

# A FULL LIFE



By

**MICHEL POULIN**

# **A FULL LIFE**

**A MIXED ALTERNATE HISTORY, SCIENCE-FICTION AND FANTASY NOVEL**

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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 THAT ARE UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN. THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION AND THE WORDS AND ACTIONS OF PERSONS IN IT WHO EXISTED OR STILL EXIST DO NOT REFLECT HISTORICAL REALITY.**

### **ABOUT THIS NOVEL**

This novel is a sequel to my THREE PROUD WOMEN and is the fifteenth novel in the Nancy Laplante Series. Its action happens in a parallel timeline, Timeline 'C', thus this is basically an alternate history novel with a mix of fantasy and science-fiction. It describes the adventures of Ingrid Dows, a veteran American fighter pilot, senior military commander, astronaut and aircraft designer who drastically changed the World for the better while serving the United States during the course of six decades. With most of the enemies of the United States having been utterly defeated during the past years and decades, mostly thanks to her, Ingrid is now free to live as a civilian but is still keeping busy with the two loves of her life: aircraft and piloting. Ingrid's other love in life, her daughter Nancy, is continuing to climb the success ladder in the world of music and singing, while young U.S. Marine Corps servicemember Greta Visby continues to rise quickly through the military ranks.

### **OTHER BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR**

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

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THE MAIN BATTLE TANK – STILL RELEVANT OR IN NEED OF EVOLUTION?

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## **CHAPTER 1 – BACK TO CIVILIAN LIFE**

**08:17 (Seattle Time)**

**Wednesday, December 12, 2001 'C'**

**Chief Aircraft Designer's office**

**Port Angeles plant of Hiller Aircraft Corporation**

**Port Angeles, Washington State, U.S.A.**



**Ingrid Dows** was finding herself to be quite busy, now that she was out of uniform for good (hopefully) and back at her civilian job as Chief Aircraft Designer and Primary Test Pilot for the Hiller Aircraft Corporation. The three last months spent by her in Afghanistan at President Bush' request had caused her 'in' basket pile at Hiller's Port Angeles plant to grow quite spectacularly and she now had to put up some long hours trying to cut it down to a manageable size.

She was reading through a flight test report done on the latest Hiller SKYTRUCK completed at the Port Angeles plant and awaiting commercial certification when her telephone rang, making her pick up the receiver.

"Ingrid Dows speaking!"

"Ingrid, this is Jeff Hiller, calling from our corporate headquarters in California. I just got a call from the Filipino defense minister, Wido Rudowo. He was calling on behalf of three governments: his own plus that of Indonesia and Vietnam. I don't want to speak too much on the phone about the exact purpose of his call but suffice to say that those governments are looking for your expert opinion about a common defense need they have. This may in fact possibly attract to us a development and design contract for our company if they find your advice attractive, so I am counting on you to blind them with your aircraft design skills brilliance. A joint delegation of nine persons should land at Port Angeles late this afternoon aboard a chartered private jet."

Ingrid briefly chuckled at the words used by the owner and CEO of the Hiller Aircraft Corporation.

"I will serve them my best bullshit, Jeff. Do you have an estimated time of arrival and the registration number for that incoming flight?"

"A precise arrival time, no! However, I was told that it will be an Air Philippines chartered GULFSTREAM II executive jet. They will come to discuss with you about a new light combat aircraft."

"I will be ready for them, Jeff. Thanks for the advanced warning."

"My pleasure, Ingrid. Could you take care of reserving hotel rooms in Port Angeles for those visitors? That delegation counts seven men and two women. Individual rooms would probably be preferable for them: while they are coming as one delegation, their governments were not always on the friendliest terms in the past."

"I served and fought enough around Southeast Asia to know about their history, Jeff. I will put on my best diplomatic face for them."

"Good! By the way, your adopted daughter Hien is still the American ambassador to Vietnam, if I remember well, right?"

"Correct! She is doing a hell of a job there and she makes me most proud, so be sure that I will do my best not to offend any of the members of that visiting delegation."

"Excellent! Well, I will leave you at that. Just keep me posted on the results of their visit."

"I will, Jeff." replied Ingrid before hanging up. She was then thoughtful for a moment while she mentally reviewed what she knew about the latest military and political developments from Southeast Asia. The composition of the incoming delegation was by itself a serious clue for her about what they wanted to discuss with her. Normally, little common linked Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam...little except their mutual suspicions about Chinese geo-political goals concerning the South China Sea. Despite the fact that the American forces in the Pacific, which were at the time under Ingrid's command, had taught China a severe lesson in the past, China had recently started to rebound and to start again to cause trouble around the South China Sea. Thus, those three countries were most probably looking to strengthen their military capacities to counter any Chinese bullying around their respective waters and their exclusive economic zones, or EEZ. With that in her mind, she started consulting her work computer, scribbling down notes for herself as she went.

**19:52 (Seattle Time)**

**Immigration and customs counters, international arrival hall**

**William R. Fairchild International Airport, Port Angeles**



Harry Gleason had been a U.S. immigration agent for over twenty years and had seen about every possible kind of foreign visitor pass by his control wicket in the past. He had also been working for a good six years at this airport and was accustomed to the kind of mix of visitors one could expect to come to the Seattle area. However, the group he was now processing, while all having valid visitor visas, was most unusual in its composition. Not only the seven men and two women traveling together were from three different countries which rarely mixed together but their high political and military status made it even more unusual, not to say suspicious. He however kept a neutral expression and a polite tone of voice as he looked up from the passport presented to him by the small Asian man now standing in front of his counter.

“And what is your military rank, if I may ask, Mister Ngo?”

“Lieutenant general.” answered the Vietnamese man in his fair English. Gleason digested that information for a second: this was the third general officer in the group he was checking out, one each from Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam. Three of the other men were government cabinet members, again from the same countries, while the remaining one man and two women had presented themselves as either political aides or secretaries.

“And what is the purpose of your group’s visit to Port Angeles, General Ngo?”

“We came to consult one of your experts in aeronautics from the Hiller Corporation about a problem common to our three countries. Hiller has a very good reputation about solving aviation-related problems.”

“That they do, General Ngo.” recognized Gleason, who then stamped Ngo’s passport and gave it back to the Vietnamese man. “Have a nice stay in the U.S.A., General.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Gleason watched the man walk away from his counter and join up with the rest of his group, which had arrived in a Filipino executive jet half an hour ago. That group may have been a valid one but its composition still made Gleason wonder about it. Grabbing his telephone, he called the Seattle office of the F.B.I.<sup>1</sup>, intent on advising the agents there about this unusual group of visitors.

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<sup>1</sup> F.B.I.: Federal Bureau of Investigation. The American federal government agency in charge of enforcing laws pertaining to federal level. The F.B.I. also is in charge of counter-espionage and anti-terrorism operations.

The nine Asian visitors, all wearing good quality civilian clothes, were processed quickly at the customs counters after retrieving their suitcases, with the customs agents there making only perfunctory searches of their luggage. As soon as the group exited the arrival area and walked into the public part of the small airport, they spotted at once a young and beautiful woman holding high a small sign saying 'Hiller guests welcome!'. Major General Anwar Sukarno, who commanded the Indonesian tactical Airforce, couldn't help stop for a moment while eyeing the young woman, then whispered to his secretary, a young woman named Putu Sarawan.

"Remind me again about the age of General Dows, Miss Sarawan."

"She is now 76, General."

"Seventy-six... A most extraordinary woman indeed in many respects. She is also said to be able to speak dozens of languages. Do you know if she can speak Indonesian?"

"I am not sure about that, General."

"Well, we will know soon enough. We do all speak fair to good English anyway. Let's go meet her."

Ingrid, recognizing the group at their ethnic mix, lowered her sign and went to greet it with a big smile while speaking to them in English.

"Welcome to Port Angeles, ladies and gentlemen. I presently speak to you in English but know that I can speak Tagalog, Cebuano, Vietnamese, Javanese and Balinese. However, my Javanese and Balinese date back from a couple of millenniums, so is probably hopelessly quaint by today's standards in Indonesia."

"We are all proficient in English, General Dows, so we can continue in English." replied Sukarno. "I am Major General Anwar Sukarno and I came with Air Minister Suparman Prabang and with my secretary, Miss Putu Sarawan."

"I am Lieutenant General Ngo Minh Wa, Commander of the Vietnamese Air Force." said in turn the older man of the group. "With me are Deputy Defense Minister for the Air Force Tran Le Toan and his aide, Mister Nguyen Binh Minh."

"Pleased to meet you." replied Ingrid in fluent Vietnamese before facing the last trio of the group, who she could recognize by their ethnic look as being Filipino, speaking to them in Tagalog.

"And you must be the Filipino delegation, I presume."

“Correct, General Dows. I am Major General Jesus Alba, Commander of the Filipino Air Force. To my left is Deputy Defense Minister for the Air Force Antonio Villanueva, along with his secretary, Miss Carmen Santiago.”

“Welcome all to Port Angeles. If you will follow me, a minibus is waiting outside to drive you to your hotel. You must be quite tired by your long trip across the Pacific.”

“Indeed, General Dows.” replied Ngo.

“Please, simply call me ‘Ingrid’, all of you. No need for formalities with me: I am a very informal woman.”

“Then, Ingrid it will be.”

Next, Ingrid led the group outside to the taxi waiting lane, where a minibus marked as belonging to the Hiller Aircraft Corporation was parked, with a driver waiting behind the wheel. As the driver helped load the group’s luggage inside the minibus, Ingrid spoke to her older visitor.

“Have you eaten supper yet, General Ngo? Are you hungry?”

“We ate a couple of sandwiches in the plane but I wouldn’t mind having a more substantial meal tonight, if that is possible.”

“Then, once you will have a chance to drop your luggage in your rooms, I will guide you to a good little restaurant I know, so we could all eat together.”

“Uh, a few members of our group are Muslims. Does your restaurant have a menu compatible with Muslim dietary rules?”

That question made Ingrid smile widely to Major General Sukarno.

“Don’t worry, General: you will feel at home at the Sabai Thai. It is a good Thai restaurant with a very varied menu. It is one of my favorite restaurants in Port Angeles, along with the ‘Toga’s Soup House Deli & Gourmet’ Restaurant.”

“Sounds good to me, Ingrid.”

“Excellent! One thing before we go to your hotel, the ‘Red Lion’: I realize that you may want to keep discreet about the reasons for your visit to Port Angeles, so I would counsel that we don’t discuss business until we are in a truly private place, like my house, or my office at the Hiller plant.”

“A good idea, actually.” approved Ngo, who then climbed aboard the minibus with the rest of the delegation.

The group first went to the Red Lion Hotel, situated along the shores of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, where Ingrid helped her visitors to take possession of their rooms, which amply satisfied their new occupants. Then, after they had taken the time to drop their bags in their rooms and since they were getting quite hungry, they loaded back in the minibus, with Ingrid leading them in her Pontiac TRANS AM sports convertible, drove to the Sabai Thai Restaurant, situated a short distance away, close to the airport. While the interior decoration and furniture was not what one would call 'impressive', the Thai menu and the food itself met with the warm approval of Ingrid's guests. Following Ingrid's advice about not discussing business in such a public place, her guests kept to anodyne or personal subjects. Major General Anwar Sukarno, consumed by curiosity about her, was one of the first to ask her a personal question while enjoying his plate of crispy duck.

"You said that your Javanese and Balinese is quite antiquated, Ingrid. From which century was your Indonesian past incarnation?"

Ingrid stopped eating for a moment as she concentrated on long-past souvenirs.

"My oldest incarnation as an Indonesian was 2,000 years ago, in Java. I was then a man named Tambali who built canoes out of tree trunks and produced stone tools for a living. He was married and had five children. He was killed by a falling tree when he was 45. My second incarnation as an Indonesian was as a fruit merchant named Tarumadam, who lived some 1,200 years ago on the island of Java. He was married, four children and drowned during a Tsunami."

"And what about your past Filipino incarnations?" asked Carmen Santiago, the secretary of the Filipino deputy defense minister.

"I lived only once in the Philippines, some six centuries ago. I was then a woman named Malitanang, who lived in a tiny fishing village on the island of Mindanao and who was married to a fisherman. She was the mother of two children and died at the age of 23, from a tropical fever. Before your Vietnamese colleagues could ask, I lived once as a Vietnamese, a modest farmer who lived some 250 years ago in the village of Gia Rai, in the Mekong Delta. His name was Tran Qui Khiem and he was married, with five children. Like Malitanang, Tran died of a tropical fever."

"So, you lived as both a man and as a woman during your past incarnations, correct?" said Antonio Villanueva, making Ingrid nod her head once.

"Correct! Out of my past 71 incarnations, they were fairly equally split between those I lived as a man and those I lived as a woman. From what I know of the past

incarnations remembered by my late adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante, this seems to be a common pattern concerning incarnations.”

“And what was the oldest incarnation you can remember, Ingrid?” asked Villanueva.

“My first ever incarnation was as a nomad woman named Amdir, who lived in the Sumerian Basin some 7,000 years ago.”

“It sounds like you mostly lived humble lives, Ingrid. Were you ever someone of importance?”

“Oh, I was a person of privilege or power a few times in the past, Antonio. My most powerful past incarnation was as Emperor Wou-Ti, of the Chinese Han Dynasty, who reigned some 2,100 years ago. Under his reign, the Chinese Empire reached its largest expansion and he succeeded in repelling the barbarian Xiung-Nu invaders from the North. I was also once a rich Ukrainian aristocrat who died in the Sixteenth Century and was also Aïsha, the third wife of the prophet Mohammed, who ended up dying as a secluded widow.”

Her last sentence had the effect of a lightning bolt on the three Indonesians eating at her table, all of whom were Muslims.

“You were the wife of the Prophet?” asked excitedly Anwar Sukarno, restraining with difficulty the volume of his voice. “Would you accept to tell us about your life with the great prophet Mohammed?”

“I will, but at a later date, once you will have rested from your long trip and once we could have discussed business tomorrow in my office at the Hiller plant. There is however something I can tell you all right now about my incarnations: despite all the scientific and technical progress us Humans did during the past millenniums, we are still basically the same kind of creatures, capable of both the best and the worst. Unfortunately, our weapons are now so powerful that we could now destroy ourselves and this planet if we don't learn to control better our potential for violence.”

Her nine guests could only soberly nod in agreement at that affirmation.

**09:11 (Seattle Time)**

**Thursday, December 13, 2001 'C'**

**Ingrid's work office, Hiller aircraft plant**

**William R. Fairchild International Airport, Port Angeles**

Ingrid greeted with a smile the nine members of the Asian delegation as they were guided into her office by her secretary.

“Good morning to you all. I hope that you had a good night’s sleep?”

“We did!” answered Lieutenant General Ngo. “My brain is still a bit fuzzy from the time zones switching but I am ready to discuss business with you.”

“Excellent! Let’s sit around my coffee corner. Would you like some coffee or tea?”

The delegates looked at each other before nodding their heads and stating their individual preferences, which were noted down by Ingrid’s secretary. The group then moved to the discussion corner in Ingrid’s office, where the usual low coffee table had been temporarily replaced by a large, round table surrounded by seven swiveling chairs, with three more chairs set against a wall for the three aides and secretaries of the delegation. Ingrid then decided to wait until the ordered coffee and tea had arrived before starting to discuss serious things, thus looked at the three general officers and three ministers sitting at the table.

“Let’s wait for your beverages to be served before discussing business. So, what do you think of Port Angeles and the Seattle region so far?”

“That it looks nice, with the nearby mountains and the Strait of Juan de Fuca giving it a beautiful natural background.” answered Major General Jesus Alba, the commander of the Filipino Air Force. “However, while the local climate is about as humid as that in the Philippines, it is much colder, I must say.”

“The view we have from our hotel rooms, which are close to the shore, is most relaxing.” added Deputy Defense Minister Antonio Villanueva. “The service at the Red Lion Hotel is also very polite and efficient.”

“I am glad to hear that, Minister Villanueva.” said Ingrid. “Aah, here are your coffee and tea.”

“That was fast!” said Major General Sukarno as Ingrid’s secretary rolled a service trolley next to the table and started serving cups around. That made Ingrid smile with malice.

“I anticipated the need for hot beverages and had full pots of coffee and tea prepared as soon as I saw your minibus arrive.”

Ingrid waited until everybody had a chance to take a first sip and until her secretary had left before addressing the men around the table.

“Good! Time to get into serious things. First off, what caused your respective governments to send you here to consult with me?”

As the senior officer present, Lieutenant General Ngo Minh Wa spoke first, his expression now most serious.

