsieur D'Ailleboust for me."

"One moment, please." Said the servant before closing the door in her face. She then heard the noise of a locking bolt being pulled in place.

"A trusting man indeed." Muttered Nancy to herself. She had to wait a couple of minutes before the door opened again, with the servant waiving her to enter.

"Please come in, mademoiselle."

Nancy entered a small, sparsely furnished living room where a man in his late twenties dressed like a noble was waiting, standing near a window. She waited until Mistibis was

in as well, then addressed the man, who was of average built and a half head shorter than her.

“Monsieur D’Ailleboust, I presume?”

“And you are Lady Sommers?” Said the nobleman caustically. “Did you need to come so heavily armed to my house, mademoiselle?”

Nancy touched the bandage around her belly as an answer while smiling.

“With all the Iroquois running around Ville-Marie, one can never be too cautious. Young Mistibis was nearly killed by eight of them but I and a friend managed to get rid of them.”

“Then I shall be grateful to you, mademoiselle.”

“Thank you! I however came here for something else. I understand that Mistibis is your slave. I wish to buy her from you.”

The noble looked surprised by that and took a moment to regain his composure.

“Buy her? Why are you interested in her? You do not strike me as someone who would need servants...or slaves.”

“I effectively do not use servants, monsieur, even though I could easily justify the use of some in France. I want to buy Mistibis so that I could then free her.”

D’Ailleboust gave her a sharp look at those last words.

“Free her? That would be a costly whim indeed on your part, mademoiselle.”

“But one I can easily afford, monsieur.” Replied Nancy, her expression now most serious. “I offer you 800 livres for Mistibis.”

“But, why are you interested in her?” Said the noble, his eyes having widened at the sum mentioned by her.

“Freeing an innocent girl from a condition that should not be permitted to exist in the first place should be enough reason for any good Christian, monsieur. Mistibis is as much a human being as you or me. Treating her like a mere possession is an insult to God in my eyes. What I am offering you now is certainly a lot more than what you paid for her, monsieur.”

“But do you really have that kind of money, mademoiselle?” Asked sharply D’Ailleboust. “As far as I know, you are only a half-breed of low lineage who is employed by a would-be innkeeper.”

“Monsieur,” replied firmly Nancy, her face stern, “know that you should defer to me as far as social rank goes, and by a good margin. As for whether I have the money I claim to have, here it is.”

Taking out of her haversack her heavy purse, she put it on top of a nearby chest, making the silver coins in the purse tinkle.

“I can count 800 livres right now, monsieur. Do we have a deal?”

D’Ailleboust didn’t have to think long before taking a decision: what she was offering was close to double what he had paid for Mistibis. He was also a noble of only relatively low birth, with little fortune in his pocket.

“We have a deal, mademoiselle. Count your 800 livres, then we will go see the Crown Attorney, Monsieur Charles Le Moyne. He will also be able to prepare a certificate of emancipation for Mistibis.”

As Nancy started counting out the silver coins from her purse, D’Ailleboust couldn’t help admire discreetly her half-naked body.

“You know, mademoiselle, for a noblewoman you wear a rather indecent outfit.”

Nancy stopped counting long enough to give him a disarming smile.

“Monsieur, even when naked the King is still the King and should be treated accordingly. Personally, I do.”

The face the squire did then at her thinly veiled revelation made Nancy giggle with amusement.

A bit less than an hour later, Nancy and Mistibis were walking out of the office of the Crown Attorney with the precious emancipation certificate in Mistibis’ hands. The overjoyed girl couldn’t stop herself from hugging Nancy in front of the office.

“Nancy, I owe you so much. What shall I do to repay my debt to you?”

“Simple, Mistibis: by being my friend and by living happily from now on. Come, we will go have a bite for lunch at our camp before bringing the good news to Ononkapis.”

## **11:02 (Quebec Time)**

**Wednesday, September 30, 1654**

**‘L’AUBERGE DU CHASSEUR’<sup>29</sup>**

**Ville-Marie**

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<sup>29</sup> L’auberge du chasseur: The hunter’s inn in French

Fernand stepped back from his just completed inn and joined his companions to admire the fruit of over six weeks of hard work.

“Well, guys, what do you think?” He asked while grinning proudly.

“It sure was worth all the work we put in it, my dear.” Replied Claudette, detailing the log house-style building. Built in length, with slightly narrower wings projecting from each end in order to use as much as possible the natural length of three logs put nearly end-to-end, the inn had a very steep roof to help evacuate snow in Winter. The roof also featured dormer windows with glass panes on each side and there was a large chimney at each end of the main body of the inn, so that the chimney could also help heat the wings. A number of annexes, including a small barn with cages for chickens and hares, sat inside a courtyard, their back part of a three meter-high wood palisade with a large gate door facing south, towards the fort of Ville-Marie. Not visible was a fair-sized basement room without windows that was to be used as a cold storage room for vegetables, fruits and meats. Everybody in the group had worked on part or parts of the inn, including on the production of most of the furniture and small ancillary items, while artisans and workers from Ville-Marie had been paid by Fernand to help accelerate the construction of the inn and to build some of the more elaborate furniture. Weeks of productive hunting by Nancy and Michel, apart from providing fresh food for all of them and thousands of pounds of smoked, salted, dried or pickled meat and fish now stored in barrels, had produced dozens of large animal hides and furs. Those hides and furs, mostly from moose and bears, were in turn to be used as warm floor carpets for the rooms of the inn. The precious still had worked nearly non-stop as well, producing kegs after kegs of berry liquor that was to be the main liquid staple of the inn, along with the barrels of wine imported from France. As for the large vegetable patch just outside the palisade, it had been carefully worked so that it would be ready for seeding during next spring, the group having arrived too late in the Summer to plant anything. That had however been compensated for by an ample harvest of wild onions, mushrooms, wild rice and herbs that, while unconventional to a European palate, provided plenty of precious vitamins and minerals. Bartering and trading with other inhabitants of Ville-Marie had also provided some fresh vegetables to the group’s diet, apart from providing excellent opportunities to interact with the settlers and document their lives.

“Well, let’s move our things inside and get installed, folks!” Said cheerfully Fernand. On his command, the two tents that had been home to twelve persons since their arrival were quickly emptied and then taken down, to be carefully stored in a small

shed inside the palisade. Fernand, the five other Time Patrol agents and the four teenage girls living with them then went inside the inn to put the finishing touches to it.

They had time to have a frugal lunch and were back at work, mostly being busy varnishing or painting the internal walls of the inn, when someone knocked on the main entrance door. Claudette hurried to it and opened it to find herself facing the Governor, Paul Chomedey de Maisonneuve, accompanied by Lambert Closse and the town's Crown Attorney, Charles Le Moyne. She opened the door wide for them while bowing.

"Please come in, Your Excellency!"

Everybody got up or straightened themselves up as the Governor walked in with his two followers, with Fernand then bowing politely to de Maisonneuve.

"Your Excellency, what owes us the pleasure of your visit?"

"Your inn, of course, my good Monsieur Bonnet!" Said jovially the Governor, looking in a good mood. "I was dying to see it once completed. Do you have much work left to be done before it is fully ready to receive your first customers?"

"Two weeks should be enough to finish everything, Your Excellency. However, we will put a priority on finishing the main hall, so that drinking and eating customers could come in before the end of the week. With luck, I will be able to throw a celebration party on Saturday."

"Excellent! This inn will be a precious addition to Ville-Marie. Could I have a quick tour of it?"

"I would be most pleased to guide you around my modest inn, Your Excellency." Replied Fernand with a smile, who then swept the hall with his left arm. "As you can see, the main hall is big enough to seat comfortably fifty persons for dinner, with room to spare for dancers and musicians. In a crunch, up to a hundred persons could be seated in here when lining chairs along the walls, like in the case of balls or celebrations. The large fireplaces at both ends will easily heat up both the main hall and the guest rooms situated above it, along with the wings containing the kitchen and staff rooms."

"Those fireplaces in fact look quite unusual, Monsieur Bonnet." Remarked de Maisonneuve, who then walked to one of them. "For one thing, they are made of bricks instead of stones."

"That is correct, Your Excellency. You will also see that iron plates have been incorporated to their sides and top, to better radiate the heat produced by the fire. Those iron plates were imported by me from France and were set in openings left in the

double layer of bricks. They are thus less likely to be touched by someone by accident and will stay hot for hours after the fire is put out. The top iron plate, apart from sending more heat towards the rooms upstairs, can also be used to put on it pots or plates of food that one would want to keep hot for hours. With this mix of bricks and iron plates, I get the benefit of better heating efficiency compared to a stone fireplace, while I avoid the need to import from France a large iron stove, which would have been extremely heavy and difficult to move. I however brought two small iron stoves to help heat secondary rooms and do some of the cooking.”

De Maisonneuve examined the top iron plate, set close to the edge of the fireplace, then one of the side plates, which was set at two bricks width from the external wall of the fireplace.

“Most clever indeed, monsieur. Apart from helping to prevent burns, this deep setting of the side plates creates a brick sill wide enough to put pots in front and close to the hot iron plate. I wish that I could have thought of that when I had my own fireplace built.”

“It is a neat solution for a large place like an inn, Your Excellency, but for private houses the most efficient heating apparatus would still be iron stoves, as they have four times the output efficiency of a stone fireplace.”

“That much? Then I shall try to encourage the importation of such iron stoves, as collecting wood in the past often provided the Iroquois opportunities to attack our people.”

Fernand nodded once at that: the use of iron stoves would indeed become quite popular in the decades to come in New France because of their sheer efficiency. In a hundred years time, nine out of ten homes in Ville-Marie were going to be equipped with at least one such iron stove, despite their high cost. Going to a nearby door opening, which still had to have its door installed, he invited the Governor to follow him inside the kitchen of the inn. De Maisonneuve looked approvingly around the large room, which fully occupied one side wing of the building. He eyed in particular the iron stove sitting at one end, opposite from the iron plate and bricks backing of the fireplace in the main hall. Iron ducts led the smoke and heat from the stove up and through the ceiling. There was also a baking oven set into one of the side walls and a small area curtained off in one corner that contained a bathtub. He was not a little surprised to see a hand water pump standing near the stove, its base set in the floor.

“You have a well directly under your inn, monsieur?”

“I do indeed, Your Excellency. It was a lot of work digging it deep enough and then lining it with clay but it will provide us easy access to clean water year long, without danger of seeing it freeze in Winter. Four journeymen from Ville-Marie did the digging work, while I imported the pump from France. If you will follow me down, I will show you our basement.”

That part of the visit was quite short but impressed the Governor, with dozens of barrels, kegs and jute bags lining the sides of the four by six meter basement.

“Tudieu! You already have enough provisions in here for a whole year. Where did you get all this salted and smoked meat? In France?”

“No, Your Excellency. All the meat and fish you see here was caught around Ville-Marie by my two professional hunters, Nancy Laplante and Michel Lorrain. As for the bags of wild mushrooms, onions and roots, they were picked in the nearby woods by the other women of my group. Only the beer and wine were imported from France, but I did bring over two tons of them with me across the Atlantic. Once the tour of the inn is completed, I shall be happy to make you taste my locally-produced raspberry liquor.”

Those last words made de Maisonneuve beam with both interest and anticipation.

“I am certainly looking forward to that, Monsieur Bonnet.”

The latter then invited to go back up to the main level, then led him across the kitchen and the main hall to the other wing of the inn. That wing was heated by both the backing plate of one of the main hall fireplaces and by an iron stove and was divided into a number of smaller rooms, which were promptly described by Fernand to the Governor and his two aides.

“This wide first room closest to the main hall is a private banquet room that can be rented for private meetings and celebrations, Your Excellency. While not as big as the main hall, it can still sit up to thirty persons. The other half of this wing is occupied by a large storeroom with its own outside door and by a small private office.”

“And where do those two opposite doors lead, Monsieur Bonnet?” Asked the Crown Attorney, Charles Le Moyne, pointing at two doors to opposite sides of the banquet room and set in the corners with the main building. In response, Fernand led his visitors through one of the doors, where they found themselves in a cramped area with two doors along the left wall and one small window providing minimal light.

“This is one of the outhouses of the inn, monsieur. This one has two pierced chairs set over clay-lined pits and is reserved for the use of ladies. The opposite



outhouse is reserved for men. In all, I had a total of six outhouses, each with two pierced chairs, built for my inn.”

“Six outhouses? Isn’t that too much?” Exclaimed Lambert Closse, making Fernand shake his head.

“Not when considering the number of people that could be using my inn, Monsieur Closse. Each outhouse, while set outside the main walls of the inn, is hugging it and thus is partially heated by the inn. The ground level of these outhouses are also covered with mounds of earth in order to cut on the smell and provide some extra insulation in Winter. The clay-lined sewage pits were intentionally kept rather shallow, so that no sewage could seep through to the underground water table and contaminate it. In this corner, on the counter, you can see a clay wash basin and a jar of water, plus a towel, so that users of the outhouse could wash their hands afterwards. Now, I would like to show you the upper level, Your Excellency.”

“By all means, Monsieur Bonnet.” Said the Governor, already impressed by what he had seen.

Going back in the banquet room and using the staircase there, they climbed to the upper floor of the east wing and found themselves in a large hallway running down the centerline length of it. One doorway near the top of the stairs connected the hallway of the wing to another hallway running along the main building. Ten meters or so across that doorway another doorway was visible, showing yet another hallway.

“As you can see, Your Excellency, it is easy to go from one end of the inn to the other when on the upper floor, which is reserved for the guest and staff rooms. In total, this inn has twelve medium guest rooms, each able to lodge up to four persons, and two large guest rooms, each lodging up to eight persons, for a total capacity of up to 64 guests. There are also in the other wing ten private rooms for me and my associates and staff. Let me show you one of the medium guest rooms, Your Excellency.”

De Maisonneuve was then invited inside a roughly four by three meter room furnished with one large double-bunk bed, a small table with two chairs, a closet, a bed stand and a large chest. One dormer window with glass panes provided plenty of light to the room.

“We will soon add drapes to the window and a fur hide to act as a carpet in each guest room, Your Excellency. Two of my associates will soon go by boat to Quebec to go fetch more articles to finish providing for this inn and also pass the word that the inn is open for business.”

“An excellent idea, Monsieur Bonnet.” Approved de Maisonneuve, seeing at once the interest in attracting more merchants and traders to Ville-Marie via this inn. “Well, this inn should definitely improve life in Ville-Marie in a significant way. Monsieur Le Moyne, the permits, if you would be so kind.”

The Crown Attorney opened a leather bag he was carrying and handed to the Governor two rolled documents. De Maisonneuve then gave both parchments to Fernand.

“Here are your permits for selling alcohol in your inn and for producing alcohol locally, Monsieur Bonnet. I sincerely wish you good luck with your business.”

“Thank you, Your Excellency. May I extend officially to you an invitation to attend the official opening of my inn? I will pass you word of the definite date as soon as I know it.”

“Your invitation is gladly accepted, monsieur.”

“Then, may we conclude your visit with a little tasting of my raspberry liquor?”

“By all means, Monsieur Bonnet.”

Fernand quickly led his visitors downstairs in the main hall, where Claudette served them small tin shot glasses of a red liquor with a strong smell of raspberry. The Governor’s eyes opened wide after he sipped a bit of his liquor.

“This is excellent indeed, Monsieur Bonnet.”

Lambert Closse, who had downed his whole glass in one shot, pounded his chest while blowing air out.

“It is also quite potent, monsieur. This certainly can warm you up from the inside.”

“With its alcohol content, I am not surprised, Monsieur Closse.” Replied with a smile Fernand. “This liquor is meant to be savored, not to be merely downed.”

“I will remember that, Monsieur Bonnet.”

They finished their glasses before Fernand escorted his three visitors to the main door of the hall. Once they were gone, Fernand faced back his associates and four maids, looking most satisfied.

“Let’s plan for a Saturday opening party, people! Henri, Michel, you will leave by boat tomorrow for Quebec, to go buy extra barrels of wine, cider and beer, along with a list of other smaller items. You will also promote our new inn and our berry liquor while there. Michel, I will ask you to go to the fort this afternoon to rent the services of eight strong men that will help row our whaler boat to Quebec and back.”

“Can I go to Quebec with them, Monsieur Bonnet? Mathurin could also help row your boat.” Asked at once the young Marie Renaud, hopeful. Fernand smiled tenderly to the teenager: Marie had already found a young man to her liking and had signed with him a marriage contract only two days ago. Fernand had met Mathurin Langevin, also known as Lacroix, a young farmer, and had found him to be an apparently decent young man who had arrived from France last year.

“I am sure that Henri won’t mind escorting you to Quebec, Marie.”

As Marie squealed with joy, Fernand eyed cautiously Catherine Lorion. The teenager, like her friend Jeanne Rousselier, had also signed a marriage contract three days ago. Catherine would soon marry Pierre Vilain, a farmer and neighbor of the inn, while Jeanne was going to marry Pierre Gaudin, a young carpenter that had arrived last year. Fernand was trying hard not to show his sadness as he mentally reviewed Catherine’s future as dictated by history. She would end up marrying four times in her life, with her first three husbands dying from various accidents, and having a total of eleven children from them. From being at first a poor teenage girl looking for a better life in New France, Catherine Lorion was slated to become one of the true founding pioneers of Ville-Marie, later to be known as Montreal. Right now, though, Catherine was looking forward to her incoming marriage. Fernand then looked back at Marie Renaud.

“Come see me before you go, Marie: I will then give you your pay for the last two weeks, so that you have something to spend in Quebec.”

The girl’s renewed squeals made Fernand swallow the hard lump that had formed in his throat. He was quickly starting to feel like a surrogate father to these teenage girls in his employ. He was also understanding more every day why Nancy ‘B’ had risked her career with the Time Patrol for the love of a man from the past. Interpersonal relationship with people from the past was a critical component of the job of a Time Patrol field agent. Accepting that all those people you talked to, laughed with or even cried with had to be left to die according to their destiny was however by far the hardest part of the job.

**11:49 (Quebec Time)**

**Saturday, October 3, 1654**

**AUBERGE DU CHASSEUR**

**Ville-Marie**

Lambert Closse, wearing his best clothes but still carrying his sword and pistol, found out that a sort of outside vestibule had been added in front of the main entrance of the new inn. He understood at once what was its use: to cut the amount of wind and snow entering the building in Winter. Entering the vestibule and closing the door behind him, he then climbed the three wide steps of the front stairs and pushed open the main door, a solid affair made of thick wood planks reinforced with iron fittings. He found inside that a few inhabitants of Ville-Marie had already beaten him to the inn's opening party. Claudette Bussière, dressed in a nice blue and white gown, came to him at once with a welcoming smile.

"Welcome to our inn, Monsieur Closse. Can I get you something to drink?"

"You may, madame. I am not too early, I hope?"

"Your timing was perfect, monsieur. Will you have wine, cider, beer or berry liquor?"

"I will have a shot of your marvelous berry liquor, madame."

Claudette quickly went to a service table set in one corner and returned with a small tin glass for him.

"Food will be served soon. Have a seat and enjoy yourself."

"Thank you, madame."

Sitting down at one of the tables, Closse started sipping his liquor with delight while looking at the decoration of the main hall and at the people around him. The settlers already present had come with their wives and children, at least those who had ones, profiting from a too rare occasion to relax and have fun, especially when someone else was paying for the food and drinks. In truth, any special occasion that allowed the chance to party or dance was precious for the settlers of Ville-Marie, who were leading hard, dangerous lives in this forward outpost of New France. Marie Lorgueil, one of the teenage girls employed by Fernand Bonnet, then came to him, a tray with a variety of small appetizers on it in her hands.

"Would you like a few bites, Monsieur Closse? I have here pieces of cheese, pickled fish, pickled moose tongue and bread. The main dishes will be served in half an hour."

"I will certainly sample some pickled moose tongue, mademoiselle, along with some cheese and bread."

Marie nodded and put a small tin plate on the table besides him, then put pieces of bread, cheese and moose tongue in the plate.

“Here you go, Monsieur Closse.”

“Thank you, Marie.”

Closse watched her walk away before starting to taste his appetizers: women were still very much in the minority in Ville-Marie, with maybe five men per women in the outpost. The presence of so many young women and girls working in this inn was certainly going to attract lots of male customers to this place. Closse was curious to see what Father Pijart was going to think or say about this inn in a few weeks and months. He was already ranting quite profusely about the wild Nancy Laplante and her often very skimpy Amerindian clothes. Amused by this thought, Closse then tried a piece of pickled moose tongue and found it excellent.

He was savoring a second piece of moose tongue when the Governor, the Crown Attorney, Sire Charles D’Ailleboust, Father Pijart and Sister Marguerite Bourgeoys came in with a good dozen more of the prominent citizens of Ville-Marie, prompting Closse to get up at once to bow to the Governor. De Maisonneuve, holding gallantly the hand of the lay sister, signaled at once to everybody to sit back down.

“Please, relax! Do as if I was not here.”

Paul Chomedey de Maisonneuve, still handsome at 42, then led his group to Closse’s table as Claudette Bussière hurried to him. The innkeeper’s wife had her new guests seated, then called for two of her maids to bring drinks to their tables. As wine and liquor was being poured, Closse saw Nancy Laplante and Françoise Vinier come out of the kitchen, carrying large serving trays of appetizers towards him and the Governor. Closse’s jaw nearly dropped when he saw them: while Françoise Vinier wore a pretty dress that valorized her youthful beauty, Nancy Laplante wore a gown and set of jewels that would look at home at the court of the King himself. Even more, she wore her outfit with panache, a far cry from her popular picture as a savage half-breed girl able to kill Iroquois warriors. Near silence fell in the main hall as Nancy presented gracefully her tray to de Maisonneuve, bending forward and showing much of her fabulous chest through the wide cleavage of her fashionable dress while giving him a wide smile.

“Would you like to bite into something, Your Excellency?”

Closse, like a few of the men around the Governor’s table, strangled a laugh at those words: whether intentional or not, her choice of words had been quite suggestive. De Maisonneuve took the situation in stride, smiling while eyeing both the offered tray and Nancy’s chest.

“In truth, you have a lot to offer, mademoiselle. I will try a bit of everything.”

Father Pijart gave him a dubious look that de Maisonneuve ignored while serving himself a few appetizers, proud of his retort: while a pious man, the Governor still understood that one had to have fun from time to time. He next looked back at Nancy as she was serving Sister Marguerite Bourgeoys.

“Quite a nice dress you are wearing, mademoiselle. It is the first time that I see you in it.”

“It had been languishing in my travel chest since I last wore it in Reims, Your Excellency. It was such a shame to keep it tucked away, so I was too happy to put it on for my first chance at celebrating in Ville-Marie.”

“And what occasion in Reims called for wearing such a rich dress, Mademoiselle Laplante?” Asked one of the well-to-do men accompanying the Governor, prompting a mild smile from Nancy.

“But, the official crowning of King Louis the Fourteenth, of course.”

“You were at the King’s crowning, mademoiselle?” Exclaimed Marguerite Bourgeoys, her eyes widening.

“I had that privilege, Sister.” Simply replied Nancy, who then went to another guest to serve him. As soon as she and Françoise went away, Charles D’Ailleboust bent sideways to speak in a low voice to de Maisonneuve.

“Sire, I am now certain that she must be a mistress of the King. She nearly recognized that much when she came to my home to buy my Amerindian slave girl.” De Maisonneuve rubbed his chin, thoughtful.

“It certainly would explain the safe-conduct signed by the King that she showed me on her arrival. This would however imply that she is in fact of rather high nobility, as only the elite of France could be invited to the King’s crowning, mistress or not.”

“Could she be a spy of the King, Sire? It would fit with her uncommon fighting abilities.”

“A person with intimate knowledge of New France through birth would certainly make a perfect spy for the King if he wished to evaluate the state of our colony, Monsieur D’Ailleboust. It would thus be prudent at the least to treat Mademoiselle Laplante with indulgence, if not deference. Her safe-conduct was however very specific about staying discreet about her. Don’t repeat any of this to anyone else, even to Monsieur Le Moyne or to Father Pijart.”

“Understood, Sire.”

The Governor and his followers then resumed their drinking and eating as a steady stream of persons were entering the inn, to be immediately greeted by Claudette, Fernand or Françoise. The main hall was soon nearly full, with over seventy persons now sitting around, eating, drinking and talking. Unknown to them was the fact that four miniature cameras with microphone hidden in the structure of the main hall were filming them, collecting precious data about the inhabitants of Ville-Marie that would be used by the Time Patrol to produce its documentary. Once the hall was mostly full, Claudette and her girls brought to the service table a number of large pots and plates filled with a variety of hot dishes, then invited the guests to come to the table to be served. Lambert Closse was not far behind the Governor, who was of course served first, and had his bowl filled with a rich, appetizing stew of wild meats and vegetables. Going back to his table, he savored his stew, washing it down with an excellent red Bordeaux wine that was being served profusely. Seeing Françoise Vinier getting ready to go outside, the Governor gently stopped her as she was passing by him, an iron pot in one hand and a covered basket in the other.

“You are leaving the party already, Mademoiselle Vinier?”

The beautiful young blonde curtsied to him before answering respectfully.

“I am going to the Hôtel-Dieu to temporarily relieve Sister Jeanne Mance, so that she could come and attend this party. God knows that she deserves a break after all the devotion she is showing to her patients. The food I have with me is for the patients and for Sister Mance’s servants.

“Are you knowledgeable about medicine, Mademoiselle Vinier?”