“First, let me say that our three governments, while quite disparate in terms of political orientations and policies, realized that they had a few identical military needs and also faced mostly similar threats. To be totally frank, our three countries also happen to have limited financial capacities when it comes to buying and operating military hardware without severely impacting important social and economic projects. So we agreed to join together in order to constitute what would be a more interesting customer to major aircraft manufacturers and thus be able to ask for a dedicated aircraft design. In terms of common threats, we are all facing a resurgent and increasingly bullish Communist China, which is pushing more and more its weight around the South China Sea. We also face persistent and wide threats from pirates, smugglers and illegal fishing vessels, thus need to enforce our sovereignty over our waters and economic exclusion zones, or EEZs. That in turn means the need for a sizeable and efficient maritime patrol capability, both from the sea and from the air. However, as you well know, aircraft can cover much larger areas much faster than ships when patrolling and identification is involved. Once detected from the air, ships and boats deemed to be either hostile or engaged in illegal activities can then be challenged by our ships called in by our surveillance aircraft. Normally, simple maritime patrol aircraft can do that job quite efficiently. Unfortunately, many of those hostile or illegal boats, like pirate skiffs and fishing boats, have taken to chasing our patrol aircraft away with rifle and machine gun fire and have become quite brazen in that respect. All three of our nations have also been facing a growing number of instances when Chinese so-called ‘coast guard’ ships have tried to intimidate our own fishermen away from prized fishing grounds inside our EEZs and are also blocking to us access to potential oil or gas deposits, claiming those waters to be Chinese waters. I know that the American government has been supportive of our rights to those waters but we need to be able to police adequately our EEZs ourselves. Thus, we need to reinforce our maritime patrol and law enforcement assets in order to better protect our waters. Unfortunately, typical existing maritime patrol aircraft are quite expensive to acquire and even more expensive to operate, so we need a more affordable, yet practical solution to our patrol needs.”

At that point, Major General Jesus Alba jumped into the conversation.

“We agree with Vietnam’s assessment about the threats and needs concerning maritime security. However, the Philippines also faces another serious category of threat: insurgency. As you well know, we have been faced for decades with a persistent, serious insurgency problem from Communist-leaning guerrilla groups hiding in the jungles covering our islands, groups who also often dabble in drug smuggling and organized crime in order to finance their insurrections. Our army has been fighting hard for years to eradicate or at least contain those insurgent forces but patrolling and guarding all those jungle-covered islands is proving to be a nearly impossible task. What we need is a sizeable force of armed strike aircraft able to patrol large areas and visually detect insurgent movements and activity, then strike those insurgents hard. Simple patrol aircraft, which are typically slow, multi-propeller aircraft with light armament, just can’t do that job properly. The Philippines thus needs to acquire a capable counter-insurgency aircraft which could also patrol our waters and counter pirates and maritime smugglers. Unfortunately, existing counter-insurgency aircraft mostly lack radar and have a limited endurance on station, while buying large numbers of modern, supersonic fighter-bombers or strike aircraft is simply too expensive a proposition for my country.”

“Indonesia also faces the same kind of insurgency, piracy and smuggling threats across its thousands of islands.” said Major General Sukarno, jumping in. “If anything, the surface area we have to patrol is even larger than that of the Philippines, thus greatly complicating our job to enforce our sovereignty. To be totally frank, our army and navy are hogging much of our available defense budgets, thus leaving little for our air force to buy a sizeable fleet of long-range, armed patrol aircraft.”

“Vietnam also has a need to patrol its land borders, in order mostly to counter drug smuggling.” said in turn Ngo. “We also have to face recurring air and maritime incursions by Chinese aircraft and ships bent on claiming sovereignty over our own waters. Finally, having a direct border with China means that we must be ready to resist any future border incursion by Chinese troops. Only armed combat jet aircraft could deal with such incursions. The leaders of our three countries recently met in secret to discuss those mutual threats and agreed on a few common measures and policies, including the need for us to acquire sizeable air fleets of armed patrol jet aircraft able to counter those threats while being affordable to both acquire and operate. Unfortunately, no such aircraft with both desired capabilities and low costs exist. We came to see you about our problem because you are recognized as both a master wielder of airpower



and as an innovative aircraft designer, while Hiller has gained a worldwide reputation for producing innovative and highly efficient aircraft, thanks to you.”

Ingrid slowly nodded her head as she mentally analyzed what the delegates had told her.

“I can see and understand your problem, gentlemen. While the United States and its European allies produce excellent, high-performance combat aircraft, their military doctrines and philosophies are geared mostly towards long-range interdiction and strike missions, plus air interceptions and air superiority missions using standoff guided missiles and gliding bombs, and this mostly against top tier adversaries rather than against low-level threats. They are simply not at their best in making low-level, low-speed combat patrols over large areas, especially when it comes to detecting such hard-to-find targets as insurgents and smugglers hiding in jungles. Also, in your particular case, you need to visually identify and classify possible threats from up close, without the benefit of relying on the support of a network of long-range ground or sea-based radars and radio-listening equipment. I also agree with you that Western combat jet aircraft are too often hideously expensive to acquire and operate to make it possible for your three countries to buy an adequate number of them. Their design and development also too often take many years or even decades before they can enter service. Another point I would note is that low-level patrolling against insurgents, pirates and armed smugglers brings a high risk of getting targeted from the ground by small arms fire. Western Air force commanders typically hate to risk jets worth tens of millions of dollars to such low-level weapons operated by illegal groups. As well, your need to patrol large ocean areas clearly call for patrol aircraft equipped with radar. Most of the present light combat aircraft geared towards counter-insurgency work lack such radar capability, as you already stated. To sum it up, I agree with you that you need a new aircraft geared towards the specific needs of your three countries. Now, you must realize that such a new aircraft will need at least a minimum of equipment, sensors and weapons in order to do its job, so there will still be a floor cost to the acquisition of such a new aircraft.”

“And do you think that Hiller could design and produce such an aircraft while keeping its cost to a minimum, Ingrid?” asked Jesus Alba, his tone reflecting some apprehension.

“Yes!” answered at once Ingrid, making the men around the table visibly relax. “I can say that for a number of reasons. First off, as you said yourself, design and development of Western combat aircraft typically take long years and cost a fortune,

mostly because they are designed by committees of air force officers setting in advance rigid and often unrealistic sets of requirements, which are also influenced too often by political actors pushing for the awarding of contracts to their own constituents. Then, whatever those committees end up producing as sets of specifications is given to other committees, this time formed of engineers and production plant managers, who also have to discuss and debate before agreeing on a final design. That so-called final design will also more often than not be modified, sometimes radically, during project development as air force leaders change their minds or want to gold-plate it in order to make it more attractive to their egos and set opinions. All this tends to kill true innovation and flexible thinking while adding years and hundreds of millions of dollars in cost to the development program of a new aircraft. Without bragging, I can say that you will not see such problems at Hiller: I am its chief aircraft designer and, while I always am ready to embrace good ideas from others, I am not in the business of committee decision-making. When I design a new aircraft, I do it mostly by myself when it concerns its basic concept and technological solutions. Also, I have the huge benefit over the various engineering design teams you will find in the United States and in Europe that I also happen to be a very experienced user in terms of combat aircraft piloting and air combat. I thus know from personal experience what works and what doesn't. Now, concerning the specific needs of your three countries. Since you will still need some air interception capabilities as a secondary mission, your new aircraft will need to be able to fly faster than sound. However, its top speed will not need to be higher than Mach 2: a high transonic speed of around Mach 1.6 would suffice for most types of missions in my opinion, except for interception missions, which call for the fastest response possible. In reality, existing fighter jet aircraft rarely fly at or past Mach 2 and, if they do, they stay at that kind of speed for only a few minutes at the most. The reason for that is simple: high fuel consumption. While powerful, their typical low-bypass turbofan engines equipped with afterburners drink fuel like thirsty camels while flying supersonic. Unless you design a flying fuel tank, you will not be able to fly a whole mission at supersonic speed. A few rare jet fighters can do what is called 'super cruise', meaning the ability to fly above Mach 0.95 without the need to use afterburning. Even then, that super cruise ability means a top speed of at most Mach 1.5 before such planes have to light up their afterburners. Another disadvantage of high Mach numbers above Mach 2 is the thermal stress it induces on airframes. The faster you fly, the hotter your aircraft leading edges get. In high performance jet aircraft, this necessitates the use of materials with high

thermal resistance, like titanium, special steel alloys or carbon fibers, which are a lot more expensive than the common aluminum alloys, which are able to resist well to speeds of Mach 2 or less. Even if you use such special materials, the difference in heating between the leading edges and the other parts of the airframe structure may cause fatigue cracks, splits and distortions. Since you want to keep your aircraft cost as low as possible, I would aim for a transonic aircraft with a top speed of at most Mach 2 and at a minimum of Mach 1.6. A fighter jock would probably poo-poo such a so-called low top speed but a transonic aircraft will do the job for your countries quite nicely. Another advantage in going for a transonic design is that it is then possible to use medium-to-high bypass jet engines without afterburners, if their air intakes are designed to let them operate properly at supersonic speeds. Such air intakes exist: they are called **DSI** inlets, which stands for Divertless Supersonic Intake. Such DSI inlets, which look like a lump stuck in your air intake, do the same job as the moving inlet plates used in supersonic fighters and bombers, and this up to speeds of Mach 2, but have no moving parts, are much lighter, cost a lot less and also are maintenance free, all things that would greatly benefit your future combat aircraft. For the sake of keeping costs low, I would choose one or two already existing high-bypass turbofan engines of the kind used to propel modern commercial airliners. That would avoid having to design a new engine specifically for your future aircraft, would give you a lot of power without the need for afterburners and, most importantly, would drastically cut its fuel consumption, as the specific fuel consumption, or SFC, of such engines typically turn around 0.55 kilos of fuel per kilogram-force of thrust per hour at cruising speed, compared to the SFC of low bypass turbofan engines, which turn around 0.75 or more at cruise settings. If you use afterburners on low bypass turbofans, your SFC then easily climbs close to or past 1.0. Thus, the use of a standard commercial high-bypass turbofan with DSI inlet would greatly cut the cost and design time for your future aircraft, would allow for a much longer autonomy and endurance and would give your pilots lots of available power when needed. As well, many of the commercial high-bypass turbofan engines now available come with thrust reverser systems, something that would drastically shorten the landing runs of your future aircraft.”



“Uh, pardon my ignorance, Ingrid, but what is this business of low and high bypass turbofans?” asked the Vietnamese deputy defense minister, Tran Le Toan. In response, Ingrid went to her work desk and grabbed a thick file on it before returning to the round table. She then opened the file at a specific page and showed it to Tran.

“These are schematic pictures for a zero-bypass turbojet, a low-bypass turbofan and a high-bypass turbofan. In the first one, the whole air volume swallowed by the engine goes through the compressor, then through the fuel injection system, where it is mixed with fuel and then burned, producing thrust. In a low-bypass turbofan, part of the air swallowed bypasses the fuel injection and burn system, to then be mixed afterward with the hot gases coming out of the burner tubes. That creates significantly more thrust without the need to burn more fuel but at the same time increases the frontal area of your engine, a critical factor for high supersonic speeds flying. Such engines typically have a bypass ratio of 1.2 to 1 or less. In medium and high-bypass turbofan engines, the major portion of the air swallowed and compressed by their large diameter fans bypasses the burner tubes before mixing with hot gases, creating a lot of thrust with a low fuel consumption. Since nearly all existing airliners are subsonic, such high-bypass turbofans are widely used to propel them.”

“Oh! I understand now. Thank you for the explanation.”

“You’re welcome.”

The next one to have a question for Ingrid was General Ngo.

“What about the wings for our future aircraft? Low-altitude patrolling and high-speed air interceptions call for two very different kinds of wing profiles and planform, no?”

“A good point, General Ngo. First, let me say that, when it comes to air combat against enemy aircraft, the days of dogfighting are mostly gone, a truly sad fact for an ex-fighter pilot like me. Today, the game is to detect your enemy at the longest range possible and then fire an air-to-air missile at it. Yes, agility in a combat aircraft is still valuable, mostly when trying to evade incoming missiles or ground fire, but it is no longer the dominant factor in air combat. Radar detection ranges and missile performances are much more important factors these days. In the case of your future combat aircraft, performances at low altitude and slow to medium speeds, along with short takeoff and landing performances, will be a lot more critical in my opinion. Shorter takeoff and landing distances will mean that shorter and cheaper runways or even dirt airstrips can be used, something that will translate into significantly lower operating and basing costs

for your air forces. The use of high-bypass turbofan engines with thrust reverser systems will help a lot in that aspect. As for the type of wing to be employed, I would advocate the use of a simple sweptback or clipped delta wing of large surface with supercritical profile, in order to have a large lifting surface and low wing loadings for low-speed landings and short takeoffs, while keeping supersonic drag to the minimum. Next, about the armament and sensors for your aircraft. These are two areas which will impact heavily on the acquisition and operating costs of your aircraft. Thankfully, in the case of its intended primary missions, that is maritime patrolling and policing, counter-insurgency and counter-piracy, low-cost weapons systems like guns, cannons, unguided rockets and bombs will do the job nicely. Also, since your pilots would need to visually locate and positively identify their targets before engaging them, human eyesight then becomes as important as electronic sensors like radar and electronic warfare systems.” Ingrid then paused while looking straight at the three general officers sitting around the table.

“Believe my extensive air combat experience when I say this: having only one pilot may sound like a way to save money but an extra pair of eyes, especially if you add a weapons officer to take care of long-range detection and weapons guidance, will prove invaluable for your future combat aircraft. The added cost and mass due to a second crewmember are truly minimal compared to the advantages of having two of them. A lone pilot trying to both look around while flying low and looking down at its sensors will be a lot less effective in detecting visually small targets, while he may lose sight of his true flight attitude and crash against the ground or the sea. I thus strongly recommend a two-seater formula for your future combat aircraft.”

Again, the three air force generals quickly agreed with her last recommendation. Ngo, most happy about the way the discussion was going, then asked Ingrid yet another question, this time a bit hesitantly.

“And...what kind of aircraft design will you propose to us once you will have time to look at all the possible solutions, Ingrid?”

Ingrid then surprised all of her guests by taking six documents from inside the file lying on the table and distributing one copy to each general officer and politician.

“When my boss, Jeff Hiller, called me early yesterday morning to warn me about your incoming visit, I then thought about the possible reasons for your countries to send delegates to see me. In view of what I know about your respective military forces and geo-political situations, it wasn’t too hard for me to figure out in advance what you would

want to discuss with me. I then worked a few extra hours yesterday in order to write down a preliminary aircraft design concept, complete with a few basic sketches and a list of optional features. It now seems that I guessed right about the goal of your visit, so I am now giving you a copy each of the proposed design concept for what I will call the Hiller A-24 SHARK. Please take your time to read carefully through your copies, then tell me frankly about any misgivings you would have about specific points of my design or about features and capabilities you would like to add, change or delete.”

General Ngo had one quick look at the front page of his copy, then looked at Ingrid with something close to reverence.

“Ingrid, you are just incredible.”

“I try my best, General.” replied Ingrid with a disarming smile. She then stayed quiet during the few minutes needed for her guests to read and study their copies of her aircraft concept paper. After some four minutes, Air Minister Suparman Prabang looked up from his copy and asked her a question.

“What is this Hiller N.A.W.V.S. mentioned as part of the sensors package, miss?”

“The Hiller N.A.W.V.S., or Night and Adverse Weather Vision System, is an optical system patented by me a couple of years ago for my new SKYTRUCK and which helps pilots see around at night and in bad weather. It uses a battery of fixed cameras linked to in-cockpit display screens and Heads Up Displays, or H.U.D.s, to show the outside world via the eyes of forward-looking infrared cameras combined with low-level light night vision cameras and laser rangefinders. The combined images of each camera combination are then projected on a dedicated transparent H.U.D. screen or on a flat plasma screen. Think of it as a sort of multiple windows through the night and bad weather. The basic commercial package we use in our new SKYTRUCK has seven such camera combinations providing vision in the frontal arc and on both side of the cockpit, while the military variant to be used in the A-24 SHARK will have fourteen combo packages. With them, the pilots will be able to see clearly around them even in the darkest of nights or the worse bad weather. The laser rangefinders associated with the cameras are used to display distance references to the objects or geographical features seen on a specific display screen. One big advantage for using such a system in a military aircraft is that the cameras are passive in operation and can’t be detected by an enemy using electronic warfare equipment. As for the laser rangefinders, very few military air force sensors are able to detect low-power laser beams. However, a pilot

could always switch off the laser rangefinders if he decides that their beams could be detected by the enemy.”

“I see! And what would be your best estimate for the actual production cost of your A-24, Ingrid?”

“It will depend on many factors, like the number of aircraft to be eventually ordered, the need to correct any possible design shortcomings and your choice of which options your government would want to add to or delete from my basic design. However, as is described in that document, I foresee an approximate production cost of about thirty million dollars for the basic variant of the SHARK and an approximate design and development time of less than two years. As for the costs added by my boss to cover our design work, the tooling up for production and a reasonable profit margin, I will let Jeff Hiller handle that. As they say, the ball is now in your respective governments’ courts. However, remind your bosses that going for three different final designs compared to a single, interchangeable design, will seriously impact the final unit price of your future aircraft. One final thing: please tell your governments to stay discrete about this. If words come out of any advanced deal between us, you may see most of the major American and European aircraft manufacturers cry foul and scream for an open bid’s competition.”

“That is precisely why we kept our visit to Port Angeles discrete, Ingrid.” said Ngo in reply. “We know too well how ferocious the competition for the sale of combat aircraft can be. When do you intend to start the detailed design work on your A-24?”

“I will contact Jeff Hiller right after this meeting and brief him about its outcome. Once I get his go ahead, I will start right away on the detailed design work as it pertains to my basic concept. If your governments wish to add or delete features out of my basic design, then I would urge you to inform me as quickly as possible about their desired changes. Remind them as well that neither gold-plating nor barebones cutting will get them the kind of affordable and effective aircraft they want.”

“I will certainly emphasize that point with our prime minister and president, Ingrid.” replied Ngo before getting up from his chair and shaking hands with her, his copy of the precious concept document now inside his attaché case.

“Thank you so much for having accepted to help us in this matter, Ingrid.”

“The same from my government, Ingrid.” added Jesus Alba, followed by Anwar Sukarno. After a round of last handshakes, Ingrid escorted her visitors all the way down

to the main entrance of the production plant, where she surprised them by taking place in the front passenger seat of their minibus.

"You don't need to accompany us to our hotel, Ingrid." said politely Ngo, to which Ingrid replied with a smile.

"I am not simply accompanying you to your hotel, General: I am going to see you off as your plane will take off for its return trip. This is the least I can do to thank you for the confidence your governments put in my expertise and advice."

To that, Ngo had no ready reply and he simply nodded once his head as the minibus started rolling.

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

**Monday, December 17, 2001 'C'**

**Aircraft design staff work section, Hiller production plant**

**Fairchild International Airport, Port Angeles**

Ingrid was working at one of the powerful aircraft computer-aided design work stations of her aircraft design section when her secretary came to her at a near run.

"Ingrid! Ingrid! A F.B.I. agent just arrived at the main entrance and is asking to speak with you."

"A F.B.I. agent? What the hell does the F.B.I. wants with me? Alright, tell our reception desk to have him escorted up to my private office."

"Got it!"

As Jenny Nakamura ran back into her own office, Ingrid closed the design program she had been working with and got up from her swiveling chair before shouting instructions at the five engineers and draftsmen working around her in the design section.

"ALRIGHT, GUYS AND GIRLS: CLOSE YOUR COMPUTERS AND PUT AWAY THE DOCUMENTS VISIBLE IN THIS SECTION, THEN GO HAVE AN EXTENDED LUNCH BREAK. BE BACK AT WORK BY ONE O'CLOCK."

Her employees didn't protest about that occasion to have extra lunch break time and quickly followed her directives before leaving the design section. When one of the plant's security guards escorted in a big man wearing a suit and tie, Ingrid was alone in the large office. She walked up to her visitor and gave a quick look at her security guard.

"Thank you, Tom! You may return to the reception area."



“Yes maam!”

Looking back at her visitor, she looked into the eyes of the beefy man with red hair while offering her right hand.

“I’m Ingrid Dows. What may I do for the F.B.I. today, sir?”

“Good day, Miss Dows! I am Special Agent Jack Flaherty and...urgh!”

The federal agent, not expecting her physical strength, was both surprised and somewhat shocked by her crushing handshake. He then reminded himself a bit late about her celebrated superpowers and withdrew his hurting hand while painting a false smile on his face.

“Uh, as I was about to say, my office was informed that you received a high-level, mixed delegation from Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines last Wednesday. We would be interested to know the reasons for their visit to your production plant.”

“And who is ‘we’? The F.B.I. or other American aircraft companies like Boeing, which has its main plant in Seattle?”

Ingrid had said that in a calm and polite tone but her impassive facial expression told at once to Flaherty that she was not going to be very cooperative with him.

“The F.B.I., miss. One of the countries who sent delegates to see you, Vietnam, has a coalition government that includes Communists.”

“I know that, Agent Flaherty: I pushed for the formation of that coalition government some 46 years ago, after beating the shit out of an invading Communist Chinese army intent on taking Vietnam. The Vietnamese Communists of the time then united with my forces and those of other Vietnamese factions to help repel that Chinese invasion. If you knew your history of Southeast Asia, you would know that the United States again joined forces with Vietnamese soldiers some twenty years after the end of the Vietnam War, in order to stop another attempted Chinese invasion, this time of the Paracels Islands. So, what about Vietnam?”

Quickly understanding that he was not going to win an argument with her and also realizing that his own legal ground was less than solid, Flaherty nonetheless made a last attempt at a question.

“So, are you refusing to answer my questions, Miss Dows?”

“What I am refusing to answer are pointless questions about a simple case of perfectly legal professional advice on aircraft design given to three countries which are not considered hostile to the United States, Special Agent Flaherty. You can tell your superiors that this comes from a retired five-star General of the Army and twice recipient

of the Congress Medal of Honor. I would thus urge them to think twice before thinking that I could possibly betray my loyalty to the United States. Any other questions, Special Agent Flaherty?"

"Uh, no, Miss Dows."

"Then, I will accompany you back to the reception area."

Feeling somewhat humiliated at being basically turned around and expelled from this place in such a manner, Flaherty still had no real choice but to follow her to the bank of elevators situated outside of the office and to get with her inside a waiting cabin. His mind was boiling as he recalled the briefing he had received from the agent-in-charge who led their Seattle F.B.I. office. What he forgot was that Ingrid, standing next to him, was a known telepath, one of the incredible powers she was said to possess. Still, Ingrid stayed perfectly polite with him, even waving goodbye to him as he sat back inside the unmarked car which had brought him from Seattle. The other agent who was driving the dark sedan gave him a questioning look as he buckled up his safety belt.

"That was quick. How did it go?"

"She basically told me that the F.B.I. can go fuck itself...in a very polite way."

## **CHAPTER 2 – UNDERGRADUATE STUDIES**



The University of Alaska Fairbanks campus.

**10:22 (Alaska Time)**

**Saturday, January 26, 2002 ‘C’**

**Weightlifting room, Nanook Students Recreation Center**

**University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) campus**

**Fairbanks, Alaska, U.S.A.**

Greg Sumner, a second-year student in engineering at the Fairbanks campus of the University of Alaska, was sitting on a low padded bench and pumping up and down a pair of 20-pound dumbbells when a fabulous-looking young blond woman entered the weightlifting room and went at once to the squat lift apparatus. She seemed quite tall for a girl but what attracted Greg’s attention, apart of course from her very sexy curves, was her incredible musculature, with very strong legs, a proverbial sixpack belly and muscular arms. Taking a deep breath while hogging the new girl, he whispered to his friend and fellow student, Alan Weir, who was exercising in a prone back position on the adjacent bench.

“Hey, Alan, take a look at that piece of pure candy and tell me if you ever saw such muscles on a girl.”

Alan looked ahead from his prone position for a couple of seconds before putting back down his head and resuming his weight lifting, a smile on his face.

“I have, Greg: she’s a new student who enrolled for the Spring semester last month. I saw her exercise here last week.”

“And you didn’t tell me about her then?” replied Greg, sounding incensed. “Do you know something about her, like her name and in what studies program she enrolled? I really wouldn’t mind trying to date her.”

“I chatted a bit with her when I first saw her. Her name is **Greta Visby** and she is a lieutenant in the Marine Corps. She is here to get a bachelor’s degree in security and emergency management, in order to fully qualify as an officer.”

“You mean that she is not a true officer?”

“Of course she is, Greg! She was commissioned from the ranks while serving in Afghanistan and is now studying here to get the required bachelor’s degree needed to satisfy the Marine Corps requirements to be an officer. Don’t you remember the various news reports about her during last year?”

“Uh, you know that I am not big on media news, Alan.”

“Your loss, Greg! There is more to life than video gaming and partying, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah! You already told me that a thousand times. Greta Visby...that sounds quite foreign as a name, no?”

“She was born in Sweden and is what you could call an ‘A’-grade Viking girl. However, don’t hope too much about dating her: she seemed to me to be a serious, intelligent and most mature girl for her age.”

“Well, nothing tells me that I can’t try.” replied Greg while watching the blonde starting to exercise with an impressive amount of weights put on the steel bar she was moving up and down. After another four minutes of lifting his dumbbells, Greg decided to change exercise machines and walked to the squat lift apparatus next to that used by the young blonde. While adding weights to the exercise bar, he smiled to the girl, who was still lifting up and down her set of weights.

“Hi! My name is Greg Sumner. I didn’t see you here before. Are you new to the university?”

Greta, who had caught at once on why this Greg Sumner was now taking the machine next to hers, answered him while keeping her eyes looking directly ahead of her as she bent and then straightened her legs while carrying the weighed-down bar on her shoulders.



"I started studying here at the start of this session. I'm Greta Visby."

A bit put off by her short, minimal answer, Greg took place under the weighed bar of his machine and started moving it up and down while talking to the girl and discretely admiring her body.

"And in what kind of program are you studying, Greta?"

"My major is in security and emergency management, while my minor is in military security studies."

"Sounds like interesting subjects. I study mechanical engineering and am on my second year of studies. I must say that I never saw a girl as strong-looking as you before. You must be exercising daily, no?"

"I do every day I can." she answered simply and not saying more while continuing her exercising. By then, Greg was starting to get a bit discouraged by her lack of conversation. He was thus surprised and stunned to hear her next sentence.

"I suppose that you would like to know the number of my room and in which residence I live, right?"

"I wouldn't mind that, Greta."

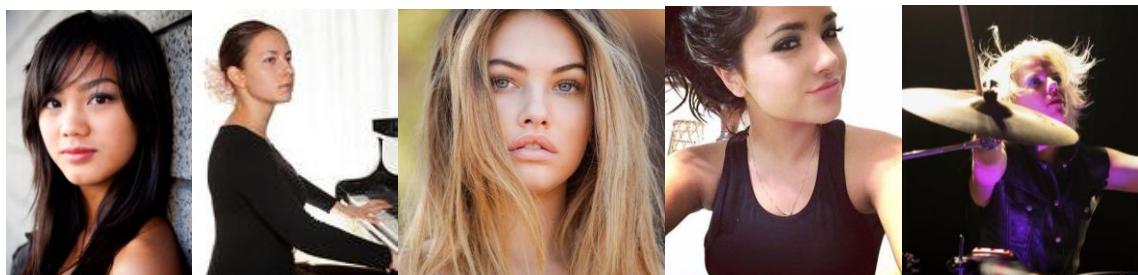
"Sorry: you can't have them."

On that cold retort, Greta got up from her exercise machine and went to a rowing machine in a far corner of the weights room, leaving behind a flustered Greg Sumner.

Greta, who already had to tell off many male students during the first two weeks of her Spring semester at UAF, didn't pay further attention to Greg during the hour or so of exercising she did before finally leaving the weights room and going to have a shower in the female locker room. Once clean and dressed up to go outside, she left the Student Recreation Center and walked some 500 meters through the snow-covered grounds of the campus, heading towards the Wood Center, which housed the main dining facilities of the UAF. There, she took a quick and frugal lunch of soup and salad before putting back on her winter parka and boots and heading out to return to her residential block, the Morton Stevens Hall, situated a bit over 200 meters away from the Wood Center. Contrary to the large majority of Americans, her Swedish upbringing and early years had accustomed her to using strictly the metric system, rather than the needlessly confusing and antiquated imperial system, so she always thought in meters when measuring distances. It was a bit past half past twelve when she arrived at the Morton Stevens Hall and went up to the second floor, where her room, Room 216, was

situated. That room, measuring about 4.7 meters by 3.5 meters, was fairly small and also minimally furnished but was still more than adequate for her, whose six years in the U.S. Marine Corps and her previous life in the wilds of Northern Sweden and Alaska had accustomed her to what many would describe as Spartan conditions. Those previous years, along with her extensive experience of combat in both Somalia and Afghanistan, had made her a lot more mature than what boys and men would expect from a 25-year-old girl, so she had learned how to politely tell those boys and men off. While she, like any normal girl, liked to have fun from time to time, this year and the next three following years were going to be concentrated on her studies and on her goal of earning a bachelor's degree, so that she could continue her military career in the Marine Corps as an officer.

## **CHAPTER 3 – AT THE TOP OF THE CHARTS**



Lucy Dows

Sarah Weissmann

Nancy Dows

Carmen Estrada

Erika Lang

**21:37 (California Time)**

**Wednesday, February 27, 2002 'C'**

**The Staples Center, downtown Los Angeles**

**California, U.S.A.**

"Ladies and gentlemen, dear guests, here is the moment you have been waiting for. LET'S APPLAUD NANCY DOWS AND THE 'D.C. FIVE' BAND!"

The thousands of spectators and invited guests filling the big sports stadium, which had been decked out with thousands of lights, a stage and giant electronic boards for the annual Grammy Awards ceremony, applauded enthusiastically as the powerful spotlights in the arena centered on a group of five young women standing or sitting behind a variety of musical instruments on the elevated stage. Sitting in one of the front rows of

spectators nearest to the stage, Ingrid Dows applauded as loudly as anyone else, feeling overwhelming emotions at seeing her daughter and her band being celebrated like this. If any person from Timeline 'A', the original timeline of Humanity's history, had been present at the ceremony, that person would probably have not recognized most of the artists and celebrities present, for the good reason that Timeline 'C' was effectively a parallel timeline which had split from Timeline 'B', itself a parallel world to Timeline 'A', decades ago. As a result, while the biggest artists and celebrities were still existing, many lesser personalities had lived different lives from those of their Timeline 'A' alter egos, or had not even been born at all due to the fluctuations of history since the splits in timelines, which had occurred in 1940 and 1941 respectively. All of this was mostly thanks to the involuntary travel back in time of Nancy Laplante, Ingrid's adoptive mother, who had been transported against her will from the year 2012 to the year 1940 by two rogue scientists from the 34<sup>th</sup> Century bent on experimenting with time travel. However, very few people in Timeline 'C' knew that their world was not the original world of Humanity. Ingrid, as the resident field agent of the Time Patrol in Timeline 'C', certainly knew about it and so was her daughter Nancy. In fact, Ingrid, then named Ingrid Weiss, had been an original inhabitant of Timeline 'A', a young teenage German girl caught in the turmoil of World War 2. Young Ingrid Weiss had then been doubled when the timelines had split for the first time in 1940 with the arrival in England of Nancy Laplante, left marooned in time when the two scientists who had abducted her were killed in an accident just after dropping her off, unconscious, with her car in a pasture field near Northolt. What was then Ingrid Weiss 'B' eventually met Nancy Laplante and got adopted by her, while the original Ingrid Weiss 'A' was officially killed in a British air bombing raid on Berlin. In reality, Ingrid Weiss 'A' was secretly saved then, along with a few of her comrades, by the Time Patrol in 1945, to then become one of its field agents. As for Ingrid Weiss 'B', she had to endure the pain of apparently losing her adoptive mother when one Nancy got killed while being held and tortured by the German Gestapo. That death had caused a further split in timelines, with Timeline 'C' emerging out of Timeline 'B' in 1941 at the moment of Nancy's death and with yet another Ingrid coming into existence in the new timeline. The present Ingrid 'C', distraught by the apparent death of her adoptive mother, had then married a handsome American Marine Corps officer, Kenneth Dows, and had become Ingrid Dows, to then follow him to his new posting in the Philippines, where her fabulous career as a fighter pilot eventually started. Now, at the actual age of 76 and while still looking like a beautiful eighteen-



year-old teenager, Ingrid was able to watch her biological daughter, conceived with Archangel Michael, as she and her band were attaining the top of the musical world.

On the stage, the already most beautiful and sexy Nancy Dows was even more of a feast for the eyes with her semi-transparent, vaporous golden dress covered with thousands of small golden reflective flakes, which glittered like tiny lights when hit by the light from the spotlights aimed at the stage. Then Nancy, standing behind a **Qanun**<sup>2</sup>, started singing a soft tune in her melodious voice while playing the strings of her instrument. More applauses rose as the spectators quickly recognized the tune and words from her band's latest hit, 'And an Angel Sang', which was presently at the top of the musical charts around the World. With Sarah Weissman playing the violin, Lucy Dows, an adopted daughter of Ingrid, playing the **harpsichord**<sup>3</sup>, Carmen Estrada playing the electric guitar and Erika Lang doing her usual virtuoso performance at the drum kit, the band played a soft, melodious and most romantic song which made the spectators listen to it in religious silence. Thunderous applauses erupted when the song ended after four minutes, with all five young women bowing down to the crowd to thank the spectators. The awards ceremony's presenter, himself an acclaimed singer, then walked on stage to thank Nancy while speaking in his microphone.



"And there you have it, ladies and gentlemen: 'And an Angel Sang', the top song on the charts and one in line for 'Best Song of the Year' award, sung by one of the contenders for 'Best Artist of the Year' award and accompanied by a most talentuous band in line for the 'Best Musical Pop Band of the Year' award. Nancy, bravo for your performance and that of your band tonight."

"Thank you, Jon. It was an honor for us to perform here tonight." More applauses rose as Nancy and her four band members walked off the stage to make place for the next performer.

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<sup>2</sup> Qanon: Zither-like board instrument with multiple strings. Of Persian origin.

<sup>3</sup> Harpsichord: A predecessor of the piano invented in the 16th Century.

Behind the curtains of the stage, Nancy exchanged warm hugs and kisses with her band members.