“As much in fact as any nursing sister, Your Excellency. If you will now excuse me.”

“By all means, mademoiselle.”

Marguerite Bourgeoys nodded her head slowly as the blonde left the inn with her food.

“Decidedly, Monsieur Bonnet and his associates may be unusual people but nobody could accuse them of not practicing Christian charity, Your Excellency. Even the wild Mademoiselle Laplante is known to help others around her whenever she can. Ville-Marie could use many more people like them.”

“And I could use many more soldiers as good in fighting and woodcraft as Mademoiselle Laplante.” Said Lambert Closse, meaning it. One of the merchants sitting with him at the Governor’s table made a gesture of derision at those words.

“Come on, Monsieur Closse! A woman being a good soldier? You must be joking! That girl’s reputation is way overblown.”

Closse looked with contempt at the merchant, a man who had the habit of letting his employees go out of the fort and take the risks.

“Is it now, monsieur? How many Iroquois warriors have you killed in combat lately? That young woman was able with the sole help of Ononkapis to defeat eight Iroquois warriors in close quarters combat and Ononkapis himself confirmed to me that she killed five and wounded one out of those eight warriors. She has also proved to be the equal of any native hunter as far as woodcraft and hunting skills are concerned. I would use that girl as a scout any time, monsieur.”

The merchant, smarting from Closse’s retort, shut up and concentrated on his food. Barely a minute later, Nancy Laplante and Fernand Bonnet came out of the kitchen, the first holding a lute, the second a violin, and went to a corner besides the space reserved as dance floor. Taking two chairs and sitting down, the pair started playing a beautiful but also heart-wrenching tune. With everybody in the main hall now listening to them, Nancy and Fernand followed their first tune with a much livelier and upbeat one that prompted many in getting up to invite the few women present for a dance. The third tune they played was a classic minuet, leading to more dancing around the main hall. For the fourth tune, with the guests well warmed up by now, Nancy sang on top of playing her lute, walking among the tables while Fernand stayed on his chair to accompany her with his violin. De Maisonneuve was pleasantly surprised by how good she was at singing, even though he had never heard before the song she was singing now. Charles Le Moyne applauded like the others at the end of the song, then spoke in a low voice for the benefit of the Governor and of the others sitting at their table.

“A half-breed native girl of New France who hunts and fights like an Iroquois warrior but plays the lute and sings like an angel and who could also be part of the court of King Louis. Quite an interesting mix of talents and skills I would say. What could we expect next from her?”

As the Governor and Lambert Closse were pondering that, two men dressed like *coureurs de bois* and carrying large backpacks and muskets entered the main hall. Claudette hurried to them and smiled to the younger man, who was stocky and in his early twenties.



“Can I do something for you, gentlemen?”

“Uh, we were told that we could find rooms in this inn, madame. My name is Jacques Leber, also known as Larose, merchant and fur trader. I just arrived from Quebec with Monsieur Jean Demers here.”

“You are in luck, monsieur.” Said Claudette, grinning at the first lodging customers of the inn. She was also thanking her luck as a field agent, as Jacques Leber was due to become the richest and most famous merchant of Ville-Marie in this century. “This inn just opened officially for business and we were celebrating the event. Food, drinks and shelter will thus be on the house for you two today.”

Jean Demers, a small and thin man, beamed at those words.

“That is most generous of you, madame. The hospitality of Ville-Marie is most commendable indeed.”

“Then you can repeat that later to Sire Paul Chomedey de Maisonneuve, the Governor. He is sitting at that table to your right.”

“The Governor is here? Excellent!” Said exultantly Jacques Leber. “I will be able to arrange some business right away.”

“Not before I show you to your rooms and feed you.” Replied Claudette good-naturedly. Leading the two men up the staircase of the main hall, she showed them one of the medium guest rooms that had been completed on a priority basis, as well as the nearest toilet.

“Do you have other luggage to bring in, monsieur?” Asked Claudette as the two men dropped their packs and muskets in their assigned room. Leber was the one who answered her.

“We do, madame. We have a travel chest and a few bundles that are presently under guard at the fort.”

“Then my husband and Nancy will help you bring those things here after the celebration. If you would come down now, we still have plenty of hot stew and wine left for you.”

**11:01 (Quebec Time)**

**Tuesday, October 13, 1654**

**Chapel of l’Hôtel-Dieu**

**Ville-Marie**

Father Pijart smiled tenderly to Pierre Vilain and Catherine Lorion, standing together in front of him in the chapel of the Hôtel-Dieu hospital.

“I now declare you husband and wife. You may kiss.”

The crowd, including Jeanne Rousselier, who had just been married mere minutes ago to a young carpenter named Pierre Gaudin, cheered as the newlyweds enlaced and kissed each other. Father Pijart waited for the assembly to quiet down before speaking again.

“We may now move to the inn, which Monsieur Bonnet has been generous enough to loan its use for the celebration following these two marriages today.”

On hearing that, Fernand got up from his bench and shouted to the other spectators.

“THE FOOD AND DRINKS ARE ON ME! TO THE INN!”

As he and Claudette got out of the chapel with the others, he patted the shoulder of young Marie Renaud, who had married Mathurin Langevin in Quebec eight days ago during her trip with Henri and Michel.

“You and Mathurin can also consider this day as a celebration for your own marriage, Marie. I wish that I could have been there.”

“You are too kind, Monsieur Bonnet.” Said Marie with a wide smile, prompting Fernand to raise a warning finger.

“Please, I am Fernand for you, not Monsieur Bonnet.”

“Understood, Fernand.” Replied the young girl, her smile widening to a grin.

Once at the inn, Claudette invited the guests to sit down and, letting Nancy serve them drinks, went to the kitchen to start bringing out the dishes that she had left Frida in charge of preparing while they were at the marriage ceremony. She then saw with alarm that Frida was sitting in front of the stove, crying silently. Kneeling besides her, Claudette held her face up with both hands.

“Frida, what’s wrong? This is a time to celebrate, not to cry.”

“You know what’s wrong, Claudette!” Replied rather brusquely Frida. “Can’t we do anything to prevent it from happening?”

“No, Frida.” Said softly Claudette with immense sadness. “It would change history and our sworn duty is to protect it, however bitter and cruel it can be. Remember Nancy and D’Artagnan: she may love him and live with him from time to time now but she will be forced to eventually let him die the way the history dictated.”

“But it is so hard to watch people who you have learned to like and even cherish die while doing nothing to prevent it.”

“Nobody said that it was easy, Frida, especially not Nancy ‘A’. She had to take some very painful decisions after she created the Time Patrol. You have to be strong and accept life as it is, Frida.”

The young German blonde swallowed hard, then wiped the tears on her face.

“I...I will try, Claudette.”

“Good! We have to serve the guests now. Put on a happy look and help me bring the dishes out to the main hall.”

Frida nodded silently, then got up and filled a serving tray with big, hot bear and moose meat sausages. Claudette was pleased to see her put on a happy smile before bringing the tray of sausages out of the kitchen.

### **15:06 (Quebec Time)**

**Tuesday, January 19, 1655**

**Hôtel-Dieu hospital, Ville-Marie**

Sister Jeanne Mance nearly panicked when two persons entered the hospital and quickly closed the door behind them to stop the blowing snow from coming in: both wore Amerindian winter gear and had their features hidden under fur-lined hooded greatcoats, apart from holding each a pair of snowshoes and displaying large knives on their belts. She sighed with relief when the two newcomers threw back their hoods.

“Ah, Nancy, Françoise, I’m happy to see you.”

“Where is Catherine, Sister Jeanne?” Asked Nancy, deep concern on her face.

“In the men’s ward, with her husband Pierre. Thank you for coming so quickly, both of you.”

“Catherine is our friend, Sister.” Said Françoise in a subdued voice. “This is the least we can do for her. Could we see them now?”

“Certainly! Follow me, please.”

They found Catherine Lorion sitting by Pierre Vilain’s bedside, holding desperately his right hand and crying shamelessly. Nancy’s face hardened the moment she saw Pierre: the young man’s skull was caved in on the left side of his face, while his wheezing breathing and pink bubbles at the corner of his mouth told her that his thorax

had been crushed and one or both of his lungs punctured by the tree that had fallen on top of him. Even in a 20<sup>th</sup> Century hospital his case would be touch and go. Here, in Ville-Marie, there was no way to save him without both blowing her cover and changing history. Pierre Vilain was not only a dying man: he also had to die today. Catherine then saw them and ran to Françoise, hugging her with desperate strength. She stayed like this for a long moment, her grip expressing better than words her despair. Catherine finally let go her hug and looked back at Pierre, unconscious in his bed.

“Can...can anyone help Pierre?”

“Not in the state he is, Catherine. I’m sorry.” Replied Françoise. She had to hold up the teenager as she collapsed from grief, crying hysterically. With the help of Nancy she managed to sit Catherine on a nearby chair, then crouched in front of her.

“I will stay with you while Nancy examines Pierre. It will take only a minute.”

A quick examination was enough to Nancy to confirm her first impressions: Pierre was already in a coma, with massive brain injuries and both lungs punctured, with possibly internal bleeding of the spleen. The young man had less than one hour to live at the most. She returned slowly to Catherine, shaking her head sadly at the teenager’s silent question.

“I’m sorry, Catherine: Pierre is going to die very soon. The best you can do is to stay with him until his last moment. Me and Françoise can be at your side if you want to.”

“Please, do that!” Pleaded the teenager before going to sit besides her husband’s bed and taking back hold of his right hand. Nancy and Françoise then pulled up chairs and sat on each side of her without saying a word.

Jeanne Mance was in her small kitchen, preparing a soup for another patient sick with a fever, when Nancy joined her, infinite sadness on her face.

“Pierre Vilain just died a few minutes ago. I convinced Catherine to come live at the inn for a while: she is in no state to take care of herself in the middle of Winter. If there are any expenses for Pierre’s stay at the hospital or for his funeral, me and Fernand Bonnet will take care of them.”

Jeanne Mance stared at the tall teenager, who had proved in the last few months that she had as much a huge heart as she had talents for hunting and fighting.

“Nancy, you and your associates seem to have infinite kindness towards others.”

Nancy answered first by kissing tenderly the old sister's forehead.

"It is nothing compared to yours, Sister Jeanne. We will escort Catherine to the inn now. If you need anything at all, don't hesitate to ask us."

Jeanne Mance watched Nancy collect both Catherine and Françoise and then leave the hospital. The old nursing sister sighed with regret: she wanted so much to know more about those two girls and their four associates. She was however too polite and respectful of others to try anything like spying on them. The only really important thing for her though was to know that they were good, honest people, however strange they could appear to be at times.

### **10:25 (Quebec Time)**

**Monday, May 31, 1655**

### **AUBERGE DU CHASSEUR**

#### **Ville-Marie**

Fernand was in the courtyard of his inn, washing and cleaning thoroughly his still before resuming alcohol production this year, when he heard the bell of the fort start ringing insistently. Stopping his work at once, he got on his feet and ran outside of the palisade, intent on shouting a warning at Frida, who was working in their vegetable plot. The young blonde was however already reacting to the sound of the bell, retreating with her tools towards the inn's compound. She stopped briefly near Fernand as the latter was closing the gate behind her.

"Do you know what's happening, Fernand?"

"Most probably an Iroquois attack around Ville-Marie. Since we didn't hear any shot, it must have been a silent ambush against some of our people. Go help Claudette prepare the inn for defense."

"On my way!" Replied Frida, heading at a run towards the main door of the inn. Fernand followed her inside and went upstairs to equip himself for possible military action. He met on the upper floor Heinrich, Michel and Nancy, who were all rushing to get their weapons and field equipment. Fernand was proud of his three ground assault specialists, who had proved their worth in combat many times during their career in the Time Patrol. Even Nancy, as the rookie of the group, qualified by now as a veteran and was far from being the slouch of their team. While the four of them could not use

advanced weapons or technology here, they certainly represented a combat potential that a seasoned contemporary soldier like Lambert Closse was unlikely to disregard.

The five visiting merchants from Quebec and two Jesuit priests who were lodging at the inn at the time watched with wide eyes the three men and one girl rush back down within minutes, loaded with weapons and haversacks full of ammunition and food. The Jesuits in particular made the sign of the cross at the sight of Nancy, who had changed in Amerindian hunting clothes that left her legs and belly mostly bare. Once the four of them were down in the main hall, Fernand reviewed quickly their equipment, then gave his instructions in quick, concise words.

“Alright, this could be anything from a small incursion by a handful of Iroquois to a full scale attack by a whole band. We will now go to the fort to propose ourselves as reinforcements to Sergeant-Major Closse. We could well be gone from here for a few days or more, so we will fill up our haversacks with non-perishable food before leaving. To the kitchen, go!”