“Great job, girls! We can now say that we are at the top of our business as a band.”

“Yes, but let’s wait for the award winners to be named before calling ourselves the queens of pop.” replied her sister by adoption, Lucy Wong-Dows. “Still, this can only boost the sales of our latest album. We are well on the way to become millionaires, all five of us.”

“And that thanks to your generosity and selflessness, Nancy.” added Erika Lang. “Compared to you, many band leaders keep the major portion of their band’s revenues, claiming their ‘lead role’ in their success, while parceling out smaller portions to their band members. In contrast, you always split our band’s revenues’ evenly in five equal parts.”

“Hey, think of this like the celebrated Three Musketeers quote: all for one and one for all. Well, time to go back to our seats besides that of my mother. We shouldn’t insult our competitors for tonight’s awards by snubbing their own performances.”

Giving back to the backstage technicians the electronic microphones they had used on stage, the five young women then went down to the audience level by a hidden staircase and went to sit on each side of a happy Ingrid, with Nancy sitting next to her and then hugging and kissing her.

“Thanks for having come to watch us perform tonight, Mother.”

“How could I have not come, Nancy? This must be about the best moment of your life and that of your band members. You richly deserve all the awards you will win tonight.”

A couple of rows of seats behind and to one side of Ingrid’s seat, a well-known rap singer was less than enthusiastic about the D.C. Five’s performance, bending sideways and talking in a low voice to his wife.

“Pff! That was pure fluff, nothing else. That Nancy Dows is sure playing too much on her reputation as a half-angel.”

His wife, a woman in her thirties who was usually quite obedient to him, did throw him a dubious side look in response.

“Come on, Jay! You can’t deny that this Nancy has a golden voice and that her band members are very talented and are all able to play multiple instruments, on top of being able to sing in many different languages.”

The rapper didn’t reply to that, making a scowl instead.

Nearly two hours later, the rapper had more reasons to scowl when Nancy Dows and her band won a total of three of the most prestigious awards of the night, namely ‘Best Pop Song’, ‘Best Pop Band’ and ‘Best Artist of the Year’. Having himself missed on the title of ‘Best Rap Artist’, he then got up from his seat and walked out, forcing his wife to reluctantly follow him as Nancy Dows got up one last time on the stage with her band to accept the award for ‘Best Artist’. Other rappers and musicians sitting in the same row as the departing couple watched him go with disapproval showing on their faces, with one rapper shaking his head.

“Jay’s problem is his damn ego, always has been.”

## **CHAPTER 4 – A NEW KID ON THE BLOCK**

**09:15 (Seattle Time)**

**Thursday, May 8, 2003 'C'**

**Prototype workshop, Hiller production plant**

**William R. Fairchild International Airport**

**Port Angeles, State of Washington, U.S.A.**



**Ingrid about to test a prototype**

Jeff Hiller had a big, satisfied smile as he looked at the prototype of the Hiller A-24 SHARK, sitting inside the prototype workshop of the Port Angeles Hiller production plant.

“It is a truly magnificent beast, Ingrid. You did a bang-up job in designing it and in building a prototype so quickly. I also love that big shark mouth you had our technicians paint around its engine air intake.”

“You can thank Joe Pirelli for the paint job, Jeff: the man is a real artist when it comes to aircraft paint jobs.” replied Ingrid, wearing a kaki flight coverall, G-suit, parachute and rescue vest. She also carried her flying helmet in her left arm. Jeff Hiller nodded once before speaking further.

“Concerning our new baby, I am happy to announce to you that we may have at least three more potential customers for it. On top of Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam, which have already promised to buy a total of at least 140 A-24s on the conditions that our plane fills their expectations, I was contacted yesterday by government representatives from Australia, Malaysia and Singapore, who appear very interested in our A-24.”

“That is very good news indeed for us, Jeff. On the other hand, I am not surprised by this surge of interest for our SHARK coming from Pacific region countries. The present lineup of American and European-produced combat aircraft, while highly performant on the most part, are simply not adapted to the conditions of the Pacific theatre, with its huge surface and often very long distances between existing airbases. Also, our Air Force planes are mostly designed for beyond visual range combat against top tier opponents, using long-range...and expensive guided missiles, and tend to be too expensive to buy and operate, too sensitive to damage from ground fire, too short-legged and are also ill-suited to counter-insurgency work against jungle-based rebels,

smugglers and pirates. With its huge operational range, economy of operation, especially in terms of fuel expenditures, and its armament mostly geared to the use of low-cost, unguided air-to-ground weapons and ordnance, our A-24 fits the needs of Pacific area countries to a 'T'. It also helps that we at Hiller can design and produce new aircraft in the fraction of the time period which typical American and European design teams take to do the same."

"Aah, but that's where your quasi-dictatorial aircraft design management style comes to truly shine, Ingrid."

Ingrid giggled at that description on how she led aircraft design work at Hiller.

"Well, 'dictatorial' may be a bit of a strong word but I do firmly believe that design by committee is probably the worst way to create a new plane, especially if you let politicians and company lobbyists add their grains of salt to a given project. As I say often, too many cooks tend to spoil the sauce."

"You are right, Ingrid, and I will be the first to say that you are always ready to listen to others' ideas if they prove worthy of attention. So, what is the program for this first test flight of our A-24?"

"It will be a mostly subdued first flight, geared to verifying its basic handling and stability in flight. However, I would like to test its short takeoff and landing capabilities this morning. After all, one of the selling points I gave to those Asian representatives was the STOL<sup>4</sup> capabilities I planned to incorporate into my aircraft design. To be able to use existing runways or even rudimentary dirt strips, without the need to build large bases with long runways, was a very attractive argument for them. With that in mind, I arranged for a small team to film my takeoff and subsequent landing this morning and to measure how much of the runway's length I will take. That will supplement the data recording package installed in the second seat of the A-24."

"A good idea, Ingrid. Well, time for me to let you board your new baby. I will go join your runway-side team in order to watch you take off. Have a good flight, Ingrid."

"Thanks, Jeff!"

Putting on her flight helmet as she walked towards her waiting aircraft, Ingrid then used the telescopic ladder lowered down from the belly of the A-24's cockpit. With the low sill of the cockpit being over five meters above the ground, such an integrated

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<sup>4</sup> STOL: Short Takeoff and Landing.

ladder was a necessity, unless the crew decided to have a mobile ladder unit rolled next to their aircraft. In turn, that ladder gave access to a small and rather tight space behind the two crew ejection seats, a space which accommodated a chemical toilet, a small refrigerator, a microwave oven, a potable water tank and a folding sleeping bunk. A Hiller technician climbing up behind her entered the cockpit area through its floor access trap, then helped her by taking the safety pins off her ejection seat. The technician then went back down the ladder, pushing the 'retract' button situated below the big engines air intake once on the ground and making the ladder telescope back in its compartment. All the while, other technicians connected the front wheel carriage of the A-24 to an aircraft tractor, using an 'A'-bar. As soon as the large double doors of the workshop were opened, the tractor started pulling out the A-24, making it emerge in the open air for the first time. As Jeff Hiller went to join the filming team near the main runway of the Fairchild International Airport, Ingrid lit up in succession the two big Pratt & Whitney PW 3500 geared high-bypass turbofan engines propelling the A-24 as soon as the aircraft tractor had disconnected its 'A'-bar and had rolled out to a safe distance. Using only a small fraction of the maximum combined thrust of 36,000 kilogram-force of her engines, Ingrid then started rolling her aircraft towards the eastern extremity of the main runway.

**09:52 (Seattle Time)**

**Main passenger terminal building**

**William R. Fairchild International Airport**

**Port Angeles**



The increasingly loud scream from powerful jet engines attracted most of the passengers who had just arrived in a regional turboprop passenger aircraft to nearly run to the large windows giving a view of the main tarmac and of the runways. Part of those passengers was a military pilot from the U.S. Air Force 92<sup>nd</sup> Air Refueling Wing, based at the Fairchild Airforce Base near Spokane, Washington, who was travelling with his wife and two young kids. Captain Jeffrey Rosen and his family were arriving in Port Angeles in order to start a long-delayed family vacation in the region of the Olympic Mountains next to Port Angeles. Being well-versed in visual aircraft recognition thanks to his job as a refueling tanker copilot, Rosen frowned on seeing an unfamiliar type of aircraft in the process of lining up at one end of the main runway.

"What the hell is this? I never saw a plane like this one before."

"But you refuel all kinds of aircraft in the air nearly every day, Jeff." said his wife, Annette.

"True, but this plane is totally new to me... Oh, I understand now: the Hiller Aircraft Corporation has a production plant and prototype development shop here at this airport. This must be a new Hiller-produced prototype. It looks impressive but it also looks quite unusual for a combat aircraft."

"How so, Jeff?"

"Well, for one thing, the two jet engines on this aircraft are huge in proportion to the rest of this plane, which is obviously a combat aircraft prototype and not some kind of commercial aircraft. I wonder..."

He was then cut off by the suddenly increasing noise volume from the unknown aircraft, which made conversations difficult inside the terminal. The aircraft then started to accelerate at an impossible rate down the runway and, to Jeff's disbelief, rotated off the ground and started to climb quickly after a very short ground roll.

"Jesus! That thing took off in less than 700 feet and is now climbing like a bat out of Hell. Shit! I should have filmed it."

"Don't worry, Jeff: I got it on my camera and I took multiple pictures of it."

"Phew! Thanks, Honey: I will have to show these pictures to my squadron leader when I will return to work next week. What an incredible plane that was."

**10:08 (Seattle Time)**

**Tuesday, May 20, 2003 'C'**

**Prototype workshop, Hiller aircraft production plant**

**William R. Fairchild International Airport, Port Angeles**

Ingrid was at hand, standing in front of the A-24 prototype, when the Asian-Australian-New-Zealand mixed military delegation arrived in the prototype workshop, escorted by a Hiller security guard. She liked very much the way the nine foreign air force officers reacted on seeing for the first time her SHARK, with their eyes and mouths popping open in admiration and wonderment. On top of two officers each from Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam, the original countries which had asked for her advice a year and a half ago, there were also one Australian, one New-Zealander and one colonel from the Malaysian Air Force. As discrete as she had tried to be about her aircraft project, test-flying it had inevitably attracted quite a lot of attention to it from

around the aviation world. Unfortunately, it had also attracted a lot of bad-mouthing from other American aircraft manufacturers who had taken exception to the lack of competitive bidding involved in her aircraft program, as well as a few pointed questions and comments from American military and political leaders. However, today she was facing what amounted to a most friendly group of visitors.

“Good morning, gentlemen, and welcome to the Hiller prototype workshop. Behind me is the prototype of the A-24 SHARK, which I have been extensively test-flying for the last eleven days. While its testing program still has quite a way to go, the A-24 has up to now proven in my opinion to be a safe aircraft to fly, with no noticeable design vice or handling problems to it. I can now tell you that, barring some unforeseen problem in its flight testing, the Hiller A-24 SHARK should be ready for series production within seven months. You were thus invited here so that you could inspect my A-24 and report about it to your respective governments. To the Australian, New-Zealander and Malaysian officers present, I will start by describing the premise that brought this aircraft program into existence. The initial countries which came to seek my advice in December of 2001, namely Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam, were looking for a new combat aircraft better suited to the conditions and constraints of the Pacific region than the existing American and European models of fighter-bombers. Their main requests were for radically extended range and flight endurance, low acquisition, maintenance and operations costs and suitability to engage effectively from close range a variety of ground and surface threats that are too often considered as secondary, low value targets by American and European air force staffs. The A-24 was thus designed mainly for long-range sovereignty patrols, counter-insurgency and counter-piracy and counter-smuggling, using mostly low-cost, unguided weapons like cannons, rockets and bombs. In terms of range and endurance, while I still have to make actual long-range test flights across the Pacific, I did conduct a fuel consumption test return flight between Seattle and Anchorage, in Alaska. The distance between those two cities is 2,309 kilometers, or 1,443 miles if you prefer using the Imperial system. Thus, we are speaking about a total flight distance of 4,618 kilometers, or 2,886 miles, non-stop and without using air refueling. That distance is greater than the maximum ferry range of most existing fighter-bombers using drop tanks, yet it was done strictly using less than half of the capacity the internal fuel tanks of the A-24, with plenty of fuel remaining in the internal tanks at the end of the flight. Furthermore, when I flew that trip, I also carried in my A-24 a five-ton load of internal dummy ammunition and ordnance representing the



combined mass of 1,200 30 mm cannon rounds, 64 76 mm unguided rockets, twelve 127 mm heavy unguided rockets and two long-range air-to-air missiles inside internal weapons bays, plus four dummy short-range air-to-air missiles on external launch rails.” Exclamations greeted those numbers as the foreign officers exchanged stunned looks. One Australian officer, a lieutenant colonel wearing the wings of a fighter pilot, then asked Ingrid a question.

“And, according to your test calculations, what would be the maximum range of your A-24 when using only internal fuel and with a clean aircraft<sup>5</sup>?”

“I have to make a caveat here: my A-24 SHARK uses only internal fuel tanks and no external drop tanks. It also has no air refueling system. Why? Because it doesn’t need them and I kept them out in order to keep the costs low. It can fly to its maximum range purely on internal fuel, thus allowing it to stay ‘clean’ and keep aerodynamic drag to a minimum. I presently estimate its maximum range in clean configuration at a minimum of 11,000 kilometers, or 6,110 nautical miles, while carrying five tons of internal ordnance and while flying at a subsonic cruise speed of Mach 0.9, meaning 950 kilometers per hour. The Hiller A-24 could thus fly a non-stop trip from Sydney to either Manila, Da Nang, Jakarta, Tokyo or Guam, all strictly on internal fuel.”

There were more befuddled looks exchanged before the same Australian officer asked another question.

“This sounds like near miraculous results, Miss Dows. How did you manage such a huge range capability on internal fuel alone?”

“By using a solution no other designer of combat aircraft has used or even thought of before in a combat aircraft: I chose two engines of a model of very high bypass turbofan of the kind commonly used to power large commercial airliners in order to propel my aircraft: the Pratt & Whitney PW 3500<sup>6</sup>. Each engine develops a maximum thrust on takeoff of 18,182 kilogram-force, or 40,000 pounds of thrust, with a bypass ratio of 7.1 and a very low specific fuel consumption which is less than half that of the low-bypass turbofan engines commonly used to power existing fighter-bombers. Many would then object that such engines are unsuited to supersonic flight, due to their huge airflow and large diameters, but there are ways to make them function well at supersonic

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<sup>5</sup> Clean aircraft: Common expression describing an aircraft that is not carrying any external load, like bombs, drop tanks and missiles.

<sup>6</sup> PW 3500: A fictitious turbofan engine design imagined by the author and based roughly on the real-life Pratt & Wittney PW 2037 engine.

speeds while keeping their low fuel consumption qualities. In the case of my A-24, I used a divertless supersonic intake, or DSI, which is a large, fixed lump situated at the entrance of the engine air intake channel. Such DSI devices slow down supersonic airflow and allow high-bypass turbofan engines to function correctly at speeds of up to Mach 2, and this while not using any moving parts. Basically, what you have here is a supersonic fighter-bomber able to fly to speeds of up to Mach 2 while using a type of engine normally used by large commercial airliners. Another advantage of using such a type of high-bypass turbofan is that they commonly use a thrust reverser system, something that my A-24 has. It can thus use thrust reversal on landings to drastically cut the rolling distance, thus allowing it to use shorter airstrips.”

“I can now see why no other builder of military combat aircraft ever produced a plane with such a range as your A-24, Miss Dows. You really can think outside of the box.” said the Malaysian air force colonel present as part of the delegation, making Ingrid smile maliciously.

“I don’t simply think outside of the box, colonel: I also live outside of the box. Furthermore, as an ex-fighter pilot with six decades of combat flying experience, I also know what works, what doesn’t and what is needed or superfluous. Take for example the present insistence for fighter aircraft to be able to fly at speeds above Mach 2. While such top speeds may sound attractive, they are in my opinion a false ideal, as they necessitate the use of engine post-combustion, which hugely increases fuel consumption and can thus be sustained only for a few minutes, while speeds above Mach 2.2 necessitate the use of special metal alloys or composite materials, both of which are very expensive and add a lot to the acquisition and maintenance costs of an aircraft. I flew many types of supersonic combat aircraft in my life and thus know plenty about the problems of flying above Mach 2. In the case of the A-24, I voluntarily limited its top speed to Mach 2. That allowed me to both use a high-bypass turbofan equipped with a DSI air inlet and to use only standard aluminum alloys in its construction, except for the engine hot parts. Even if an enemy aircraft tries to flee at faster than Mach 2, it will be able to do so for only a few minutes and then will find itself with empty tanks, while the A-24 will be able to sustain its top speed of Mach 2 for much longer and will then be able to catch up with its prey. To better make that point, I was able during a recent test flight to dash out on a simulated intercept mission at Mach 2 to a radius of 2,500 kilometers, with then enough internal fuel left for twenty minutes of intense air combat followed by a return trip at subsonic speeds. Know that the PW 3500’s specific

fuel consumption at maximum thrust is only 0.31 pounds of fuel per pound of thrust per hour, while a typical military low-bypass turbofan engine using post-combustion has a SFC at maximum augmented thrust of well over 0.8. Thus, while flying supersonic, my A-24 will be about three times as economical in fuel usage as the other fighter-bombers in existence. That is the main reason for the astounding range and endurance of my A-24.”