They went single file in the kitchen, where they found Claudette securing the windows there by closing and locking their safety shutters, which only had one small hole in them to permit the firing of a musket through them. There, they stuffed pieces of cheese and smoked meat wrapped in waxed paper into their haversacks and filled their water flasks with pre-boiled water from a covered pot. Catherine Lorion, who was still working at the inn, came out of the east wing and into the main hall as the four agents were about to run outside, ready for action.

“Please be careful, all of you!” She shouted to them, earning a big smile from Fernand.

“You better warn the Iroquois that we are coming to kick their ass, Catherine.” The ex-French Army lieutenant colonel then became deadly serious, looking somberly at the young woman.

“Make sure that you lock the door solidly behind us and don’t open it again unless Claudette tells you it is safe to do so. See you soon, Catherine.”

The four agents then left the inn, making the gate of the palisade lock by itself behind them before they took the trail leading to the fort, adopting a quick walking pace and with their muskets at the ready. Such alerts had happened a few times already during their time in Ville-Marie but had thankfully been due to minor raids. Those raids had however

cost the life of one Frenchman and had covered much of the population into their houses and in the fort most of the time.

They found the gate of the fort closed and with two nervous-looking militiamen on watch atop the gate. They were however recognized at once and one militiaman briefly opened the gate for them, putting back in place the two locking beams once they were inside. Fernand and his three agents then went to the house of Lambert Closse, in front of which were already assembled nine militiamen and six soldiers being briefed by Closse. While those men gave funny looks to Nancy, who looked more like an Iroquois warrior than a French woman, Lambert Closse beamed happily at the sight of the newcomers.

“Ah, Monsieur Bonnet and his intrepid associates are here. We may very well need your military skills this time.”

“What is happening, Monsieur Closse?” Asked Fernand, resting the butt of his musket on the ground. Closse’s face then became somber.

“Julien Daubigeon was killed by an Iroquois party this morning as he was gathering fire wood near his lot of land to the West of the fort. The Iroquois then crossed to the South Shore, where they may be preparing for more raids. The wife and four children of Daubigeon have been brought to the safety of the fort, along with their neighbors, until this danger has passed. For the time being we will have to stay on the alert and be ready for any more raid from the South Shore by those Iroquois. Monsieur Charles Le Moyne, who has just returned from Quebec, also brought the news of another recent attack by the Iroquois, that time against the Geese Island, near the Island of Orléans, where they killed a French couple and took away as prisoners five young children.”

“Sweet Jesus!” Said softly one of the militiamen, Nicolas Godé. Nancy was also touched deeply by that news, prompting a pat on the shoulder from Fernand.

“We may still see those children back, Nancy: the Iroquois sometimes make prisoners exchanges.”

Closse, who was adding the names of Fernand and of his three ‘associates’ to a list in his hand, then spoke up in his strong voice.

“Alright, listen up! Until we know more or until something else happens we will keep a strong guard on top of the walls day and night. I will thus split you into two guard shifts. The first shift will be on guard from noon to midnight and will be commanded by

Monsieur Charles D'Ailleboust, who is presently conferring with the Governor and with Monsieur Charles Le Moyne. The men on the first shift will be Private Baston, Jean Sicot, Urbain Baudreau, Pierre Raguideau, Christophe Roger, Pierre Martin, Pierre Bareau, Antoine Chevasset, Nicolas Jousselein, Private Laviolette and Michel Tallemye. The second shift will stand guard from midnight to noon and will be commanded by Monsieur Charles Le Moyne. In that shift will be Private Saint-Pierre, Private Delorme, Nicolas Godé, Gilbert Barbier, Caporal René Besnard, Private Claude Robutel, Private Jean Valiquet, Fernand Bonnet, Henri Bruage, Michel Lorrain and Nancy Laplante."

While a few of the men looked dubious on hearing that a woman would stand guard with them, Fernand nodded his head in approval: Lambert Closse had reserved his most experienced and skilled people for the second shift, which covered the period when an Iroquois raid was most likely. Closse was again showing that he was a true professional soldier. Fernand then raised his hand, attracting the attention of Closse.

"Yes, Monsieur Bonnet?"

"What about Ononkapis? He is a seasoned Algonquin warrior and a dependable man and could be of use now. Also, if you are short of space for the family of Daubigeon or for others, I still have many rooms that are presently unoccupied at my inn."

Closse only had to think for a short moment before he nodded his head, appreciative of Fernand's suggestions.

"Ononkapis could indeed be of help, Monsieur Bonnet. Go send for him at once. I will talk to the Governor about your offer of space in your inn."

With Closse leaving with the men of the first shift to show them their duty posts, the men of the second shift sat down on the porch of his house to wait for further instructions. Fernand however grabbed Michel Hofmann and gave him a few quick instructions.

"Go see Ononkapis and ask him if he would accept to help in the defense of the fort. If he does, offer him a space at the inn for Mistibis during his absence. That should help him come with less concern about his young wife."

"Understood!" Simply said Michel before running away towards the main gate. Fernand then sat down with the others, doing what consumed the most time by far in war: waiting. The French men around him were understandably nervous and tense right now, not knowing what to expect next or fearing it. One of them, Private Jean Valiquet,



used the idle time to look at Nancy's numerous weapons, which also gave him an excuse to admire her bare legs. Apart from her musket and blunderbuss, she had her longbow and quiver of arrow, her war axe, a hunting knife and two pistols. The latter ones, sheathed in soft leather holsters by the sides of her belt and with their butts sticking out, attracted his attention.

"You have beautiful pistols, mademoiselle. Can I see one?"

"Sure!" Replied Nancy. "It is loaded, however, so be careful."

"I am an armorer, mademoiselle: I know how to handle weapons." Said reassuringly Valiquet. Nancy extracted one of her pistols from its holster and handed it butt first to him. Valiquet whistled in admiration as he examined the pistol: it was inlaid with ivory and silver and was exquisitely engraved, being as much a work of art as a weapon.

"This pistol must have cost you a fortune, mademoiselle. It must be worth at least 300 livres."

"It actually didn't cost me anything, Monsieur Valiquet: my two pistols were gifts from a good friend." Replied Nancy calmly, not mentioning that the friend in question was the King himself. Many of the men snapped their heads towards her at her words: to have such a rich friend implied that she had contacts with persons of high standing indeed, which only jived with the rich gown and jewels she had been seen wearing at the inauguration of the inn and at a few marriage ceremonies a few months earlier. The popular belief around Ville-Marie that she was an important noble lady, albeit a most unusual and scandalous one, was thus reinforced by this last clue. Nancy ignored their stares and holstered back her pistol, making sure to secure the holster's flap afterwards.

Lambert Closse returned twenty minutes later and led the members of the second shift to the guardhouse of the fort, where five men of the first shift were already installed. Closse looked around him at the men and single woman packed in the small room, a stern expression on his face.

"The safety of Ville-Marie now depends on all of us. Unless going to relieve yourselves, I want you to stay in or directly around the guardhouse, so that I could find you without delay at any time. Anyone who gets drunk until this emergency is over will be severely punished for dereliction of duty. While those of the first shift present here will stay up and will keep ready to react to anything, those from the second shift can relax and catch sleep if you want to before your shift starts on midnight. I will have some

bread and beer brought in shortly. Don't eat it all, as those presently on guard duty on the walls will have to eat too when relieved. Be frugal about your ration, since we don't know how long this could go on. Monsieur Bonnet, when Ononkapis will arrive, tell him that he will be part of the second shift."

"Yes, Monsieur Closse."

"Then try to relax all as much as possible, but make sure first that your weapons are loaded and ready. I will come and see you again once I know more about what is happening. Carry on!"

Once Closse was gone, the men inside tried to make themselves as comfortable as possible for their stay in the small guardhouse. Seeing how crowded it was, Nancy looked at Fernand while getting on her feet.

"I'm going to have a nap on the porch, where I can get some fresh air."

Fernand nodded at that, understanding too well her point: with the habit of the French of this time of not washing more than their hands and faces most of the time, the body stench from the dozen plus French around them was quite overpowering.

"I may just do the same myself, Nancy."

Heinrik actually ended up following them outside on the porch, giving up on the smelly crowd inside the guardhouse. All three were soon lying down on the porch, bathing in the noon Sun and quickly going to sleep there, their heads resting on their haversacks. When Michel returned with Ononkapis, both joined the three agents for a nap without further ado. The other occupants of the fort passing by couldn't help look at them as they walked by, with many either staring hungrily at the long, bare legs of Nancy or eyeing them with scandalized eyes.

"*Damnée sauvagesse*<sup>30</sup>!" Spat in a low voice a passing man who didn't believe the stories of her being a noble, figuring out that her dress and conduct was incompatible with a noble woman.

The day passed without incidents or sightings of Iroquois and so did the night. Late in the next morning however, as Nancy and her shift were on guard duty on the walls, a canoe with three Iroquois in it approached the fort from the South Shore of the Saint-Laurent River. Promptly warned of this, Paul Chomedey de Maisonneuve climbed on top of the ramparts with Lambert Closse and Charles Le Moyne to look at the

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<sup>30</sup> *Damnée sauvagesse*: 'Damn savage girl' in French.

approaching canoe. The three Iroquois however stayed out of effective musket shot, with one of them shouting at the top of his lungs in Iroquois. Nancy went at once to the side of the Governor to translate the Iroquois' words for him.

"Your Excellency, they say that they are from one of the Iroquois bands that signed a ceasefire with us last year. They say that they would like us to send someone to discuss with us a joint effort to chase those who attacked us yesterday."

"Don't believe them, Your Excellency!" Said at once Charles Le Moyne. "The Iroquois who attacked the Geese Island and killed the Moyne couple used the same stratagem to try attracting more French into their trap. That group of Iroquois was then seen going south towards Ville-Marie. I am certain that these Iroquois are part of the same band."

Nancy refrained from commenting on this, not wanting to influence what was an incident that was going to be well documented in the history of Ville-Marie. Charles Le Moyne's assumption was anyway a correct one. De Maisonneuve thought for a moment, his eyes fixed on the waiting Iroquois, before speaking up.

"Mademoiselle Laplante, tell those Iroquois that I will talk with their leaders tomorrow morning."

Nancy obeyed him, shouting in Iroquois and getting a prompt answer, which she translated to de Maisonneuve.

"Their chiefs will come back in a canoe tomorrow morning and ask that you do the same then, alone."

"Tell them that I accept their offer." Said de Maisonneuve, who raised a hand at once to silence Charles Le Moyne, who was about to object. "I know, Monsieur Le Moyne: this is probably a trap. We will however find a way to turn that trap around."

Nancy again translated the Governor's words, which made the Iroquois then paddle away calmly after a friendly wave of the hand. De Maisonneuve watched them for a moment, then spoke with cold resolve.

"Monsieur Closse, Monsieur Le Moyne, we need a plan of action for tomorrow morning. Do you have suggestions for me?"

"Your Excellency," said at once Charles Le Moyne, "let me go in your place. I can hide pistols in my canoe, take the Iroquois who will come by surprise and force them to beach their canoe near the fort."

"A risky plan, Monsieur Le Moyne." Replied the Governor, prompting Lambert Closse to speak in turn.

“We could support that plan by hiding a number of shooters near the shoreline, besides the meeting point, Your Excellency.”

“The Iroquois have keen eyes, Monsieur Closse. Those shooters will have to be good at hiding themselves in the woods in order for that plan to succeed.”

The eyes of the three men turned at once on Nancy, still standing besides them in her Amerindian clothes. De Maisonneuve eyed her critically.

“Do you believe yourself able to approach the Iroquois without being spotted, Mademoiselle Laplante?”

“Without a doubt, Your Excellency. May I say that my associates and Ononkapis, being all adept at woodcraft, would also be well suited for that task.”

De Maisonneuve nodded at once: the reputation of Fernand Bonnet and of his associates about their hunting skills was well established by now in Ville-Marie. As for Ononkapis, his services as a hunter were already most appreciated.

“Very well, mademoiselle. Monsieur Closse, have Monsieur Bonnet and his people ready to hide in the woods near the shoreline before sunrise tomorrow morning. I want the Iroquois who will show up to be taken prisoners as much as possible.”

“Yes, Your Excellency!”

The three men were coming down from the ramparts when a sentry shouted to them that a Jesuit was coming from the inn of Fernand Bonnet with Françoise Vinier. Intrigued, de Maisonneuve waited for them inside the main gate, greeting the priest and the young blonde when they entered through a small door in the gate. Françoise, while dressed most decently and correctly for the standards of the time, also lugged a musket and a pistol and was obviously escorting the priest.

“Father Lemoyne, what prompts you to come to the fort at such a dangerous time?”

“I believe that I can be of better help to you here than at the inn of Monsieur Bonnet, Your Excellency.” Answered politely the Jesuit. “I have worked with many Iroquois bands in the last few years and know many of their leaders, having even baptized a few of them. I also speak their language.”

“You can effectively be of use, Father. Some of the Iroquois are slated to come tomorrow morning but we believe that they are trying to set a trap for us. We are hoping to turn that trap around. Your knowledge may help us better assess the real intentions of the Iroquois tomorrow. Mademoiselle Vinier, while you are here, could I ask you to

escort back to your inn the widow and children of Daubigeon, who was killed by the Iroquois yesterday? Monsieur Closse will provide you with two men as extra escorts.”

“I will be most please to help, Your Excellency.” Said at once the beautiful blonde, bowing respectfully to de Maisonneuve.

“Good! Monsieur Closse, see to this! Father Lemoyne, follow me!”

Things then followed up quickly, with Closse providing two soldiers to Françoise and fetching Perrine Meunier and her four young children, which included a toddler girl. Closse wished them goodbye as the group departed through the main gate, then went up the ramparts to follow its progress towards the inn. To his relief the group made it safely into the inn, with his two men returning at once at a near run. This done, Closse made his preparations for the action of tomorrow, which could be very well be critical for Ville-Marie.

## **08:26 (Quebec Time)**

**Wednesday, June 2, 1655**

### **Ville-Marie**

“ONE CANOE APPROACHING WITH THREE OCCUPANTS!”

The warning from one of the sentries made the Governor and his aides run up to the top of the ramparts at once, where they were able to see a lone canoe approaching from the South Shore. Using a telescope to examine it, de Maisonneuve then passed the telescope to Lambert Closse, looking perplexed.

“Look at that canoe, Monsieur Closse, and tell me if there is indeed what appears to be a child between two Iroquois in it.”

“You are too right about that, Your Excellency.” Replied Closse, surprised, after a few seconds. “What kind of game are the Iroquois playing now?”

“I guess that we will soon know. Have Father Lemoyne join us at once. With Mademoiselle Laplante hiding with her associates in the woods, we will need his knowledge of the Iroquois language. Monsieur Le Moyne, are you ready?”

“I am, Your Excellency.” Replied Charles Le Moyne at once.

“Then good luck!” Said de Maisonneuve, giving an accolade to Le Moyne before the latter left the ramparts and exited the fort through the main gate. De Maisonneuve and the other Frenchmen on the ramparts, soon joined by Closse and Father Lemoyne, then anxiously watched Charles Le Moyne get into a canoe and start paddling away. Le

Moyne roughly followed the shoreline while paddling upstream, intent on attracting the Iroquois towards the spot where Fernand Bonnet and his four companions were hidden. The trick worked, with the two Iroquois eventually stopping their canoe only a few meters from his canoe and less than five meters from the shore. As Le Moyne was fervently hoping that Bonnet's group was effectively there and ready, the small boy, who was obviously a European, spoke to him in French with a heavy English accent.

"Sire, I am here to translate for those Iroquois chieftains, who do not speak French. They wish to come alongside to parley."

Charles Le Moyne could see at once that the boy, who was at most twelve years old, was terrified of the two Iroquois. The latter looked on their part supremely confident of themselves and wore the attributes of important Iroquois leaders.

"Tell them that they can approach, boy." Replied Le Moyne in an even voice to the boy, who translated his words to the Iroquois. The two chieftains resumed at once their paddling. As they were about to come alongside with his canoe and still had their hands holding their paddles, Charles Le Moyne suddenly reached for his two pistols and pointed them at the surprised Iroquois.

"DON'T MOVE OR YOU'RE DEAD!"

Another shout, this time from the shore and in Iroquois, immediately followed, making the Iroquois and the boy snap their heads in that direction, in time to see Fernand Bonnet and his four companions emerge from the woods, their muskets leveled and ready to fire. As the two Iroquois froze in stunned surprise, Charles Le Moyne took away the paddle from the nearest one, while Nancy Laplante went into the water, armed solely with a knife between her teeth. Swimming quickly to the Iroquois canoe, she pulled away the paddle from the second chieftain, then started dragging their canoe towards the shoreline, still covered by her companions. As soon as the canoe hit the shore, Fernand Bonnet and Henri Bruage stepped forward with pistols and brutally pulled the two Iroquois out before forcing them to go face down in the dirt. Charles Le Moyne was beaching his own canoe as Nancy went to the English boy, who looked understandably scared. With her knife back in its sheath, she caressed gently the boy's blond hair with one hand while smiling to him and speaking in English.

"Do not be afraid, boy: we will treat you kindly. Were you a prisoner of those Iroquois?"

"Yes, miss." Answered the boy while starting to cry. "They killed the rest of my family two years ago and took me as their slave."

“What is your name, boy?”

“James, James Walker. I am from Portsmouth. The band of Iroquois who killed my family during a trip to Fort Ann are allied to the Dutch and thus attack Englishmen as well as Frenchmen.”

“James, you are now safe. My name is Nancy Laplante and I have English as well as French blood in my veins.”

“You do, miss?” Said the boy, strangling his tears. Nancy nodded slowly once.

“My mother was English. She was herself a slave of Amerindians but was saved by my father, who was a French trapper. I can promise you that you will be well treated in Ville-Marie. Come, I will lead you to the fort.”

Gathering back her weapons and haversack while Fernand and Henri solidly tied the hands of the two Iroquois behind their back, Nancy then recuperated one paddle and sat in the Iroquois canoe with little James. Henri, one of the Iroquois and Ononkapis then joined her, while the rest went in Charles Le Moyne’s canoe. They were paddling back towards the fort when Michel Lorrain shouted a warning.

“At least eight canoes are now coming from the South Shore towards us.”

“LET’S GET TO THE FORT QUICKLY, THEN!” Shouted Charles Le Moyne. They paddled harder still, thankfully arriving at the improvised wharf of the fort well in advance of the pursuing Iroquois canoes, which were still a good 500 meters away. The two Iroquois captives were quickly pushed towards the fort, each being manhandled by two men while Nancy accompanied James Walker, with Charles Le Moyne covering their rear. They were greeted inside the fort by an ecstatic de Maisonneuve who patted their backs enthusiastically.

“Well done, all of you! Is anybody hurt?”

“Only their pride, Your Excellency.” Replied Fernand, pointing at one of the downcast Iroquois and making the Governor laugh briefly. De Maisonneuve then eyed the boy led by Nancy.

“Is he French?”

“English, Your Excellency. His family was killed by this Iroquois band and he was made a slave. I can take care of him for the time being, if you will allow me.”

“Go ahead, mademoiselle.” Said softly de Maisonneuve. “I now have to go back on top of the ramparts. We will talk later about this boy.”

While five soldiers escorted the Iroquois prisoners to a cell, Nancy led young James inside the now empty guardhouse, sitting with him on a bench before speaking softly to him in English.

“How old are you, James?”

“Nine, miss.”

“Please, call me simply Nancy. Are you hungry or thirsty?”

“I am mostly hungry.” Answered timidly the boy. Nancy took out at once a piece of cheese and offered it to James, who grabbed it at once and bit in it. She next poured a cup of water for him and let him eat in silence for a couple of minutes before asking him another question.

“James, do you know if any member of your family is alive still?”

Tears came back to the boy’s face as he shook his head.

“They were all killed: my father, my mother, my older brother and my three sisters, along with the members of another family traveling with us.”

“Do you still have family relatives alive somewhere, uncles, aunts, grand-parents?”

“My paternal grand-parents still live in England, in the Sussex, I believe.”

“Do you know exactly where?”

“In Guildford, South of London. What is going to happen to me now?”

Nancy couldn’t answer that at first, partly because of the lump that had formed in her throat, partly because she had to study the consequences of any action involving that boy.

“Me and my associates will take care of you while we figure a way to reunite you with your grand-parents.”

“That won’t work, Nancy.” Replied the boy, surprising her somewhat. “My grand-parents are very poor and sick and can’t take care of me.”

“Is anyone else alive who could?” Asked Nancy, getting suddenly depressed.

“No! I should have died with my parents.”

“Please, don’t say that, James! I will find something for you, I swear!”

She hugged the boy gently after that, as much to hide her own sadness as to console him. She next looked into his blue eyes.

“James, how did the Iroquois treat you in captivity? Be frank: I need to know so that you could be treated for any wound you may still have.”

The boy lowered his head as deep shame showed on his face.



“They...they tortured me on capture, like they did to two of my sisters. I survived that but my sisters didn't.”

The lump in her throat growing bigger, Nancy turned her back to James and partially pulled up her buckskin tunic, showing to him the faint marks left on her by whip lashes and red hot irons.

“I was tortured myself, James, but I not only survived that: I got over that and went on. You can do the same, James. Now, take off your shirt and show me your wounds.”

James obeyed him reluctantly, obviously embarrassed. Nancy had seen him redden when she had pulled up her tunic and and thought that he probably had been raised by a Puritan family. She had a hard time keeping a straight face at the sight of the large burn marks covering most of his torso. Undoing herself his belt buckle, she then lowered his trousers and inspected his buttocks and legs, finding more burn marks there. A quick inspection of the boy's groin area and front legs thankfully showed no marks there. Gently dressing him back, she looked tenderly into the boy's eyes.

“James, nobody will hurt you here, I promise. I and my friends will be there to protect you.”

“What if the Iroquois attack and take this fort?” Said James in a resigned tone.

“They won't take this fort, that I can assure you. Now, you can either stay here for the moment and sleep a bit or come with me. I am however going to the ramparts and things could be dangerous there.”

“I am staying with you, Nancy.” Said the boy without hesitation, making Nancy nod.

“As you wish, James. Then follow me.”

Nancy stepped back on the ramparts with James as a rather loud exchange was going on between an Iroquois chieftain sitting in a canoe out of musket range and the Governor, with Father Lemoyne as translator. In essence the Iroquois was promising a terrible revenge on the French of the fort if the Governor didn't return at once the two chieftains just captured. De Maisonneuve was however refusing to let himself intimidated by the said 'Laplume' and was himself asking for the return of all the French presently captive of the Iroquois in exchange for the two chieftains. Not getting what he wanted, Laplume soon left with his warriors, paddling back to the South Shore. That left the Governor conferring with his aides and Father Lemoyne as they stood together on

the ramparts. From what Nancy heard from a distance, the Governor had in mind to cross to the South Shore at night and to attack the Iroquois there. While Lambert Closse showed himself reluctant to that idea, Father Lemoyne suggested that they take counsel from an Iroquois chieftain wounded and captured last autumn and who was now sympathetic to the French because of the way he had been treated while wounded. De Maisonneuve agreed to that and had Closse fetch the said 'Labarique', who was still severely handicapped and resided at the Hôtel-Dieu. It then took a good half hour before four men carried Labarique inside the fort on top of a wooden stretcher. Fernand's group knew that Iroquois well, as it had been Michel who had severely wounded Labarique with a volley of lead pellets while the latter was leading an attack against Frenchmen working in their fields. As much as he had been at first ferocious with the French, he was now a man they could trust. It didn't take long for Labarique to oppose the Governor's plan and to persuade him instead to send him to the South Shore next morning to go negotiate with the chieftain Laplume. That raised however an objection from de Maisonneuve.

"But Labarique can hardly move by himself, much less paddle all the way to the South Shore. He will need at least two other men to escort him across the river. Those men in turn very well risk being taken captive by the Iroquois and then tortured and killed."

"I volunteer to go help Labarique negotiate with that Laplume tomorrow." Replied calmly Father Lemoyne, to the shock of the Governor.

"You, Father Lemoyne? But you are too precious to us to risk yourself like this."

"Every Christian soul in this fort is precious, Your Excellency. If it can help save the people in this fort, I will gladly risk my life."

Before de Maisonneuve could reply to that, Nancy stepped in front of the Governor, acting on an impulse.

"I wish to volunteer as well, Your Excellency. I speak Iroquois and know their customs."

"That's totally out of the question, mademoiselle!" Replied at once de Maisonneuve. Labarique eyed Nancy, then the Governor.

"That squaw is a daughter of the forest and has proved repeatedly to be a brave woman. Why deny her a chance to help you all? Personally I would trust her more for that mission than any of your soldiers save maybe for Closse."

“Please, Your Excellency!” Pleaded Nancy. “If there is a time when I can be truly of help, this is it. Forget whatever else I could be.”

Those last words nearly made the Governor blow a fuse.

“How could I forget what you are, mademoiselle? I would never pardon myself if something happens to you tomorrow.”

“I could make a letter discharging you from any responsibility if I die, Your Excellency.” Said calmly Nancy, resolved to push her point through. “I could even become naughty and push rank on you.”

That last sentence, told in a near whisper audible only to de Maisonneuve, Lambert Closse, Labarique and Father Lemoyne, made de Maisonneuve and Closse pale. Nancy smiled at once to minimize the impact of her words.

“That of course stays between us, Your Excellency. If I die tomorrow, it will officially be as the half-breed French-English daughter of a coureur de bois with Huron blood in her vein.”

That was when Labarique firmly pointed a finger at Nancy while looking at de Maisonneuve.