“Well, I’ll be...” could only say Filipino Air Force Major General Jesus Alba. “Miss Dows, you are truly a magician when it comes to aircraft design...and to piloting.”

“Thank you, General Alba. However, flattery will get you nowhere.”

A concert of laughs greeted that joke from Ingrid, who then invited her visitors to do a detailed tour of her A-24 with her.

Ingrid was about halfway through her guided tour and was showing to her visitors the internal weapons bays under the belly of the aircraft when the leader of the private security team employed by Hiller to guard her production plant came to see her and spoke to her in a near whisper.

“Miss Dows, an Air Force colonel has arrived at the main gate and wants to meet with you. He arrived in an official, chauffeured Air Force staff car and his name is Colonel James Forrester. Should we allow him in?”

Ingrid thought about that for a moment before taking a decision.

“Let him in the plant but not in the prototype workshop. Lead him to my secretary’s office and tell him that I will see him once I am finished with my visitors here. If he insists on seeing me right away, stay polite but tell him that he will have to wait. He is not to be allowed to eye my prototype or to disturb my presentation to this delegation.”

“Understood, miss.” said her security chief before walking away, allowing Ingrid to resume her guided tour of the A-24.

A good fifty minutes later, and having let her visitors go to the plant’s cafeteria for a lunch break, Ingrid went up to her office, where she found an American air force colonel in dress uniform arguing quite heatedly with her secretary, Jenny Nakamura. Irritated by the tone used by the senior officer, Ingrid charged into her secretary’s office and interposed herself between Jenny and the colonel, eyeing him coldly.

“Colonel Forrester, if you continue talking like this to my secretary, I will personally throw you out of this building. She had instructions from me and she was simply following them.”

“And then why did you make me wait like this for a good hour? I was sent here on official government business.” replied rather brusquely Forrester.

“Why? Because I had my own business to attend to and was hosting a delegation of foreign customers. Follow me in my office, so that you could leave my secretary in peace.”

The poor Jenny Nakamura blew air out in relief after Forrester followed Ingrid out of her office: that senior officer was a big, intimidating man who seemed to be accustomed to push other, so-called lesser people, around. However, that James Forrester was about to learn that no one pushed Ingrid Dows around.

As soon as they both were inside her office, Ingrid closed the door behind her and threw a cold stare at Forrester.

“Now, tell me what is the goal of your unannounced visit, Colonel.”

“My goal is to convey to you the misgivings of my superiors at the Pentagon concerning the way you deal in secrecy with those Asian countries about your new combat aircraft, and this while refusing to inform the Air Force staff about your A-24. General Spurling is not happy at all about the way you failed to keep his air force staff informed about your new plane.”

Pricked by Forrester’s choice of words, Ingrid walked quickly to him, stopping nearly nose-to-nose to him and staring unflinchingly into the colonel’s eyes.

“I didn’t inform General Spurling about my new aircraft because it is none of the Air Force’s business: it is Hiller’s private business. I designed and built my A-24 in order to satisfy an initial request from three countries in Southeast Asia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam, to produce a combat aircraft better suited to their needs than the existing models of fighter-bombers produced in the United States and in Europe. Four more countries, Australia, Malaysia, New-Zealand and Singapore, have since joined that initial group of customers for Hiller. Yet, after having already worked for eighteen months on my project, this is the first time that the U.S. Air Force is officially contacting me about my A-24...by sending you unannounced to Port Angeles. Again, this is private Hiller business and is of no concern to the Air Force. The customers for this aircraft project are all countries which have good, friendly relations with the United

States and thus have every legitimate right to seek the help of Hiller in order to procure a new combat aircraft for their national needs.”

“Without opening any competitive bidding for their new aircraft? Without giving other American aircraft manufacturers the chance to bid for such an aircraft?”

“And since when are other countries obliged to follow the acquisition rules of the United States concerning military equipment, Colonel? Those countries want a new plane suited for the vast distances of the Pacific Theatre, and this at a reasonable price and within a quick design and production time. They came to see me because they knew that I could think out of the box and produce a solution for them at minimal costs and time. If the Air Force is so interested by my plane, why didn't it send me an official request for tender?”

“Because, at the moment, the Air Force fleet inventory is full and that no extra budget was voted by the Congress for a new aircraft acquisition.”

“Then, the Air Force can mind its own business and let Hiller deal with willing customers, Colonel.” replied Ingrid, hardening her tone. “You can return to the Pentagon and tell General Spurling to leave Hiller, a privately-owned aircraft corporation, alone. If he doesn't want my plane, then he should let other customers free to procure my A-24.”

“That makes you the agent of foreign countries, miss, and...”  
Ingrid, stung by those words, rose her voice to a near shout.

“ME, AN AGENT FOR FOREIGN COUNTRIES? HOW DARE YOU OR GENERAL SPURLING CALL ME, A TWICE RECIPIENT OF THE MEDAL OF HONOR WHO SERVED THE UNITED STATES FOR OVER SIXTY YEARS AND TEN WARS, THIS? YOU'RE A SIMPLE FUCKING LOGISTICAL BRANCH OFFICER AND I SEE NO COMBAT MEDALS ON YOUR CHEST, COLONEL, SO YOU CAN PACK AWAY YOUR ACCUSATIONS AND LEAVE...NOW!”

Turning red with contained anger, Forrester however did not fire back a response and stomped out of Ingrid's office, with Ingrid following him closely. She escorted Forrester all the way down to the reception lobby and put him into the care of her security chief.

“Nathan, Colonel Forrester is leaving the plant now. Make sure that he finds the right way out.”

“Yes, Miss Dows!”

As the security boss escorted Forrester back to his staff car, Ingrid did her best to cool down the anger inside herself.

“Me, an agent of foreign governments... What a load of shit!”

## **CHAPTER 5 – IN THE CROSSHAIRS**



**15:09 (Paris Time)**

**Friday, June 13, 2003 ‘C’**

**French Air Force Mirage 4000 fighter jet**

**On patrol over the Atlantic, west of the coast of Brittany, France**

Captain Jean Vermeil was flying his Dassault MIRAGE 4000 fighter on a maritime patrol, accompanied by his wingman, Lieutenant Pierre Favreau, when his radar started showing a fast blip which had just appeared on his radar screen, coming from the West. While there were plenty of aircraft in the air in this area, mostly commercial airliners, the speed of the newcomer instantly put Vermeil on alert and he spoke in French to his wingman on the radio.

“Lima Two, from Lima One: I have a supersonic contact coming from the West and which has just entered my radar range. Follow me and turn to heading 310. Be ready to go to afterburners if that contact proves to be a possible hostile, over.”

“Lima Two, understood!”

Next, as Vermeil turned to the new heading and pushed forward his engines throttles, he called up his air controller at the Mont-de-Marsan airbase, just south of Bordeaux.

“Mont-de-Marsan, from Lima One: I have just detected an aircraft coming from the West and heading towards the general direction of Paris while flying at close to Mach 1.6. Do you have any military flight scheduled for this area this afternoon, over?”

It took a few seconds before the military air controller at the base housing the 3/30 LORRAINE Fighter Squadron answered his call, probably because he took the time to consult his list of flight schedules.

“Lima One, from Mont-de-Marsan. The only supersonic-capable aircraft announced for this afternoon is a prototype heading to the Le Bourget Airshow. It is designated as the Hiller XA-24 SHARK, coming from Seattle. Intercept and confirm visually its identity, over.”

“Lima One understood, out!” said Vermeil in his oxygen mask’s microphone before thinking about the information he had just received. A prototype coming all the way from the American West Coast and arriving at supersonic speed near the French coast? Did that Hiller XA-24 fly supersonic all the way or did it just go supersonic now, possibly to make a show of itself? If it was the second case, then that American pilot would not impress him much with such a braggard attitude.

“Lima Two, from Lima One: we are going to intercept and visually confirm the identity of what may be an American prototype aircraft heading towards the Le Bourget Airport. Accelerate to Mach 1.7.”

“Lima Two, understood! Will follow you on your port side.”

Vermeil then briefly looked down at his fuel gauge, checking out how much fuel he had left. While the MIRAGE 4000 could attain speeds of Mach 2.5, it could only sustain such speeds for a few minutes at the most before emptying its fuel tanks. Even at Mach 1.7, he was going to have to use his engines’ afterburners at partial power, as his aircraft could only ‘super cruise’ at up to Mach 1.4 before having to switch its afterburners on. That Hiller XA-24 must thus be drinking up fuel like crazy in order to perform its little supersonic stunt.

Using his radar to intercept the fast blip ahead of him, Vermeil was able to spot the newcomer after another three and a half minutes. What he saw as he performed a wide turn to the right in order to get in an intercept position behind and below the newcomer made him exclaim to himself.

“Look at that big bugger! It must have the biggest aircraft engines I ever saw on a combat aircraft. It is also quite big for a fighter-bomber, with some unusual design features. The wings are positively huge in proportion to the rest of the aircraft.”

Vermeil then realized something that left him utterly flabbergasted and prompted him to talk again to his wingman on the radio.



"Lima Two, from Lima One: that XA-24 is flying clean, with no fuel drop tanks visible under its wings and belly. I don't even see any wing pylons on it."

"How the Hell can it fly supersonic and cross the Atlantic without using drop tanks, Lima One? That's impossible!"

"Well, that kind of confirms my belief that it went supersonic only after getting near our coastline. If that pilot was trying to impress me, then he got the wrong result with me."

A female voice then spoke on his frequency, using excellent French.

"French MIRAGE 4000 patrol, from Hiller XA-24, on the way to Le Bourget: sorry to contradict you but I have been flying transonic since I crossed the American East Coast and I am not in the habit of bragging when flying over international waters, over."

"Did you release your drop tanks before approaching our coast, XA-24?"

"Negative! I designed the XA-24 as a very long-range fighter-bomber and it does not use drop tanks nor has an air refueling system. It can actually cross the Pacific without the need for air refueling or refueling stops."

"Your aircraft can cross the Pacific by itself? How did you manage that?"

"I will be most happy to explain that to you if you come visit us at the Le Bourget Airshow. Lady Hawk, out!"

*'Lady Hawk? The famous Ingrid Dows? Wow! She is the biggest, most distinguished name in aviation and in air combat history. Hell, I must find a way to find time to visit Le Bourget during the coming days.'* thought Vermeil before speaking on his radio.

"Then, have a good trip to Le Bourget, Lady Hawk. Lima One, out to you! Lima Two, switch off your afterburners and follow me back to base."

Jean Vermeil had a last look at the impressive prototype aircraft before veering away and heading southeast towards Mont-de-Marsan. This new jet sighting was going to deserve a full debrief to his squadron commander. Maybe he could also convince him to have the whole squadron travel to Le Bourget, in order to examine as a group this new wonder plane from up close.

**16:14 (Paris Time)**

**Le Bourget Airport, Northeast suburbs of Paris**

**France**

Ingrid's landing at Le Bourget Airport didn't go unobserved, far from it. By the time that she followed a guide vehicle to her assigned parking spot in the aircraft display area of the airshow, which was due to open on Sunday, a crowd of at least a hundred persons had gathered to look at her A-24. **Shirley Slade**, Ingrid's copilot for this trip, remarked on that as the latter rolled the last few meters to their assigned spot.



"Our new plane is certainly going to attract a lot of attention during the next few days. With the way we kept its development discreet, few people outside of the specialized aviation press realized that Hiller was going to produce its first combat jet aircraft ever. Hopefully, this curiosity will translate into more sales. Personally, I believe that the United States Air Force would be stupid not to buy our A-24: it is the perfect plane for the Pacific Theatre."

"I am not sure that our air force will even want to look at my SHARK, Shirley, especially after the way I basically threw that Colonel Forrester out of our plant. By USAF definition, my A-24 is a 'bare-bones' combat aircraft, with little of the advanced...and costly, features the Pentagon brass is so fond of. There is also the fact that nearly all the big aircraft manufacturers in the USA have basically blacklisted Hiller for not having conducted an open bid competition for the new aircraft requested by our ASEAN clients."

"Well, those manufacturers would never have been able to keep their design and production costs down the way you did, **Ingrid**. If designed and produced by, say, Boeing or Lockheed, the A-24 would have ended costing at least twice what Hiller is now asking for the SHARK. There is also this USAF complaint that our aircraft is not fast enough as a fighter-bomber to interest it into buying it."



**Ingrid Dows at age 77**

"Which shows you how they completely misunderstood the main design aim of my A-24: to produce a combat plane with Pacific-wide reach, and this at the lowest production, maintenance and operation costs possible. This myth about needing to attain or surpass a top speed of Mach 2 is making those Pentagon bosses forget how important autonomy is for an aircraft operating in the Pacific region. Right now, nearly all the American aircraft in USAF or Navy inventory need to either use multiple air refueling or multiple legs in order to get to our bases around the Pacific. Arranging and

coordinating such trips takes time and lots of support work, all things that are always in short supply when an unexpected crisis blows up. By contrast, our customers will be able to fly to each other's aid at a moment's notice, with minimal pre-combat preparation."

"So, who else could be interested in buying our A-24, Ingrid? What could our participation to this airshow bring to Hiller?"

"Wider recognition of its expertise in designing specialized aircraft tailored to specific customers, for one. That expertise was already proven with our PELICAN and SKYTRUCK VTOL transport aircraft, which are now in high demand and have proven extremely popular with their users. In terms of potential customers, if you exclude the United States, our biggest prospect right now is India. India is a large country possessing as well a few islands around the Indian Ocean and facing two actual hostile countries, China and Pakistan. Another serious potential customer is France. While the French typically prefer to design and build themselves their combat aircraft, which are excellent in my opinion, the French have presently nothing that allows them to patrol easily all its far away and dispersed possessions around the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Imagine how a couple of squadrons of our A-24 based in, say, French Polynesia and in The Reunion, in the Indian Ocean, could actually cover those oceans without the need for complicated and costly air refueling operations. With India and France, we could more than double the numbers of A-24 sold by Hiller, so the economic arguments for us to participate in this airshow are quite compelling."

"What about your new HVSSR system? Presently, there is nothing else equivalent around the World."

Ingrid thought over her answer to that for a couple of seconds. Her HVSSR system, which stood for 'Hyper-Velocity, Spin-Stabilized Rocket', which she had designed specifically for her A-24, was indeed unique around the World and was meant to provide heavy and accurate firepower from beyond ground-based small arms and automatic cannons range, and this while avoiding the high costs and complexity associated with guided missiles. It was in her mind the perfect solution for air forces which were facing the threat of ground fire from low technology opponents during patrol and strike missions.

"Well, the problem for us in trying to sell our HVSSR system is that only our A-24 can carry it, as it needs to be directly incorporated into the aircraft, rather than simply be hooked under a wing pylon. Of course, the best solution for us would be to sell more A-

24s, but we will need to keep our expectations about that to a realistic level. Aah, I see Elliot Goulding and our maintenance team standing at the ready next to our parking spot. We will thus be able to go quickly take the rooms reserved for us at the Hôtel Izmir once out of the aircraft.”

Shirley Slade, who had been with Ingrid at the previous Le Bourget Airshow two years ago, nodded her head and smiled while looking at Hiller’s Vice-President for Marketing and Sale: she knew him well and liked him for being a competent and most decent man.

By the time that Ingrid and Shirley climbed down from their aircraft while carrying their large travel bags, using the telescopic ladder deployed down from the cockpit section, the crowd of curious onlookers had grown to well over 200, with many of them taking pictures of the A-24. Those onlookers, which were mostly airport employees or participants to the airshow, were however kept at a safe distance by French police officers assigned to the security of the airshow’s grounds. Elliot Goulding was the first to come forward and shake hands with the two aviatrixes once they set foot on the tarmac.

“Welcome to Paris, girls! How was your transatlantic trip?”

“Relatively short, thanks to the transonic capabilities of our SHARK.” answered Ingrid. “We had two French MIRAGE 4000 which came to sniff us out off the coast of Brittany but they did not cause us any problems and were most polite. I however did invite them to come and visit us here during the airshow, so if you see a bunch of French fighter pilots show up here, let them examine our aircraft from up close. With luck, they will also sniff me and Shirley from up close as well.”

Goulding had a chuckle at that while eyeing the two apparently very young aviatrix facing him. While both Ingrid and Shirley appeared to be in their early twenties, he knew that Ingrid was in reality 77 years-old, while Shirley’s true age was 82. The ‘Fifinellas’ patches on their flight coveralls, which marked them as ex-members of the famous all-female combat air unit which had distinguished itself during World War 2 and the Korean War, was one indication of their true age. However, Goulding knew that both women had been rejuvenated via supernatural means some three years ago, so was not fazed out by their apparent youth. If anything, that only made both girls even more appealing to him...and to most men around them. Being single and quite fun-loving, both Ingrid and Shirley didn’t mind at all that male attention, something that Goulding both understood and accepted as normal for two such beautiful women.