“I want to go with her and Father Lemoyne, and no one else.”

De Maisonneuve brooded over that for a few seconds, then relented with a sigh.

“Alright, mademoiselle, you go with Labarique and Father Lemoyne. Just don’t take unnecessary risks tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Your Excellency.”

“Don’t thank me yet, mademoiselle.” Said the Governor, who then signaled her to come off the ramparts and follow him. Putting first little James in the temporary care of Fernand, she then followed the Governor to his private office, where de Maisonneuve locked the door before facing Nancy, a sour expression on his face.

“No more games with me, Mademoiselle Laplante! Who are you really?”

“First, Your Excellency, I really am what I said I was up on the ramparts. I however was ennobled by King Louis the Fourteenth for services rendered to the Crown during the uprising of the Fronde. I am the Marquess of Saint-Laurent and am also a close friend of the King. Do not worry, though: I came to Ville-Marie simply to see again my country of birth, not to spy for the King.”

“Marquess of Saint-Laurent...” Said de Maisonneuve, looking as if lightning had just struck him: he was himself a mere squire in terms of nobility title, a full four ranks below a marquess. Only the ranks of duchess and princess stood between those of a

marquess and of a queen. Seeing an ink bottle, a pen and a reserve of paper on the Governor's work table, Nancy pointed to them and gave de Maisonneuve her best smile.

"While we are here, may I write something down, Your Excellency?"

"Uh, of course, Marquess."

Sitting down at the table, Nancy grabbed the pen and a sheet of virgin paper and wrote a short, two-paragraph text, then signed it. She then applied a wax seal to it, using for that a small brass seal hanging from a chain between her breasts and a red wax candle on the Governor's table. De Maisonneuve read the paper Nancy gave him before eyeing her with deference. She however spoke before he could.

"Please don't feel subservient to me because of my nobility title or of my closeness to the King. You are still the legitimate governor of Ville-Marie and doing a fine job of it, while I am here only as the associate of an innkeeper and merchant. In truth, I have come to truly admire your work here, Monsieur de Maisonneuve and you don't have to bow to me. You may do that only if you meet me in the company of the King, for the sake of the etiquette and not because I am superior in any way to you."

Nancy then came to attention, her face serious.

"Permission to return to guard duty, Your Excellency!"

"Uh, permission granted, mademoiselle."

De Maisonneuve watched her leave, then sat heavily in his chair behind his work table before looking down again at the declaration signed by Nancy, having still a hard time to believe what had just happened.

## **07:40 (Quebec Time)**

**Thursday, June 3, 1655**

### **Ville-Marie**

"Please be careful, Nancy." Implored quietly Michel Hofmann as he was about to help push her canoe into the current. Nancy grinned and kissed him on the cheek.

"Believe me, Michel: my butt is as precious to me as it is to you. I'll be back in a few hours, I promise."

She then grabbed her paddle as Michel and another man pushed the canoe away from the shoreline. Father Lemoyne, sitting in the rear of the canoe, did the same and started paddling in cadence with her. Labarique lay in a half-sitting position between them, his back resting on a rolled bear fur. Labarique was also holding up a white flag with his

sole functioning arm. While Father Lemoyne was unarmed as per custom for a priest, Nancy had left all her weapons save for her war axe and hunting knife with Michel Hofmann, along with her precious personal seal. She had also left the little James Walker in the good hands of Claudette at the inn yesterday, where he would be able to recuperate both physically and psychologically from his long and cruel ordeal. The results of a preliminary genealogical search by the Time Patrol concerning James and his family line had confirmed that the boy had disappeared without a trace two years ago and had no surviving relatives able to care for him. Right now, Elisabeth Windsor was busy conducting an on-the-spot inquiry in England to confirm that information but there was little hope that any unknown relative would be found. With this going around her mind, Nancy paddled at a steady cadence, heading towards the spot on the South Shore from where the canoes of Laplume had appeared, at the future site of the city of Longueuil, itself only a few kilometers from the future city of Boucherville, the original hometown of her deceased timeline twin.

The voice of Father Lemoyne took her out of her thoughts as they were halfway across the river, which was a good 1,600 meters wide at this point, and were leaving the island of Sainte-Hélène to their left.

“Mademoiselle, while we are practically alone right now, would you mind telling me what you are really?”

Nancy glanced at him over her shoulder, then replied in Latin.

“Since we may very well die today, Father, I will tell you this in the confidence of confession: I am the Marquess de Saint-Laurent, ennobled by King Louis XIV nearly four years ago. I am also one of the mistresses of the King and work in his service for delicate and discreet missions.”

The Jesuit nodded somberly, having understood perfectly her Latin words. As this had been said in confession, he was now bound in front of God to keep this strictly confidential. He used Latin as well to reply to her.

“This explains many things, mademoiselle. With all your talents and with your beauty, you could indeed do things a male spy of the King couldn’t do and go into places he couldn’t enter.”

“I knew that you would understand, Father: the Jesuit Order is no stranger to power politics.”

“I will recognize that much, mademoiselle. Since you are working for the good of the King and France, I absolve you of all the sins you may have committed in the course of your duties.”

Stuff your absolution, thought Nancy, sick of the religious hypocrisy permeating this whole century. The sight of four canoes heading their way from the South Shore then returned her mind to their present situation.

“We have a welcoming committee coming at us.” She warned in French, making Labarique and Father Lemoyne focus their eyes on the still distant canoes. Lemoyne then made the sign of the cross and said a silent prayer as the Iroquois approached them. Sixteen Iroquois in four canoes soon surrounded them, muskets and bows pointed at them. Labarique shouted at their apparent leader in Iroquois.

“We came to parley! I want to talk with your chieftain, Laplume.”

“Do you have weapons with you?” Asked the leader, still clearly suspicious. In response, Nancy showed him her knife and war axe, making the Iroquois nod.

“We will accept that, but no more. Follow us!”

With her heart beating faster, Nancy started paddling again, following the lead Iroquois canoe, as the three other Iroquois canoes formed a diamond around her boat, surrounding it while they headed to the South Shore. A good forty Iroquois warriors were waiting for them on the shoreline, including the said Laplume, who eyed with contempt the handicapped Labarique sitting in Nancy’s canoe.

“Why should I talk with a traitor like you?”

Labarique, stung by this insult, stared hard at Laplume with his remaining right eye.

“You break the ceasefire signed by the Five Nations<sup>31</sup> and you call me a traitor?”

“I didn’t sign on that ceasefire, thus deem myself not bound by it. Say your piece, quickly!”

“The French have your two chieftains, who are being well treated. I saw them and can vouch for that. The French know that you are holding a number of French prisoners, including five children taken recently near Quebec. They want these captives back, all of them, in exchange of which they will give you back your two chieftains.”

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<sup>31</sup> Five Nations: Name of the Iroquois Federation until a sixth nation, the Tuscaroras, entered the federation in 1722. The Five Nations included the Cayugas, the Agniers (Mohawks), the Oneidas, the Onondagas and the Senecas and was created in 1570.

“Why should I give back my French slaves when I could easily go get back my two comrades myself by taking the French fort?”

“Your vanity is obscuring your head!” Replied Labarique in a firm tone. “You don’t have all the warriors needed to take the French fort. Besides, your two chieftains would be hung by the French before you could enter their Fort.”

“Then I will burn down their houses around the fort until I get my two comrades back alive. Maybe the screams of their squaws being tortured will convince the French to give up our people. In fact, I could start with this young one here.”

“We came under a white flag of truce.” Spat out Labarique, now truly angry. “Are you ready to soil the honor of all the Agniers by committing such treachery?”

A rumble of whispered comments and exclamations around Laplume then told Laplume that Labarique had just marked an important point. Not willing to risk dissension among his warriors, he relented partly after a hesitation.

“You may return safely to the fort with your two companions. Tell the French that I want our two chieftains back, alive, before noon or I will burn down their fort. As for the slaves I have, I will keep them. Make sure that the French understand that I set the conditions, not them. Now, go!”

Somewhat discouraged, the three emissaries turned their canoe around and paddled back towards Ville-Marie. Once a good 600 meters from the South shore, Father Lemoyne allowed himself to blow air out in relief.

“This was a close call, especially for you, mademoiselle. I would hate to think of what these barbarians could have done to you.”

Like Labarique, Nancy shot at once a black look at Lemoyne, with Nancy admonishing him in an angry voice.

“Who are we to call these people barbarians, Father? I can assure you that when it comes to torturing people, we are as cruel as anybody else! In fact, you may look at this as proof of that.”

She then pulled her buckskin tunic over her head, stripping topless in front of the shocked priest and of the delighted Labarique.

“Look at what was done to me in the basement of the Bastille in Paris, Father, and see how merciful we French could be. A so-called noble lady and a duchess no less directed my tortures there as she tried to get from me the names of the agents of Cardinal Mazarin in Paris during the Fronde.”

"I...I'm sorry, Marquess." Said weakly the priest, now pale. "I spoke rashly and chose my words poorly."

Nancy nodded once, calming down, then put her tunic back on. The rest of the trip back to the fort was spent in silence. The Governor was one of the men who rushed to the shoreline to greet them.

"Thank God, you came back safely. What did that Laplume say to our conditions?"

"He refused all of them and in turn threatened to burn the fort if the two chieftains are not returned alive to him by noon." Answered Labarique, making de Maisonneuve grimace.

"That man is decidedly impossible to deal with. As much as this could cost us, I am however not ready to free those two chieftains without getting something in return."

"Then expect Laplume to come and attack us after noon is past." Replied Labarique, somber. "He however doesn't have enough warriors to attack directly the fort. He threatened to burn the houses around the fort and then torture captives in plain sight to convince us to give up our two prisoners."

That made the Governor's face harden, while Lambert Closse swore quietly to himself.

"Tudieu! We don't have enough soldiers to protect all the houses outside the fort. We will have to evacuate all our people still outside the fort to safety."

"May I suggest something, Your Excellency?" Said promptly Fernand, who was near the Governor and Closse. "If you have to evacuate houses, then bring their occupants to our inn, which is fortified. This way we will have two strong points able to provide mutual supporting fire to each other. Also, our inn will probably become the main target of that Laplume, since he will judge that it would be easier to attack than the fort itself. We could use that to mount an ambush for the Iroquois when they cross the river again."

"Go on, Monsieur Bonnet." Said de Maisonneuve, interested at once by that idea. Fernand then spent a minute describing his plan, after which the Governor and Closse discussed with him its finer details before coming to a decision.

"We will proceed as we just discussed then, gentlemen. Let's start evacuating at once the families still outside the fort to the inn of Monsieur Bonnet: we don't have much time left before noon."



A period of frantic activity followed that decision, with Fernand and his associates put in charge of assembling in the inn the settlers living around it. The first problem came when Sister Jeanne Mance refused to evacuate her hospital, insisting on staying barricaded inside it. It took the direct intervention of the Governor to finally get her to let herself be escorted to the fortified inn, which was now housing over forty persons. The nursing sister was greeted there by Claudette, who was now in charge of the defense of the inn and was helped in this by Françoise and nine other musket shooters that were in turn supported by twenty more persons able to reload their spare muskets. Once de Maisonneuve was satisfied that the inn was well enough secured and defended, Fernand, his three agents, Ononkapis, Lambert Closse, Charles Le Moyne and five militiamen crawled from the inn to the nearby woods, intent on discreetly setting up an ambush point by the shoreline of the inn.

It didn't take long after noon arrived for the Iroquois to get on the move. Fifteen canoes loaded with Iroquois warriors departed the south shore of the river and headed towards the north shore, skipping the western point of the Island of Sainte-Hélène, then heading towards the fortified inn, as hoped for by the Governor. The Iroquois, Laplume in the lead, chose to land in the wooded shoreline close to the fields surrounding the inn and the nearby houses. Fernand had judged that precise point to be the probable landing spot of the Iroquois and had convinced Charles Le Moyne and Lambert Closse of this. The moment that Laplume and four warriors beached their canoe ahead of the other Iroquois canoes, Charles Le Moyne jumped out of cover and pointed his musket literally in the face of the stunned Laplume, while Fernand, Henri and Michel pointed their own muskets at the four warriors accompanying their chieftain.

"One false move and you are all dead!" Warned Charles Le Moyne, his index on the trigger of his musket. At the same moment the voice of Lambert Closse came out of the woods as he gave an order to his hidden militiamen.

"AT THE CANOES STILL IN THE WATER, FIRE AT WILL!"