“Well, if those French fighter pilots don’t show interest in you, then they will go against the widespread reputation French aviators have as incorrigible womanizers. Now that you are here, I will drive you to our hotel while our maintenance team conducts a thorough maintenance check of your aircraft. You will most probably want to go to bed early this evening in order to go over all those time zones you flew through. I already expect that a lot of attention will be directed at our aircraft during this airshow.”

“I certainly hope so, Elliot.” replied Ingrid. “While I did my best to keep the design and development costs of my A-24 down, Hiller sure could use as many customers for it as possible in order to recoup its expenses for the program. Well, lead on: we will be right behind you.”

**18:06 (Paris Time)**

**Hôtel Izmir-Café du Nord restaurant, 126 Avenue du 8 Mars Le Blanc-Mesnil, Paris Northwest suburbs, near Le Bourget Airport**



Having taken the time to take a shower and change into a set of informal clothes, Ingrid then went down from her room to go to the ‘Café du Nord’ restaurant, situated on the ground floor of her hotel. She first collected Shirley Slade on her way down and went to sit with her at one of the tables of the small restaurant, which was used mostly by the hotel’s customers but which was also used by a number of locals. She and the Hiller team had already used that hotel and restaurant once, two years ago, when they had participated in the preceding Le Bourget Airshow, and had liked their quiet, intimate

touch. It also had the great virtue of being only a few hundred meters to the Le Bourget exposition area, making it a short walk away. Looking at the menu, Ingrid smiled on seeing what the 'plat du jour', or special of the day, was.

"Aaah, they have a lamb couscous as the special of the day. The last time I tried it, it was truly excellent, Shirley."

"I buy that. I will have tea with it: we can't afford to drink wine or other types of alcohol with all the flying we will be doing during the next few days."

"The same here." said Ingrid before calling the waiter to their table and placing their orders. As they waited for their orders to be delivered, Ingrid saw that the television set next to the bar of the restaurant was showing the evening news on the F1 national channel. Both she and Shirley, who spoke perfect French thanks to her previous incarnation as a French nobleman of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century who had lived near Bordeaux, in the southwest region of France, thus listened to the latest news. Shirley got excited a bit when the newscaster started reporting on the oncoming Le Bourget Airshow.

"Yes! Maybe they will speak about our new plane."

Her wish quickly came through when a video of the landing of their A-24 was shown, followed by more videos showing both aviatrix climbing down from their plane, with the newscaster commenting on that.

"Piloting this new and exciting prototype from Hiller was the famous Ingrid Dows, probably the most renown fighter pilot and military commander in modern history, who is often nicknamed 'God's General' thanks to her supernatural powers and to her eternal youth. Believe it or not, dear viewers, but this 'young' woman you are now seeing on this video is in reality 77 years-old. Millions of French women must certainly be jealous about that..."

Ingrid chuckled at that little comment from the newscaster.

"Oh, American women are as jealous of me as French women are. I can attest to that."

The newscaster then made a comment as the video centered for a moment on Shirley, who was standing next to Ingrid in front of their plane.

"A short search after this video was taken revealed that Dows' copilot, named Shirley Slade, is actually even older than her and is in reality 82 years-old, despite her youthful looks. She was apparently rejuvenated by supernatural means, possibly by Dows herself, and was a member of the famous 'Fifinellas', the all-female American air combat unit which distinguished itself in the Pacific Theatre during World War 2 and also

during a number of subsequent conflicts. More detailed information about this Shirley Slade and on Ingrid Dows will be presented at a special report tonight at ten.”

“Oooh, we must watch that report, Ingrid!” said Shirley excitedly, making Ingrid smile. She was about to reply to that when a wave of mental hatred struck her, making her discretely look at a man sitting at another table and sipping on a strong Turkish coffee. That man, who appeared to be from the Indian sub-continent, was looking at her with nearly undisguised hatred. Looking away from him in order not to signal to him that she had spotted him, Ingrid then used her telepathic abilities to scan his thoughts as the man fetched a cell phone from one pocket and started composing a number on it. While still listening to his thoughts, Ingrid was also able to hear him talk on his phone: the man spoke in Urdu, a language she could recognize but not understand. She thus touched Shirley’s hand and spoke to her in a near whisper.

“Shirley, this man near the bar is speaking in Urdu. Try to hear what he says but don’t look at him: he seems hostile to us.”

Shirley, who had lived through countless dangers and adventures with Ingrid during the past decades, understood at once that this had to be important and concentrated on listening to the man’s conversation as he spoke on his phone. Her first incarnation on Earth had been as a young Pakistani prostitute named Aleena Umrani, who had lived a short, hard and miserable life in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century before being publicly stoned to death at the young age of 23. While she could not hear fully what the man said, what she heard was enough to alarm her and make her whisper to Ingrid.

“That man is signaling your presence in Paris to his interlocutor... He is now discussing how to get at you and kill you... He also speaks like a Muslim extremist.”

“It figures! I made a lot of enemies in Pakistan and Afghanistan during my last combat tour, when I commanded the American forces in Afghanistan and led an air bombardment campaign which threw the Pakistani military back to the Stone Age. This guy could very well be a Pakistani agent sent to report on the airshow.”

“What should we do about him, Ingrid?”

“Nothing for the moment. Just keep listening to him.”

However, Shirley didn’t have much time to listen on further, as the man terminated his call after a few more seconds, then paid for his coffee before walking out of the restaurant, studiously avoiding to look at Ingrid as he walked by her table. The moment he was out, Ingrid went to one of the windows of the restaurant and, staying

mostly behind the frame of that window, watched the man as he unlocked a small car and sat in it. She was able to note down the make, color and plate number of the car before the man rolled out of his parking spot and drove away. Shirley, who had watched Ingrid from their table, asked her a question as she sat back in her seat.

“What are you going to do about that man, Ingrid? He could turn out to be a real danger to us.”

“I fully realize that but this is not for me to handle: I will let the French authorities handle this. It’s their country after all. Thankfully, I have a few high-level contacts here in Paris who like me a lot for what I did while commanding the American forces.”

### **19:13 (Paris Time)**

#### **Headquarters of the Groupe d’Intervention de la Gendarmerie Nationale<sup>7</sup>**

#### **Camp of Satory, near Versailles, Greater Paris region**



Lieutenant-Colonel Frédéric Gallois was still at work in his office at the headquarters of the GIGN when his telephone rang. He wished that he could have gone home to his family for the weekend, like many of his gendarmes, but a few serious cases of possible threats to the national security of France were pushing him into doing some

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<sup>7</sup> Groupe d’Intervention de la Gendarmerie Nationale, or GIGN: Translates into ‘Intervention Group of the National Gendarmerie’. Elite unit of the French Gendarmerie specializing in counter-terrorism, hostage taking situations and other criminal high threats against France. While officially part of the French Armed Forces, the GIGN is under the direct authority of the French Minister of the Interior.



extra hours this evening. Grabbing his telephone receiver, he saw on his caller I.D. display that his commander, General Jean Labrosse, who commanded the whole of the French Gendarmerie, was calling him.

"Lieutenant-Colonel Gallois! What can I do for you at this hour, General?"

"Aah, I knew that I would find you still at work, even on a Friday evening, my dear Gallois. Look, you know who Ingrid Dows, the American ex-fighter pilot and ex-general, is, right?"

"Of course I do, General: who doesn't? What about her?"

"Well, she arrived in Paris this afternoon at the commands of the prototype of a new combat aircraft she designed for the Hiller Corporation and is intent on participating to the Le Bourget Airshow due to start this Sunday. As you must know, she made a lot of enemies, criminals and foreign governments alike, during her decades of service and, if I can believe her, it seems that one of those enemies of hers has spotted her in Paris and may be planning to try to assassinate her. We are talking here about the Pakistani government, which got a first class beating from Dows' American forces air units while she was in command of the Afghanistan Theatre two years ago. She just contacted me and told me about her reasons to feel threatened here by the Pakistanis. What she told me convinced me that this could be serious and I would like your GIGN to check out that possible threat and, if that threat is confirmed, to neutralize it. Here are the few details she gave me over the phone."

Gallois hurried to grab a pen and a notepad, then scribbled down the information given to him by his general.

"Got that, General. I will have this checked out at once and I will call you back if I find anything about it... Good evening, General."

Gallois then hung up and looked at his notes for a few seconds before getting up from his chair and leaving his office. He walked down the main hallway of his floor and entered a guarded and secure room which was used as the operations center of his command, then went to one of the intelligence analysts on duty this evening. The pretty female gendarmerie junior officer straightened up in her chair as Gallois stopped next to her computer station.

"Yes sir?"

"Lieutenant Marchand, I received some information about an individual who could be a foreign agent and who is presently in Paris. Could you please check quickly this info about the car he was seen in?"

“Right away, sir!”

Gallois then patiently waited as the female analyst worked her computer, entering data in it. She spoke less than a minute later, sounding triumphant.

“Bingo! That car officially belongs to an Imran Gurmani, who is listed as an attaché at the Pakistani embassy in Paris, with the official post of assistant commercial attaché. This Gurmani is however suspected to be in reality an agent of the ISI, the Pakistani intelligence services.”

“Do you have a file picture of this Gurmani, Lieutenant?” asked Galois, now taking very seriously that reported possible threat.

“We should have one, sir. One moment please!”

Another twenty seconds and a color, passport style picture of a man with brown skin and short black hair appeared on the analyst’s computer screen.

“Here you go, sir. I have to say that this man corresponds pretty much to the description you noted down, sir.”

“I would say the same here, Lieutenant. Can you print out this biographical page and the car registration info? I believe that we will need to start a surveillance and counter-terrorism operation concerning that Imran Gurmani.”

He soon got the requested printouts in his hands and then walked quickly to the desk of the captain in charge of the evening shift at the operations center: his officers and field operators were going to have to act quickly to face this new situation before something regrettable could happen.

**08:26 (Paris Time)**

**Saturday, June 14, 2003 ‘C’**

**Hôtel Izmir – Café du Nord, near the Le Bourget Airport**

Ingrid, with Shirley walking next to her, had just walked out of their hotel and was about to go down the Avenue du 8 Mars and walk to the nearby airshow’s grounds when she hesitated and slowed down her pace while eyeing a sedan car parked along the avenue, its nose pointed towards the entrance gate to the Le Bourget Airport: there were four men sitting in that parked car and all of them were looking at her. Ingrid understood at once that something smelled very bad here and touched Shirley’s right arm.

“Shirley, get ready to take cover behind that beige sedan parked ahead of us: we may have trouble in sight.”

At that exact moment, she saw two gun barrels appear at the opened windows of the parked sedan.

“TAKE COVER, SHIRLEY!”

Thankfully, her friend and old comrade reacted instantly and dived for the cover of the beige car parked a mere four paces ahead, imitated by Ingrid. As they crouched behind the rear bumper of that car, careful to also use its rear tyres as extra protection against bullet ricocheting on the pavement, bursts of automatic fire shattered the peace of the morning and made bullets whiz past the two women’s heads, shattering windshields and piercing car bodies. To Ingrid and Shirley’s amazement, that incoming automatic fire was then abruptly interrupted when

a dark blue SUV left its parking spot on the other side of the street and, engine roaring, violently rammed the sedan in a noise of crumpling metal. Three men dressed in black commando outfits, bullet-proof vests and helmets then jumped out of the



SUV, submachine guns pointed at the men in the sedan. **GIGN officers in action.**

One of the four men in that car started pointing his rifle at the black-clad commandos but was instantly peppered with bursts of 9 mm fire. Another one of the four men also tried to point a pistol at the commandos but was promptly gunned down and slumped forward over the front dash. The dumbstruck Ingrid and Shirley then saw more black-clad commandos run out of a delivery van parked some fifty meters from the sedan and run to the smashed vehicle, their submachine guns pointed. Ingrid then understood what had just happened and grinned to Shirley.

“Well, you just saw the French Gendarmerie in action, Shirley. These guys are real pros.”

“I’d say! They would make our own S.W.A.T. teams look geriatric in comparison.”

“As the French themselves would say, ‘on ne fait pas dans la dentelle’, which translates into ‘we don’t do lace’. Alright, stay behind cover, Shirley, and let’s wait for these gendarmes to declare the scene secured before we approach them.”

Maybe one minute later, one of the commandos ran towards the two aviatrices, prompting Ingrid in straightening up to face him, soon imitated by Shirley. The man looked them over quickly before speaking to Ingrid.

“Are you alright, ladies?”

“We are, mister, thanks to you and your comrades. The speed and effectiveness with which the Gendarmerie reacted to my warning about possible Pakistani killers is truly impressive, I must say.”

Her compliment made the man smile.

“We thrive to do our best to protect innocent persons, miss.”

“Are those gunmen all dead? Are all your men okay?”

“One of those gunmen is alive but seriously wounded. We are presently administering first aid to him and an ambulance is on its way. As for my team, we are all unhurt.”

“Can I and my friend go to the airport now, mister? We have lots of things to do in order to prepare for the opening of the airshow tomorrow morning.”

“That is no problem, miss, now that those men have been neutralized. However, stay on your guards while in Paris: more of those foreign agents could try again to get at you.”

“I am very conscious of that, mister, and will certainly heed your advice. I would appreciate if someone from your service could contact me later in order to inform me about what was found about those wannabe killers.”

“I will pass the word to my superior, miss. You may go now.”

“Thank you, mister. Let’s go, Shirley.”

The commando watched both women walk away for a moment, admiring their calm and composure after such a traumatic event, then returned to his team, which was now busy searching the four gunmen, both the dead and the live one.

### **09:06 (Paris Time)**

**Monday, June 16, 2003 ‘C’**

**Hiller exposition stand, Le Bourget Airshow exposition park**

“Aah, here comes our first visitors of the airshow.” said Elliot Goulding, satisfaction in his voice. “Let’s see how much true interest they will show for our A-24.”

"I wouldn't expect much of that today, Elliot." replied Ingrid, a sarcastic smile on her face. "Most of these reporters will probably be more interested about yesterday's shootout rather than about our plane."

That made the marketing and sales executive roll his eyes.

"You're unfortunately probably right about that, Ingrid. Mayhem and chaos seem to stick to you like glue."

That made both Ingrid and Shirley chuckle briefly at that remark. Then, the first reporters and photographers got to their stand at a near run and started shouting questions at Ingrid.

"MISS DOWS, CAN YOU TELL US WHAT HAPPENED YESTERDAY NEAR YOUR HOTEL?"

"DO YOU KNOW WHO TRIED TO ASSASSINATE YOU, MISS DOWS?"

Ingrid smirked at those questions and spoke in a low voice to Goulding, who was rolling his eyes again.

"You see? I should have placed a bet with you on that."

### **13:50 (Paris Time)**

#### **Hiller exposition stand**

Ingrid, whose eyesight was legendary, smiled to herself when she spotted a particular group of men approaching the Hiller stand.

"Heads up, Shirley: I see a bunch of French Air Force pilots in uniform approaching from the right."

"Goodie! Maybe the two pilots who intercepted us over the Atlantic will be part of that group. If so, I hope that they will prove cute."

"We'll see soon enough, Shirley. Elliot, we will personally take care of that particular group."

"Why am I not surprised by that?" replied the Hiller executive, who then stepped back to let the front of the stand to Ingrid and Shirley. The man leading the newcomers' group was a commandant wearing a fighter pilot's wings on his chest, along with a number of medal ribbons. He smiled widely to Ingrid while offering his hand for a shake.

"Good afternoon, General Dows. I am Commandant Robert Pelletier, commander of the fighter squadron 3/30 'Lorraine'. Two of my pilots met you and your wingman over the Atlantic on Friday."

“And we were hoping fervently that they and their comrade fighter pilots would come visit us here at Le Bourget, Commandant Pelletier.”

“How could we not visit your stand in order to have a look at your impressive new aircraft, General?”

“You came only to look at my plane? What about me and my friend Shirley?” Pelletier and many of his pilots chuckled at that reply.

“Don’t worry about not being paid attention to, General: we also came to see you and your friend.”

“Aah, that’s better!” said Ingrid, drawing some amused exclamations from the French pilots. “Well, let’s start first with a guided tour of my Hiller A-24 SHARK. Then you will be able to go to the ‘pièce de résistance’: us!”

More laughter followed before she led the group of French military pilots closer to her A-24, stopping under the nose section, which stood over three meters over ground level.

“Let me first explain what prompted me into designing the A-24, gentlemen. A bit over eighteen months ago, a delegation from Southeast Asia visited me at my office and production plant in Port Angeles, near Seattle, on the American West Coast. They then asked me to design for them a new combat aircraft specifically geared for the Pacific area, with very long endurance and range, and this at the lowest cost possible without compromising its requested performances. The roles they had in mind for that new plane were actually quite different from those normally assigned to American and European combat aircraft, thus no existing type could fill their requirements, which are the ability to patrol over huge areas, police their economic exclusion zones, fight piracy and do counter-insurgency and counter-smuggling operations. Also, they wanted a plane that would be economical to acquire, maintain and operate. Armed with those specific requirements, I then designed the beast you are looking at now: the Hiller A-24 SHARK. Let me now show to you this large sign, which gives the specifications and performances of the A-24, as validated to date by test flights done by me. Read it first, then I will answer your questions and comments.”