Eight muskets fired at once, dropping seven Iroquois out of their canoes and making two of the unstable boats tip sideways and sink, throwing more Iroquois in the water. A second salvo from the hidden French militiamen, who had each a spare musket ready to fire, followed less than ten seconds later, killing or wounding more Iroquois. One canoe with one dead Iroquois in its bow tried to rush to the shore and was nearly there when Nancy ran out of cover and fired her blunderbuss in their faces from less than five

meters away. The three surviving Iroquois in that canoe were swept by the volley of lead pellets and fell in the water, dead or dying. With over a third of their warriors dead or captured before they could themselves fire once, the surviving Iroquois turned their canoes around, paddling desperately to get out of musket range as quickly as possible. That didn't save them from a third salvo or from the rain of arrows Nancy started shooting from her longbow at an infernal rate. Having suffered for years from terror attacks by Iroquois raiders, the Frenchmen were in no mood to show mercy now and kept firing steadily until their enemies were out of range. By then, less than fourteen terrorized Iroquois had survived to paddle away to safety. Apart from Laplume and the four warriors captured with him, now solidly tied up and held face down in the mud of the shoreline, no mercy was shown to the wounded Iroquois trying to either swim to the shore or to merely keep their heads above the water, with the lot of them being methodically shot dead by the French. A concert of wild cheers followed the end of the firing: the latest threat to Ville-Marie had been decisively defeated with no losses to the French side. Lambert Closse, elated, surveyed the battleground and the river, now full of dead Iroquois floating downstream, pushed by the current. He then knelt and made a prayer of thanks, imitated by his militiamen and by Charles Le Moyne. Only Fernand, his three associates and Ononkapis, who were guarding the five Iroquois taken prisoners, refrained from praying then.

The return of the French force to the fort with their five prisoners was greeted by cheers from the occupants, with the Governor coming out to meet them. He first shook hands with Closse and Le Moyne, speaking to the first one while grinning.

"This is truly a day to remember in the history of Ville-Marie. How many Iroquois did you kill? How many escaped?"

"Maybe thirteen or fourteen Iroquois were able to flee, Your Excellency." Answered Closse soberly. "We captured five of them, including this loud mouth of Laplume, and killed over thirty of them. We are however still not safe, far from it. Those surviving Iroquois will bring the news of our victory to their band, which will then probably send a strong war party to avenge their warriors. We will have to stay vigilant for the next few weeks and months."

"As we always have been." Replied de Maisonneuve, his initial enthusiasm now falling off. "Let's hope that some of those Iroquois will come to their senses and will try

to discuss instead of continuing this endless killing spree. Were you able to capture some of the enemy weapons?”

Closse then proudly showed him five militiamen loaded down with a collection of muskets and pistols.

“The powder we collected from the dead Iroquois is wet and will have to be carefully dried and remixed, but we captured eighteen muskets and seven pistols. Most of those weapons are of Dutch manufacture.”

“That doesn’t come exactly as a surprise to me.” Replied the Governor while making a face. “These weapons will however come handy indeed to reinforce our defenses. Again, good work, all of you! Monsieur Le Moyne, you go put those prisoners in irons and throw them in jail. Closse, you tell our people in the inn that they can return to their homes...until the next alert. We will talk tonight about what to do next concerning the Iroquois.”

“Yes, Your Excellency!” Both said Le Moyne and Closse before carrying out the Governor’s orders.

Fernand, his associates and Ononkapis were able to return to the inn in time for supper, having been released from duty by Lambert Closse. While Claudette and Françoise respectively hugged and kissed Fernand and Henri, Nancy got a warm hug from little James Walker. The strength of the boy’s grip told Nancy that he was still very much in emotional distress, although not as badly as yesterday. His despair finished convincing Nancy, who had anyway pretty much made her mind already after getting via radio the results of Elizabeth’s inquiry in England. Holding James gently by his shoulders, she looked straight into his big, sad eyes, and spoke softly to him.

“James, I know that you need and want someone to care for you and love you. If you want, I wish to be that person.”

“You would be ready to be my new mother?” Said the boy in a shaking voice, tears coming to his eyes.

“Yes, I would. My friends here also would be ready to care for you whenever I would have to go in the woods. They are good people whom I consider like family for me. Do you accept to stay with me, James?”

“Yes!” Answered the boy timidly but without hesitation. A lump in her throat, Nancy then hugged him for long seconds. Looking into his eyes again, she kissed him on both cheeks, then got up and took him by the hand.

“Come, James: we will tell Fernand about our decision.”

Nancy intercepted Fernand as he was about to go to his room to drop off his weapons and gear.

“Fernand, me and James have something to tell you. Do you have a minute?” She said in English. Fernand looked at her, then at little James and smiled, answering also in English.

“I think that I know what you want to talk about, Nancy. Come to my room with me.”

Going together up the stairs to the upper floor of the west wing, the trio soon entered the large bedroom used by Fernand and Claudette. Fernand closed the door before facing Nancy and James, looking specifically at Nancy.

“Go ahead, Nancy.”

“Fernand, I offered to take care of James and he accepted. I will take him with me when I will leave Ville-Marie to return in France.”

Fernand nodded his head at once, smiling to her.

“You have my wholehearted support in this, Nancy. If you need any help with James, me and Claudette will be most happy to oblige. Did you tell James about Charles?”

“Not yet. That’s next.”

Fernand nodded, then went to James and crouched in front of him, smiling to him and playing with his blond hair.

“You are a lucky boy, James: Nancy is an exceptional girl in all respects. She is also very kind and caring. You will be happy with her.”

“I believe so, sir.” Said timidly James, prompting Fernand to shake a finger at him.

“Call me Fernand, not sir. In this inn, we all call each other by our first names.”

He then got back up and let Nancy go out with the boy. Nancy in turn brought James to her own bedroom, where she got rid of her weapons and haversack before leading James to the bed, sitting on the edge of it with him.

“If we are to care about each other, James, then we have to know each other. I will start first. Officially I am not married. I however love very much a Frenchman whom I cannot marry for a number of reasons. I can assure you though that he also loves me very much. His name is D’Artagnan and he is the most loyal and honest man you could think of. I had a baby boy from him, who is now three years old and is named Charles.

He is presently being cared for by relatives of mine while I am in New France. You will be able to see him soon enough. Next, I have a secret, a big one I don't want other people here to know: I am a marquess."

"What is a marquess?" Asked James, making Nancy smile.

"A marquess is the same thing as a countess, but people don't use that title in England."

James' eyes widened at those words.

"Then, you must be rich and important!"

"Rich, not really, but I am comfortable. Important? Well, it depends where. You see, my title is well known only at the court of the King of France, who is a good friend of mine. In other places, I try to be discreet about it, like here."

"Why?"

"For a number of reasons, which you will understand when we will leave New France in a few months. Mostly, it has to do about avoiding enemies."

"Do you have a lot of enemies, Nancy?"

"Let's say that I live a dangerous life, James." She replied, most serious. "Now, tell me about you. Did your parents make you learn something? They must have, since you speak French already."

"My father was a merchant and wanted me to learn many languages, so that I could help him one day with his business. Since our family had money, he paid a private teacher for me and my older brother."

"So, what did you learn, apart from French?" Asked Nancy, smiling down at him.

"I was learning how to read, write and count. Our teacher also showed us maps, so that we would know how this country was made and how to go around it."

"That is indeed very good for a boy of your age, James." Said Nancy, meaning it. "Now, I believe that it is supertime. Did Claudette wash you while I was gone?"

"She gave me a warm bath last evening."

"Then you will only need to wash your hands before supper. As for me, I'm afraid that I need a bath, badly."

"Should I come with you?" Said James innocently, not meaning wrong but making Nancy grin.

"That would not be considered proper, James." She said with a smile. "Come, I will show you where you can wash your hands."

Before leaving her room, Nancy grabbed a set of fresh clothes and a large towel, then went with James to the nearest bathroom on the upper floor, where she showed him the small counter, with its wash basin, water pot and towel. Once the boy had washed his hands, Nancy went down with him to the kitchen and showed him the bathing area. She however didn't go beyond the privacy curtain with James, as someone was evidently having a bath in there.

"Who is in there?" She asked through the curtain, getting a male voice in answer.

"It's me, Michel! I won't be long."

"I'll wait!"

Nancy then grabbed a large iron bucket and, using the hand pump in the kitchen, filled it halfway with water and, with a marked effort, put it on top of the stove so that the water could warm up. While the stove did its work, she served to James a good bowl of stew and a piece of bread, making him sit at the small table sitting in one corner of the kitchen, where Catherine Lorion was also eating.

"Have supper while I wash. I won't be long."

Michel was coming out of the bathing area, wearing a clean shirt and trousers, as she approached with her bucket of lukewarm water. He didn't help her with it, not because he wasn't a gentleman but rather because he knew from experience that she disliked it when someone assumed that she was too weak for a task. Filling the bathtub that Michel had just emptied, Nancy took a quick bath, toweled herself dry and put on a simple dress over a shirt, all in less than fifteen minutes. James was still eating when she joined him at the kitchen's table. The poor boy evidently had been malnourished during his time with the Iroquois and was taking his time, his restricted stomach not allowing him to eat too fast. Thankfully, his first question to her then had nothing to do with his recent ordeal.

"Nancy, what do you do to earn money? My father always said that hard work was the mark of an honest man."

"That is certainly an opinion typical of a Puritan, and a fairly correct one at that, James. Basically, I am paid by Fernand to hunt, fish and guide him while in New France. As an associate, I also get a part of the profit made by this inn."

"And when you go back to France?"

"Then, I have another work at the King's court, for which I get an annual pension from the King."

“What kind of work, Nancy?”

Claudette, who was passing nearby at that time, grinned as she eyed the blond boy.

“Kids will always be curious. Right, Nancy?”

“I am starting to see that.”

With Catherine Lorion still at the table with them, Nancy debated for a moment how to answer James, finally finding the right words for it.

“I am a court lady, someone who goes around with the King and help him look like, well, the King. The King always must have a lot of nobles around him, both to counsel him and to boost his prestige with foreign guests and visitors. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Nancy.”

“It must be fascinating to be close to the King like this all the time.” Said timidly Catherine Lorion, feeling a bit envious of Nancy. Nancy made a face at that.

“Not always, Catherine. Some of the ministers and nobles around him could be quite arrogant at times and treat anyone under them like dirt. The higher born noblewomen in particular could be downright mean and ignorant with others. You also wouldn’t believe the petty intrigues going around the palace.”

Nancy ended up talking about palace gossip and intrigues for another good ten minutes, until Claudette put a serving tray with a pitcher of wine and four cups in front of her.

“Nancy, you can be a real chatterbox at times. Here, time to help serve the customers. It seems that the whole of Ville-Marie is here tonight to celebrate today’s victory on the Iroquois.”

“Gee! I can understand them, Claudette.”

“Oh, I do too, but they still need to be served. Go! Scram!”

“Alright, alright, I’m going!” Replied Nancy with a smile before speaking to James. “I will be back shortly, James. If you need anything, ask Claudette: she doesn’t bite, at least not officially.”

Nancy then pulled her tongue at Claudette before leaving with her tray, making James laugh at the false expression of indignation Claudette made then.

**14:10 (Quebec Time)**

**Friday, July 16, 1655**

**Ville-Marie**

Paul Chomedey de Maisonneuve felt a wave of exhilaration nearly overtake him when the ranks of the Iroquois that had come to conclude the exchange of prisoners broke open, letting pass a group of eleven pitiful-looking French men, women and children. Five weeks of tough, often risky negotiations between his people and the famous Iroquois war captain known as Lagrandarmée were finally paying off handsomely. Apart from the five children taken at the Geese Island, six other French settlers from various outposts and settlements had just returned from Iroquois captivity, in return for the release of the three Iroquois chieftains and four warriors held up to now in Ville-Marie. On the appearance of the French ex-captives, de Maisonneuve made a sign to Lambert Closse, who in turn ordered his soldiers to let go the seven Iroquois men they were surrounding. As per a prearranged ceremonial, all but three warriors or soldiers from each side and the French and Iroquois commanders withdrew with their respective people. Now facing Lagrandarmée from less than three paces, de Maisonneuve calmly took one step, imitated by the Iroquois captain, and shook hands firmly with him.

“May this peace of the brave stop the suffering on both sides.” Said solemnly the Iroquois leader in his language. His words were immediately translated by Nancy, one of the three designated bodyguards for de Maisonneuve. The Governor nodded, then spoke in French, with Nancy again playing interpreter.

“And may this peace of the brave endure, so that both of our people could learn to respect and live peacefully with each other.”

Lagrandarmée nodded in approval at those words, then sat down, imitated by de Maisonneuve. Their respective bodyguards also sat down, two paces behind their leaders, and waited silently as the latter smoked together a peace pipe, then exchanged gifts. Nancy was the sole bodyguard to speak during those phases of the ceremony, translating back and forth in French and Iroquois. Without showing it, she felt excitement, for two reasons: one, because of the release of the eleven French captives and, two, because of the fact that this was allowing her to record from up close a truly historical event via the micro-camera and microphone hidden in her Amerindian headband. While proud of her role in all this, having with Labarique and Father Lemoyne conducted most of the contacts and discussions with the Iroquois, she knew that the final Time Patrol documentary on Ville-Marie was going to be carefully edited so that she and the other Time Patrol field agents appeared as little as possible in it. That was not because the Time Patrol was unappreciative of their efforts on this mission, far



from it, but rather because it wanted to focus on the real heroes of this story: the settlers and founders of Ville-Marie.