It took only a few seconds before the first question came up from Pelletier.

“You really can cover 9,600 kilometers at Mach 1.62, and this with a clean aircraft and no air refueling? That’s mind-boggling! How did you manage that, General?”

“By powering my aircraft with two commercial engines of the high-bypass turbofan type, which have a specific fuel consumption that is less than half of that of the

typical low-bypass turbofan engines used in modern combat aircraft. When coupled with divertless supersonic air inlets, those high-bypass turbofans can work perfectly well at speeds of up to Mach 2. Also, I voluntarily limited its top speed to Mach 2, both to allow the use of high-bypass turbofan engines and to be able to use only standard aluminum alloys in its construction, another way I kept the costs low.”

Another French pilot then asked the next question.

“Your board states that your A-24’s maximum range, without any air refueling, is just over 11,500 kilometers. Have you actually validated that claim by flying a long-range trip, General?”

“I have, Lieutenant! Last week, I flew straight from Seattle to Manila, crossing the whole Pacific at Mach 0.9 on that trip, a 10,692-kilometer flight, using only internal fuel and with some fuel to spare on landing. From there, I flew from Manila to Perth, on the western coast of Australia, covering some 5,203 kilometers while flying supersonic at Mach 1.9 before landing in Perth. Those two flights thus validated both the subsonic range and the supersonic range my A-24 claims. As is, you could fly out of Paris and get to either Djibouti, La Réunion, French Guyana or the Martinique in one straight flight. As for reaching Tahiti, you would need only one pit stop on the way, in either the Martinique or French Guyana.”

The French fighter pilots exchanged befuddled looks, having never heard of such long ranges in combat aircraft, other than with strategic heavy bombers. Ingrid didn’t miss the fact that many of the French pilots, including Commandant Pelletier, noted down the numbers she was quoting. The next question came from a handsome young captain who waved his hand high to attract Ingrid’s attention.

“General, my name is Captain Jean Vermeil and I led the patrol that intercepted you off the coast of Brittany on Friday. While your plane certainly can carry and fire missiles, I can’t help but notice that you apparently put a heavy emphasis on the use of unguided rockets, notably by incorporating your HVSSR system to your aircraft. May I ask why?”

“A good question and one that deserves a full explanation, Captain Vermeil. Please understand first that my plane was designed to fill roles specifically requested by the customer countries which asked for it and which are quite different from the roles typical of combat aircraft operating in the European Theatre. Those roles are mainly long-range oceanic patrol and policing of economic exclusion zones, counter-piracy, counter-insurgency and counter-smuggling. Guided missiles are mostly wasted in those

roles, which call for close-in and positive visual identification of targets before any attack can be authorized and then initiated. On the other hand, using gravity bombs forces an attacking aircraft to approach and even overfly a target in order to drop its ordnance, something that will expose those aircraft to ground fire by rifles, machine guns and automatic cannons. My new rocket-launching system protects my A-24 from such ground fire by allowing it to fire its rockets from a safe distance, out of automatic cannon range and also out of most shoulder-launched surface-to-air missiles range.”

“But, wouldn’t such unguided rockets be quite inaccurate at the ranges quoted by your information board, General?”

“Normally, most existing unguided rockets would indeed be inaccurate at ranges over 3,000 meters, Captain, but not my HVSSRs. As its name indicates, my HVSSR rockets attain maximum speeds at engine burnout of either 1,200 meters-per-second for the larger caliber ones or of 1,600 meter-per-second for the smaller, 81 mm and 76 mm caliber rockets, velocities which are actually faster than those of cannon shells and are as fast as tank-fired armor-piercing sabot rounds. They thus have very flat trajectories, which helps tremendously their accuracy at long range. Also, my rockets are spin-stabilized by exhaust vanes in their rocket motors and start spinning inside their launch tubes the moment their rocket engines ignite. By the time they exit their launch tubes, my rockets are already spinning at a high rate, while their engines finish burning just after leaving their tubes. I used for that purpose the best solid propellants available in the American Space launch engines, which burn much faster and much more energetically than the usual propellants used in, say, the 68 mm and 100 mm rockets presently used by the French Air Force. Finally, the warhead sections of my larger rockets, in calibers of either 155 mm, 127 mm, 122 mm or 100 mm, detach automatically from their motor sections once the latter have burned out, then continue on their ballistic trajectories while spinning at a high rate. You will thus find that my rockets are at least as accurate and as fast or faster than the shells fired by automatic cannons, on top of having a much longer effective range. Finally, HVSSR users can choose from a variety of warheads and fuses and can also change quickly the caliber of the rockets carried by their A-24s by switching the type of rocket-launching modules they carry, an operation that can be easily done in the field and which takes less than one hour to do.”

Exclamation again ran through the group of pilots before another question was thrown at Ingrid.

“Can our planes carry and fire your HVSSR rockets, General?”



“Unfortunately for you: no! They necessitate the use of long launch tubes which would not fit easily on your planes. My HVSSR system was specifically designed for the A-24 and for any other plane designed from the start to carry it. However, please note that this HVSSR system is covered by a patent under my name and that France would thus have to pay royalties to Hiller in order to use or adapt my HVSSR rockets to your planes.”

Commandant Pelletier showed some disappointment on hearing that.

“That’s too bad, truly, as your aircraft possesses some truly tremendous firepower, mostly thanks to your HVSSR.”

“Maybe France could buy some A-24s, in order to equip a few squadrons tasked with patrolling your overseas possessions in the Pacific and in the Indian Ocean, Commandant Pelletier.”

“Uh, I would personally like to see that but, in view of our national policies concerning weapons systems acquisitions, I doubt that we will ever see that happen, General. I however agree with you that a few of your A-24s would do a great job if based in, say, Tahiti or the Reunion Islands.”

Ingrid nodded her head once, then pointed at the HVSSR rocket pod module on display on the ground next to her A-24, along with a number of demonstration rockets of various calibers.

“Well, with this said, let me show you in detail what my HVSSR system is all about, gentlemen.”

About one hour later, and after letting a few of the French pilots climb up to the cockpit section, so they could see what the instruments in it looked like, the group left, but not before Jean Vermeil and Pierre Favreau received discrete invitations to visit Ingrid and Shirley at their hotel in the evening. As for Elliot Goulding, who had taken care of the other visitors to their stand, he was visibly satisfied with their day of work.

“Nicely done, girls. Many of the other visitors to our stand listened on to the briefing you gave to those French pilots and were apparently very impressed by what you said. I had in particular a group of Indian government officials who showed a high interest in our A-24 and who even asked me for details on its pricing and delivery times.”

“India would indeed prove to be an important customer for us, Elliot, especially since its usual past provider of aircraft and weapons, Russia, is now mostly out of the advanced aircraft production business, thanks to our strikes after it tried to launch a

surprise nuclear attack against the United States a decade ago. Well, things are looking good for us up to now. I am however impatient to see the open family days next weekend: I love showing off my aircraft to little kids.”

**10:11 (Paris Time)**

**Wednesday, June 18, 2003 ‘C’**

**Hiller exposition stand, Le Bourget Airport**

This third day of the airshow was proving up to now to be as busy and productive as the three preceding days for both Ingrid and Elliot Goulding. Ingrid had been approached by a high-level Air France executive who had asked her if Hiller was planning to eventually design and produce a transonic airliner with the kind of speed and range of the A-24 or better, stating France’s need to shorten the long present flights endured by Air France’s customers when traveling from France to French Polynesia, Australia and the Réunion Islands. The man had been positively fired up with enthusiasm on hearing from Ingrid that she already had such a plane in her projects book, to be called the Hiller TRAN-SONIC. Ingrid had then discussed for a good half-hour with him about the requirements and performances desired by Air France for such a future airliner, with Elliot Goulding attending the discussion and taking copious notes. Both Ingrid and Elliot were thus in a very good mood by the time that Shirley Slade spoke up with a verbal warning.

“Heads up, guys! I see a group of probable V.I.P.s on approach, surrounded by at least a dozen armed French gendarmes.”

That prompted both Ingrid and Elliot in staring at once at the incoming group, with Ingrid soon letting out an exclamation.

“These are not mere V.I.P.s, Shirley: that’s nothing less than French President Jacques Chirac, coming along with his prime minister, his minister of defense and the chief of staff of the French Air Force. Time to straighten ourselves up, guys: some big business may be coming our way.”

“Gee, I hope so!” said Elliot. “To be able to have France as one of our customers for the A-24 would be a true marketing coup for Hiller. Uh, could I ask you to greet them, Ingrid? Your French is so much better than my French.”

“No problem, Elliot.”

Ingrid then quickly combed her hair and zipped up fully the front of her aviator's coverall, which had the ribbons of her impressive collection of military medals pinned to her chest's left side. A forked thong would have told her to do the contrary and show as much of her cleavage as possible, since President Chirac was rumored to have cheated on his wife more than once, but Ingrid was not that kind of girl: only single men...and women, would be targeted by her for some fun. Besides, this would have been totally inappropriate and would have hurt Hiller's reputation, especially since the French minister of defense was a woman. As the French president stopped in front of Ingrid, the gendarmes escorting him immediately established a security perimeter around the Hiller stand, while four presidential bodyguards in suits stayed around Chirac. Ingrid came to quasi military attention and nodded her head in salute while speaking in French to President Chirac.

"Mister President, it is a true honor to receive you at this Hiller exposition stand."

"And it is an honor for me to finally meet such an illustrious person as you, General Dows. I see that you have won in the past the French Légion d'Honneur, along with the Croix de Guerre. You won them during the Second World War, right?"

"Correct, Mister President. I won them in 1944, for planning and leading the major Allied heliborne assault which took the bridges along the Rhine in Southern Germany."

Chirac nodded his head as well, then presented his group.

"May I present you my Prime Minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, my Minister for the French Armed Forces, Michelle Alliot-Marie, and the Chief of Staff of the French Air Force, General Richard Wolsztynski."

Ingrid shook hand in succession with the French dignitaries, then presented to them Elliot Goulding and Shirley Slade, who also shook hands with them. With that done, President Chirac had another question for Ingrid.

"Pardon my next question, General, but how old are you? Right now, I would give you only about nineteen."

"I am now 77 years-old, Mister President. Before you ask, I don't know when or how fast I will physically age during the next years and decades."

"I am sure that my minister of defense, Michelle Alliot-Marie, standing to my left, must be jealous about that." joked Chirac, a smile on his face. "My own wife told me that she is certainly jealous about your ability to stay young."

“Aah, the female wish for eternal youth. If it could interest your wife and Minister Alliot-Marie, my friend Shirley here is now 82 years-old and fought alongside me during World War 2. She was rejuvenated by supernatural means three years ago. But that is most probably not the reason for your visit to our stand, Mister President.”

“Indeed, General Dows. We came to see your Hiller A-24, about which I heard a lot about in the last couple of days. While France didn’t formally have an acquisition program for a very long-range fighter-bomber, it was for the simple reason that no existing aircraft possessed the kind of range we would wish to have to defend and patrol our overseas possessions in the Pacific and in the Indian Ocean. Presently, the combat aircraft we use in those areas have to use a circuitous route with many stops, or a number of successive air refueling operations, in order to deploy from France to our overseas territories, or to redeploy between them. This takes a lot of time, preparation and coordination and is also quite costly, if you count the need to maintain a fleet of air tankers. Even once deployed, our present MIRAGE and SUPER ÉTENDARD need to fly around with drop tanks in order to be able to cover a wide-enough area. Now, we have your A-24, which you designed specifically for the Pacific Theatre, and which promises to fill our needs nicely. However, I will let General Wolszynski and Minister Alliot-Marie elaborate more on that subject. First, would you be kind enough to give us a tour of your aircraft, General?”

“With pleasure, Mister President.” replied Ingrid, smiling. “Let’s start by showing you the specifications and capabilities of my aircraft, then I will explain in detail its main features and systems. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.”

With the gendarmes protecting President Chirac politely keeping other visitors away from the Hiller stand while he was there, Ingrid was able to concentrate on him and his ministerial team and took a good twenty minutes to guide them around the A-24. At the end of the guided tour, Ingrid and Elliot Goulding sat down with President Chirac and his group to discuss business about the possible acquisition by France of a number of A-24s, with Goulding now the center of attention for the French. To Goulding joy, that discussion concluded with the French taking a buying option for an initial fifty A-24s and for the license production in France of Ingrid’s HVSSR system and rockets, to be produced solely for French needs. As President Chirac was getting up to leave, Ingrid quickly asked him a question not related to the A-24.

“Mister President, you must have heard about the assassination attempt against me and my friend Shirley on last Saturday morning. Could you tell me what your Gendarmerie has found to date about those would-be assassins?”

“Since my minister of defense was briefed in detail about that incident, I will let her answer your question, General.”

In turn, Michelle Alliot-Marie thought for a second before speaking, probably to decide what she could say to Ingrid about that ongoing crime investigation.

“While the GIGN is still working on that investigation, what I can tell you is that the four men shot by our officers were all Pakistani citizens, two of whom actually worked at the Pakistani embassy in Paris. A series of searches of their residences uncovered a number of illegal weapons and explosives, along with documents linking them to the Pakistani ISI intelligence services. As a result of all this, the Pakistani ambassador was called in and given a stern rebuke and warning, while a number of Pakistani diplomatic attachés were expelled as ‘persona non grata’. Unfortunately, our security services can’t vouch that other potential assassins are not still at large, so I would urge you to be extra cautious during the rest of your stay in Paris. If this could reassure you, the GIGN has posted a few undercover agents around your hotel to provide you with protection and they will stay on duty until your departure from France.”

“It does reassure me quite a lot, Madam Minister. I saw your GIGN officers in action and they proved themselves to be very competent and professional.”

“Thank you for your compliment to our officers, General, and for guiding us around your impressive new aircraft.”

The French dignitaries then left after a last exchange of handshakes. Elliot Goulding had a huge smile on his lips as he watched them walk away with their escort.

“Now, this is what I call a good, productive day. I believe that I will have to tell Jeff Hiller to speed up the construction of that new aircraft production line for your A-24 in Palo Alto. By the way, when do you expect it to be officially certified as good for production, Ingrid?”

“Since all the test flights to date have gone without a hitch, I expect the FAA to certify the A-24 within at most five more months, so you can tell Jeff that this new production line will be needed soon indeed.”

“I will! In fact, I’m going to call him right now, to give him the latest good news. You certainly have the Midas touch, Ingrid. Since you started working for Hiller, our

corporation's business has grown exponentially, to the point where we are hard-pressed to build our planes fast enough to satisfy our customers."

"Well, I in turn have to thank Hiller for giving me a chance to continue living my aviation dream. This is the best job I could have hoped for after retiring from military service."

"Yeah!" said Elliot, his smile partly fading. "Let's hope that some new war will not prompt the President to recall you to military service...again!"

**09:49 (Paris Time)**

**Friday, June 20, 2003 'C'**

**Hiller exposition stand, Le Bourget Airport**

Ingrid was having a great time as she was answering the questions from a large group of small children from a primary school excursion trip visiting the airshow. She always had loved children and those preteens, who had come with their teachers and a few parents, reminded her of the times when she was raising her own daughter, Nancy. She was listening to a question from a cute nine-year-old girl when she telepathically felt intense hatred directed at her. Snapping her head up, she saw a man of possibly Middle-Eastern origin who was approaching the Hiller stand at a rapid pace, his eyes drilled on her. The man wore a loose-fitting windbreaker completely zipped up despite the fairly high temperature of the day. She understood at once what that man wanted to do and felt rage towards him: he wanted to blow himself up and kill her, along with the over twenty young children surrounding her. Her suspicions were confirmed when the man took out of one pocket of his windbreaker a sort of handle with trigger, raising it high while starting to shout out loud.

**"ALLAH..."**

Transported with fury, Ingrid reacted immediately, with her sole goal being to save those children from being slaughtered by the suicide vest probably carried by this fanatic. Her rage and despair multiplied the strength of her supernatural powers as she pointed a hand at the man and concentrated her telekinetic powers on him, shouting out her anger at the same time. Before he could finish his short sentence, the man was catapulted into the air, as if a giant, invisible hand from the sky would have pulled him up by his collar. Before he could understand what was happening to him, he was already at an altitude of

over 150 meters and was also being pushed away from the Hiller stand at a rapidly increasing speed. Overtaken by panic, the man did the only thing left that he could do: he pressed the trigger of his explosive vest. However, when the seven kilos of plastic explosives, wrapped with old nails and ball bearings, detonated, he was already at an altitude of 200 meters and at a distance of 150 meters relative to the Hiller stand. Thus, apart from blowing the suicide-bomber to bits, the explosion proved nearly harmless to the people on the ground, which only received a dispersed rain of low-velocity metal fragments. Another effect of all this, something that Ingrid had never experienced before, was the fact that a glowing white halo enveloped her as she projected all of her energy into her telekinetic effort to save the children around her. That halo persisted long enough after the death of the suicide-bomber to permit a couple of the teachers and parents accompanying the children to film her as she was still glowing, looking up while trying to calm herself down. When she regained full control of herself, she belatedly realized that the people around her, including the children and the two French gendarmes who had been posted nearby, were staring at her with disbelief.