After maybe forty minutes of head-to-head talks and gestures, the ceremony was concluded and the two parties prepared to go their respective way. Before he left, though, Lagrandarmée stopped briefly and turned around, saying a few words in Iroquois to Nancy, taking her by surprise. The Iroquois leader then walked away with his bodyguards. Intrigued, de Maisonneuve looked at her, waiting for the Iroquois to be out of earshot before asking her.

“What did he tell you, Mademoiselle Laplante?”

“That he and his people were going to remember me, then calling me in Iroquois ‘the French woman from the woods’. It kind of made me feel proud.”

“As you should be, mademoiselle.” Replied at once de Maisonneuve, dead serious. “We owe you, Father Lemoyne and this big Labarique a lot. Be assured that your name will figure prominently in my letter to Governor Lauson about this peace deal.”

“Please don’t, Your Excellency.” Said at once Nancy, surprising de Maisonneuve. “I would prefer that my name not be mentioned anywhere. When describing what I did, simply credit it to a French coureur de bois. That would be plenty to satisfy me.”

“Decidedly, you are indeed an uncommon girl, mademoiselle. Very few people I know would miss such a chance at gaining fame.”

Nancy responded with a shrug and a smile.

“Well, you should know me by now, Your Excellency. I work better in the shadows.”

“Indeed, Mademoiselle Laplante! Indeed!”

### **08:19 (Quebec Time)**

**Monday, September 6, 1655**

**AUBERGE DU CHASSEUR**

**Ville-Marie**

It took Nancy much longer than she had expected to say her goodbyes along the shoreline before leaving with her little James for Quebec to take a ship ride to France:

half of the people of Ville-Marie seemingly wanted to wish her good luck, many with tears in their eyes. Last in line but not least in her eyes were Catherine Lorion, Ononkapis and Mistibis. Catherine, who had remarried in June with Jean Simon and was no longer working at the inn, was particularly emotional about her departure.

“I feel like dying right now, Nancy. Are you sure that you need to go back to France?”

“I am, Catherine.” Replied softly Nancy. “The King expects me back at his court, while I have a lover and a son that I haven’t seen for over a year now.”

“Will I ever see you again?” Asked the French girl, her voice half-strangled. Herself having difficulty not to shed tears, she managed to answer back.

“I will, at least once. That I promise. Goodbye, Catherine.”

“Goodbye, Nancy.”

Stepping next in front of Ononkapis, who was holding a crying Mistibis, Nancy looked at both tenderly, speaking to them in Algonquin.

“Ononkapis, of all the friends I had here you were by far the most loyal and honest. Words wouldn’t suffice for this occasion, so I decided to leave you something more concrete.”

Ononkapis’ eyes widened when she presented him her English longbow and the quiver of yard-long arrows that went with it.

“This bow is now yours, my friend. May you have many successful hunts with it.” Ononkapis took slowly the longbow, handling it like the most precious thing in the World, then stared with tears in his eyes at her.

“I will remember you every time I will use it. May the Great Spirit watch over you, Nancy.”

“And on you too, little James.” Added Mistibis before looking up at Nancy. “I owe you my freedom and a happy life with a good husband. How can I ever repay my debt to you?”

“As I said before, Mistibis, by being happy. May you and Ononkapis prosper and live many Winters.”

Then grabbing the part of her kit that was not already in her canoe, she shook hands one last time with her five Time Patrol colleagues, who were due to stay another year in Ville-Marie before selling their inn and disappearing deep inside the woods on the pretext that they were switching business to the fur trade.

“Good luck with your business here, guys, and don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“If we did that, Father Pijart would damn all of us to Hell.” Replied Michel, grinning, making everybody laugh. Nancy, dressed in her Amerindian hunting clothes and with her hands full of kit and weapons, then got in her canoe with James. One push from Fernand and Michel and she was on her way, going down the current while paddling at an easy rhythm. She couldn’t help look back one last time at the people of Ville-Marie present to watch her go before they disappeared from direct sight at a bend of the river. Her heart heavy, she looked at James, who was sitting in front of her in the middle of the canoe. James too had tears in his eyes.

“We just left many good friends indeed, my dear James, but I promise you that, where we are going, you will find many more friends. You will also live with me a life you couldn’t even start to dream about right now.”

“It still hurts to lose those friends, Nancy.”

“I know,” said Nancy in a resigned tone, “it always does.”

## **20:51 (Quebec Time)**

**Friday, April 19, 1720**

**Côte Saint-Martin**

**Montreal (formerly Ville-Marie)**

On the urging of one of her grand-daughters, the few relatives still present left the old woman’s bedroom to let her rest on what was probably going to be her last night in this World. Soon alone in the dark room, the 84 year-old woman had nothing else to do but reflect on her life, her four marriages, eleven children and 56 grand-children. It had been a hard life but it had been worth it in the end: she could say proudly that she had left an enduring legacy in and around Montreal and had earned the title of pioneer of Ville-Marie. If only some of her early friends could have been here on this night to stay with her until her final moment. Gone was Jeanne Rousselier, dead over thirty years ago somewhere in the Acadie. Gone was Jacques Morin, dead for twenty years now. Gone was Marguerite Landreau, passed away in 1680, along with her husband Hubert, who had survived her for only seven years. Gone was also the kind Sister Marguerite Bourgeoys, dead at the age of eighty in 1700, a woman to whom she owed so much.

A movement in the dark room suddenly distracted her from her souvenirs. Her weak, tired eyes could only make out a dark form approaching her bed silently.

Catherine did not feel fear then: she had nothing left to fear by now, except of dying alone. The person then knelt besides her bed and started caressing her hair, while approaching its face to only centimeters from Catherine's face. She saw that the newcomer was a very tall teenage girl with long black hair and that there were tears in her eyes.

"Catherine, it's me, Nancy, your friend who came from France with you in 1654. Do you remember me?"

"Nancy? How could it be? You still look so young."

Somehow, Catherine knew that this was really her long lost friend: the voice was the same and the face of Nancy was as beautiful as ever.

"Catherine, the how is not important. The only important thing is that I am here with you and will stay by your side to the last moment."

"Nancy, I want to know." Said Catherine weakly. "Who are you really?"

Young hands then caressed tenderly her face.

"I am a time traveler, Catherine. So are Fernand, Henri, Michel, Claudette and Françoise. They are all alive and well."

Tears then came to Catherine Lorion's eyes: however fantastic was her friend's explanation, it fit well with what she had been then. She had known for a long time that Nancy and her friends were special people.

"You said that you were going to stay with me, Nancy?"

"I did and I will, Catherine."

The teenager then took hold of Catherine's right hand and lay her head on the pillow, right besides the old woman's head. When Nancy raised her head and let go Catherine's hand hours later, a happy smile was gracing her friend's dead face.

**The seventh and last novel of this series, TO THE SANDS OF MARS, will be published in early 2015.**

## **TRIBUTE TO WASP PILOTS**

This page is a tribute to a few of the hundreds of courageous American women who volunteered to serve as auxiliary ferrying pilots with the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) from its formation in 1942 to its disbandment in 1944, and who were featured in my novels. While their actions in my novels are purely fictitious, their courage, dedication, patriotism and sense of adventure were not.

**Nancy Batson:** (1920 - 2001). Joined the WAFS, then the WASP in 1942. Served until its disbandment in 1944.



**Elizabeth Gardner:** (1921 - ) Joined the WASP in 1943 and served until its disbandment in 1944.



**Jean Hixson:** (1922 - 1984). Joined the WASP in 1943 and served in it until its disbandment in 1944. Retired from the Air Force Reserves in 1982, with the rank of colonel. Was tested by the NASA as a prospective astronaut in 1961 and successfully passed all the same medical and psychological tests given to the male Mercury astronauts. However, the NASA eventually decided not to hire female astronauts then.



**Betty Huyler Gillies:** (1908 – 1998). Joined the WAFS, then the WASP in 1942. Served until its disbandment in 1944. President of the Ninety-Nines (American women pilots association) from 1939 to 1941.



**Teresa James:** (1914 - 2008). Obtained private pilot's licence in 1933. Joined the WAFS, then the WASP in 1942, served until the WASP were disbanded in 1944.



**Gertrude Meserve:** (1920 - ). Joined the WAFS, then the WASP in 1942 and served until its disbandment in 1944.



**Helen Richey:** (1909 - 1947). Joined first the British ATA in 1941, then the WASP in 1942, served until its disbandment in 1944. Committed suicide in 1947 after being systematically refused jobs as a pilot by male airline executives.



**Evelyn Sharp:** (1919 – 1944). Joined first the WAFS, then the WASP in 1942. Killed in 1944 in the crash of a P-38 fighter she was ferrying.



**Shirley Slade:** (1921 - 2000) Joined the WASP in 1943 and served until its disbandment in 1944.



## **TRIBUTE TO THE PIONEERS OF VILLE-MARIE**

This page is to pay tribute to the settlers and pioneers of Ville-Marie who figured prominently in the last chapter of this novel. While their actions and words as described in this novel are fictitious, the main events of their lives were as recorded in history.

**Bourgeois, Marguerite (Sister):** (1620 – 1700). Born in Troyes, Champagne. Arrived in New France, then in Ville-Marie in 1653. Founded the Notre-Dame Congregation in Ville-Marie. Opened Ville-Marie's first school in 1658. Went back to France in 1659 to recruit three more nuns for her congregation and returned to Ville-Marie.

**de Chomedey, Paul, Sieur de Maisonneuve:** (1612 – 1676). Born in Neuville-sur-Vanne. Arrived in New France in 1641. Founded Ville-Marie in 1642. Recalled to France in 1665 after falling out of favor with the Governor of New France. Died in anonymity in Paris.

**Closse, Lambert:** (? – 1662). Born in Trèves, Lorraine. Squire and sergeant-major of the garrison of Ville-Marie. Arrived in Ville-Marie in 1647. Married Élisabeth Moyon in 1657, had two children. Killed in combat by the Iroquois.

**Hubert, Nicolas:** (1609 – 1687). Unknown place of birth. Master tailor. Arrived in 1649 in New France. Arrived in 1654 in Ville-Marie. Married Marguerite Landreau in 1652, had six children.

**Landreau, Marguerite:** (1631 – 1680). Unknown place of birth. Arrived with husband Nicolas Hubert in Ville-Marie in 1654. Had six children.

**Lemoine, Charles, sieur de Longueuil:** (1626 – 1685). Born in Dieppe, Normandie. Squire, Royal Prosecutor, Lord of Longueuil. Arrived in 1641 in New France. Arrived in 1647 in Ville-Marie. Married Catherine Thierry in 1654, had fourteen children.

**Lorquell, Marie:** (1638 – 1700). Born in Saintes, Angoulême. Arrived in 1654 in Ville-Marie. Married Toussaint Hunault in 1654, had ten children.

**Lorion, Catherine:** (1637 – 1720). Born in La Rochelle. Arrived in 1654 in Ville-Marie. First marriage with Pierre Vilain in 1654, no children. Second marriage with Jean Simon in 1655, one child. Third marriage with Nicolas Millet in 1657, eight children. Fourth marriage with Pierre Desautels in 1676, two children.

**Mance, Jeanne:** (1606 – 1673). Born in Langres, Haute-Marne. Arrived in 1641 in New France. Arrived in Ville-Marie in 1642, helping to found the town. Founded in 1645 l'Hôtel-Dieu, the first hospital in Ville-Marie.

**Merrin, Jeanne:** (1635 – 1711). Born in Poitiers, Poitou. Arrived in 1654 in Ville-Marie. First marriage with Éloi Jarry in 1654, three children. Second marriage with Henri Perrin in 1661, five children. Third marriage with René Moreau (sieur Dubreuil) in 1672, two children.

**Morin, Jacques:** (1628 – around 1699). Unknown place of birth. Farmer. Arrived in 1654 in Ville-Marie.

**Renaud, Marie:** (1633 – 1673). Born in Saint-Paul, Orléans. Arrived in 1654 in Ville-Marie. Married Mathurin Langevin in 1654, no children.

**Rousselier, Jeanne:** (1636 – after 1686). Born in Saintes, Saintonge. Arrived in 1654 in Ville-Marie. Married Pierre Godin in 1654, had nine children. Emigrated to the Acadie around 1677.

**Simon, Jean:** (? – 1656). Born in Saint-Saturnin, Limoges. Arrived in 1654 in Ville-Marie. Married Catherine Lorion in 1655, one child. Drowned.

**History is not only the stories of various kings, emperors and conquerors. It is the sum of the lives of billions of anonymous people who loved, hoped, toiled, suffered and without whom all those kings and emperors would have accomplished nothing.**



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