“Aw shit! More circus to come after this.”

Her mind then returned to the children she had protected and, crouching down, gently hugged the little girl who had been asking her a question.

“Don’t be afraid, young girl: you are now safe, you and your comrades.”

Straightening back up, she looked around her at the people staring at her and spoke up in a loud but calm voice.

“Please do not be afraid of me: I only did what was needed to save you all from that suicide-bomber.”

She next turned to face an equally flabbergasted Elliot Goulding.

“I guess that I will now need to go make a statement with the gendarmerie about this incident, Elliot. Could you and Shirley please continue here while I’m away?”

“Uh, of course, Ingrid.”

Feeling tired from the explosive energy drain caused by her desperate telekinetic effort, Ingrid walked to the nearest gendarme and nodded her head at him.

“I believe that I will need to fill a statement about this incident, Officer.”

“Uh, I believe so as well, General. Please follow me.”

**10:58 (Paris Time)**

**Security offices of the Le Bourget Airport**

"If you will please sign your declaration here, General, plus write the date there." Ingrid did so, then handed the form to the captain of the Gendarmerie Nationale who had been interviewing her. The man read quickly her statement, then gently smiled to her.

"This looks quite satisfactory to me, General. You may now return to the Hiller exposition stand if you wish so."

"I don't know, Captain: I am liable to find an army of reporters, press photographers and paparazzi waiting for me there. Have your officers found anything about that suicide-bomber who blew himself up? I know that he was reduced to shreds but maybe some papers on him survived the blast."

"My officers indeed combed the scene in a large area but they found nothing except for pieces of scrap metal and human remains. The man's head was blown to bits, thus it made it impossible to see what he looked like while alive."

"Damn! I hope that this failure for them will discourage for good those who sent that man from trying anything else against me. This incident is liable to create a full-blown media circus around me."

The gendarmerie officer briefly looked up at a television screen positioned high in a corner of the reception room and made a sour smirk.

"Too late for that, General. MERCIER, RAISE THE VOLUME ON THAT TELEVISION SET, PLEASE."

Turning her chair around, Ingrid then saw that the television set had just started showing the hourly news program of the main French channel, TF1. On it, a young and pretty newscaster was shown sitting behind her news desk, while half of the screen was occupied by a still picture showing a glowing Ingrid still looking up while pointing her right arm. The picture had apparently been taken by someone's cell phone camera and also showed a few of the children who had been near Ingrid at the time.

"...This dramatic and fantastic picture shows the famous retired American general and fighter pilot, Ingrid Dows, just after she had catapulted high in the air, probably using one of her supernatural powers, a suicide-bomber before he could explode his bomb near her and the group of children visiting the Hiller stand at the time. Thankfully, nobody was hurt by the explosion or by the shrapnel which flew around. As for the suicide-bomber, he was reduced to small bits by the explosion of his suicide vest. One witness to the incident reported that, before he was projected upward by some kind of invisible hand, the suicide bomber had started to shout 'ALLAH' but never got to finish



his sentence, which was probably 'Allah U Akbar', meaning 'God is great', the usual ultimate shout from Islamic fanatics conducting a suicide attack. As of this hour, General Dows is still at the security offices of the Le Bourget Airport, where she is said to be filing a statement on this incident. In the meantime, the gendarmerie is still searching the airport for possible accomplices to this suicide bomber..."

Ingrid sighed in discouragement as the newscaster continued her reporting.

"I'm going to again be a circus animal after this. Damn!"

"You only did the right thing, General, and saved dozens of lives by your actions, however fantastic they were." said gently the gendarmerie officer facing her. "Nobody could blame you for anything in all this."

"Maybe, but I still have a job to do here and I won't be able to do it if I am constantly besieged by an army of reporters and paparazzi. I suppose that you can't stop them from harassing me at my stand or at my hotel."

"I effectively can't: liberty of the press, as they say. If I may make a suggestion, giving a formal press conference here may buy you at least some peace afterwards."

"Yeah!" replied Ingrid, not too convinced. "And I wanted so much to be able to enjoy Paris during this stay. Alright, could you arrange for a select group from the media to come in for a press conference given by me, Captain?"

"I will be happy to help you with that, General." answered the gendarmerie officer. "Give me a couple of minutes and I will take care of it."

Ingrid then waited patiently for a few minutes while watching the TF1 newscast on the room's television set, imitated by the three gendarmes present. The gendarmerie captain finally reappeared and signaled Ingrid to follow him. Doing so, Ingrid ended up in what had to be a press conference room, complete with a lectern with microphone, a giant flat screen television and rows of chairs. Sitting in the chairs facing the lectern were a good twenty men and women who were obviously reporters or press photographers. Thankfully, there were none of the paparazzi which Ingrid loathed in that lot. The gendarmerie officer went to the lectern first and powered on its microphone before speaking to the reporters.

"Thank you for your patience, ladies and gentlemen. Before General Dows will speak, I will urge you to show both restraint and respect towards her and to not turn this into a circus. I will designate the reporters who will be allowed to ask questions. General..."

With the gendarmerie officer stepping aside to free the lectern, Ingrid walked to a position behind it and adjusted the height of its microphone before speaking, as numerous camera flashes exploded from the crowd of reporters.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the Press, I will first make a short statement, then you will be able to ask questions. What happened less than an hour ago at the Hiller exposition stand was a despicable attempt by a religious fanatic at killing me while showing utter disregard for the lives of dozens of young children who were visiting the Hiller stand at that time. Personally, I believe that those who are ready to worship a god who would supposedly encourage or reward such a despicable act should seriously reconsider their notions of what is right and what is wrong. Those I call good Muslims do not condone such suicide attacks against unarmed, innocent children and will state so and oppose fanatics like the one who tried to kill me today. As for my demonstration of supernatural powers, you frankly should not be surprised by it, ladies and gentlemen. I have publicly announced my nature as a Chosen of The One decades ago, along with the fact that I hold supernatural powers from The One and that I can remember my past incarnations, which cover over 7,000 years of history. I have also been known for over fifty years as ‘God’s General’, a rather misleading nickname in my opinion. I don’t fight in wars in the name of any god, but simply to defend the United States, its people, its allies and the innocents being abused or killed by dictators, criminals and fanatics. I serve The One, the powerful spiritual entity from which I received my powers sixty years ago, by simply promoting good and helping this World to become more peaceful and kinder. The One is not the so-called ‘God’ of the Bible or of the Koran and he didn’t create our Earth or the Universe: he was simply created along with the Universe. He also doesn’t want to be prayed to or worshipped and neither is he asking for financial donations from believers, contrary to the prophets and preachers claiming to represent the ‘gods’ of the various religions practiced around this planet. He simply wishes to see Humanity better itself with time. I say ‘he’ to describe The One only as a matter of simplifying my choice of words, as The One has no sex and is an entity made of pure spiritual energy. You can contrast that with those religions which preach that men are superior in status to women, just because of their sex. We are all equal at birth and I have always acted accordingly. With that said, you may now ask your questions.”

The room exploded at once with shouted questions, forcing the gendarmerie captain to point at one reporter.

“The gentleman from AFP has the floor. Go ahead, sir.”

"Thank you, sir. General Dows, what kind of power did you use to propel that suicide-bomber high in the air?"

"I used telekinesis. It was the quickest and safest way to put the children present at the Hiller stand out of harm's way. I however must recognize that the emergency of the situation and the gravity of the danger faced by all around the Hiller stand injected in me an intensity in my power that I have not experienced before, a bit like adrenaline will increase your strength, speed and endurance when faced with a mortal threat. Next question!"

"Mary Hopkins, BBC! There was already another assassination attempt against you six days ago, as you were walking out of your hotel in the morning. Aren't you afraid that more attempts may be made against your life after this, General?"

"Only a fool would dismiss such a possibility, miss. However, I am more worried about the lives of the innocents around me than about myself. As for the ones who would want to hurt me, I have a warning: I am ready to unleash all of my powers to counter their attacks and I will show no pity towards cowards who would be ready to endanger the innocents around me. What you saw today is only a small part of the powers I hold, but don't ask me what my other powers are: I will keep them as a surprise for the bastards who sent that suicide-bomber. Nex question!"

"John Renquist, ABC News! Wouldn't it be both simpler and safer for you and others around you to leave France now and return to the USA, General?"

Ingrid glared for a second at the American reporter before answering him.

"That would be the cowardly way out, mister, and it wouldn't really ensure my safety anyway. I was attacked a number of times in the past while in the United States, including two times when my house was riddled with bullets by criminals. Did the United States cower from the Japanese after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941? No! We fought back and eventually won the war. I came to Paris to show my newest aircraft to the World and I will do just that this afternoon, when I will make a demonstration flight of my A-24 SHARK at Le Bourget Airport at two o'clock."

Ingrid answered seven more questions after that one before calling an end to the press conference. She was then escorted out by four gendarmes and returned to the Hiller stand, leaving behind a crowd of half-satisfied reporters still shouting questions at her. Once she was out of the room, those reporters then ran out themselves, in order to call their editors and place their reports online.

**14:07 (Paris Time)**

**Cockpit of the Hiller A-24 SHARK**

**Rolling towards Runway 03/21 of Le Bourget Airport**

Ingrid did her best to forget about the morning incident with the suicide-bomber and to concentrate on her present task as a demonstration pilot for her A-24 as she taxied towards **Runway 03/21**, the second longest one in Le Bourget with a length of 2,665 meters and also the one nearest to the spectators of the airshow



presently watching her roll along a taxiway. Stopping briefly at the junction of the taxiway and of Runway 03/21, she took a few seconds to obtain from the control tower the latest meteorological and barometric pressure data, as well as the permission to roll on the runway. Once authorized to do so, she turned right on the wide concrete runway and stopped again, now aligned with the centerline. Ingrid did a last check of her instruments, then took a deep breath of oxygen from her mask.

“Time to show them that you know how to pilot an aircraft, old girl.”

With both of her feet firmly pressing on the brake pedals, Ingrid then gradually pushed forward the double throttles of her engines, making them scream in a thunderous avalanche of decibels and making her A-24 vibrate like a restrained bull. Then, once at maximum power, she released her brakes, with the forward acceleration that followed pushing her back in her seat.

In the squadron readiness room of the 3/30 Squadron ‘Lorraine’, in the French airbase at Mont-de-Marsan, near Bordeaux, nearly twenty fighter pilots were avidly watching the video of her takeoff on the television set hooked to a wall, impatient to see what her A-24 was truly capable of and commenting between themselves.

“There she goes! Hell, that’s an incredibly fast acceleration on takeoff.”

“SHE’S ALREADY ROTATING HER NOSE UP AFTER BARELY 200 METERS OF ROLLING. THAT’S INCREDIBLE!”

“She barely left the ground and is already pointing her aircraft to the near vertical... MERDE<sup>8</sup>, SHE’S NEARLY IMMOBILE IN THE AIR. SHE’S GOING TO STALL AND CRASH!”

“WAIT! SHE’S NOW ACCELERATING AT THE ABSOLUTE VERTICAL AND SEEMS TO BE IN FULL CONTROL OF HER AIRCRAFT. THAT AIRCRAFT OF HERS IS SIMPLY INCREDIBLE!”

The French fighter pilots watched on, their eyes glued to the television set, as Ingrid’s plane rocketed up through the sparse clouds hovering over Paris.

“Did you see that vertical acceleration? She must have climbed at an acceleration of about half a G<sup>9</sup>.”

“She’s now performing a large looping and is now on her back... Now entering a steep dive back towards the airport. Her aircraft is now spinning like crazy: I hope that this is intentional and not a loss of control.”

“She’s in control, Jean: I can tell by how her aircraft is moving. She is now in a tight corkscrew dive. Damn, she must be enduring at least six or seven Gs of continuous turns while doing this. That’s one tough girl.”

“She’s now out of her dive and heading straight down the runway at low altitude... SHE JUST ROLLED ON HER BACK AND IS FLYING LOW AND SLOW LESS THAN FIFTY METERS ABOVE THE RUNWAY. THAT’S NEARLY SUICIDE!”

“Not for her, Régean: she’s the best and has been proving it for over fifty years.” replied their squadron leader, his expression most serious.

When the video showing her airshow performance was broadcasted a few hours later on the American West Coast, Jeffrey Hiller yelled in triumph as he watched Ingrid land back after some ten minutes of amazing flying.

“YES! WAY TO GO, INGRID!”

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<sup>8</sup> Merde: ‘Shit’ in French. Very popular exclamation in France.

<sup>9</sup> G: Unit used to express acceleration in relation to Earth’s gravity. Our planet’s gravity is worth one G, or nearly ten meters per second square. An acceleration of 0.5 G means that you are picking up speed at a rate of nearly five meters per second every second.

In the pilots' lounge of the Marine Corps' El Toro Air Station, where dozens of marine aviators had been watching the broadcast showing Ingrid's air performance at Le Bourget, their wing commander turned down the volume of the television set they had been looking at and looked at his pilots with a stern expression.

"Alright guys: if any of you try to replicate her stunts, I will kill you...if you survive your flight."

## **CHAPTER 6 – A CRUCIAL DECISION**

**16:30 (Seattle Time)**

**Tuesday, June 24, 2003 'C'**

**1402 South McDonald Street, West End District**

**Port Angeles, State of Washington, U.S.A.**



**Ingrid** was tired but happy when she arrived at her house, situated on the southern coast of the Juan de Fuca Strait. Apart from the two assassination attempts against her in Paris, the participation to the Le Bourget Airshow had been a huge success for the Hiller Aircraft Corporation and for her new A-24, a success which had translated into a mana of new aircraft orders and contracts for Hiller. Personally, the airshow had reaffirmed her as being one of the top aviators of her time, as well as being recognized as being in a class of her own in terms of aircraft design work. Now, having returned from France only a couple hours ago, she had only one wish: to have a good meal and then have a good night's rest.

Her happiness at returning to her home was however doused as she turned her car into her driveway, when she saw light inside her lounge. She was quite certain that she had closed all of her lights before leaving for France. On the other hand, she doubted that a thief would be dumb enough to leave the lights on after burglarizing her home. Still, she pulled out from its ankle holster her compact 9 mm GLOCK pistol as soon as she had parked her car inside her garage and took its safety off before going to the side entrance door linking the garage to her house proper. Deciding to take out her suitcases only after checking out her house, Ingrid unlocked the side door and cautiously entered the staircase well and vestibule beyond it, her pistol at the ready. She froze for a moment, then swore at herself then: she had not checked the door for possible boobytraps before opening it. With Muslim fanatics and suicide-bombers being after her, the presence of a hidden bomb inside her house was a real possibility, with her ten days of absence from Port Angeles giving plenty of opportunities for an assassin to enter her house and place a bomb. Resolved to be more cautious from now on, Ingrid slowly

climbed the short set of stairs that led to her kitchen. That was when a voice she knew well called her out from inside the house.

“YOU CAN RELAX, MOM: IT’S ME! I’M IN THE LOUNGE, WITH MICHAEL.”

Reassured by that, Ingrid put back on the safety on her pistol, then holstered it back before climbing the last few stairs and going through her kitchen. As soon as she entered the lounge, a smiling Nancy came to hug and kiss her, with Ingrid happily returning the favor. Archangel Michael, as impossibly handsome as ever, was next to hug and kiss Ingrid. The latter however couldn’t help look at him questioningly.

“Michael, I am happy to see you again but when you show up, something important or grave is happening or about to happen. To what do I owe your visit this time?”

“Partly to your trip to France and to the two attempts by Muslim fanatics at killing you there, Ingrid. But let’s sit down first, so that we could discuss quietly.”

“With pleasure, Michael.”

The trio moved to the two sofas of the lounge, set in a ‘L’ shape facing the television set, with Nancy taking one sofa and Ingrid and Michael taking the other sofa. However, instead of sitting next to Michael, Ingrid sat in his lap and wrapped one arm around him while smiling maliciously, attracting an amused smile on the archangel’s lips.

“I see that you really missed me, Ingrid.”

“Oh yes, I did, Michael. So, why did you come to visit me at my house, with our daughter in tow?”

“Well, as you saw in Paris, you still have plenty of enemies of all ilk, be they religious extremists, hostile governments or plain criminals, all of whom want you dead. While you were saved from the first assassination attempt in Paris by the quick and efficient reaction of the French police, you only barely survived the second attempt. In fact, you only survived it because The One then lent you a hand by temporarily multiplying the strength of your powers. If not for that, your normal telekinesis power level would have only pushed away that suicide-bomber by a few meters, not enough to save you or the children surrounding you then.”

Ingrid soberly nodded her head once at that.

“I thought so, Michael. I thus must thank The One for that providential assistance: many innocent lives were saved then by his assistance.”



"And saving all those children was his best reward, on top of saving you, Ingrid. But, to return to the reason of my coming here today: I came to present you an offer from The One, an offer that would make you able to counter much better those would-be assassins and to also help more efficiently those around you."

Ingrid, guessing what that 'offer' could be about, looked soberly into the eyes of the archangel.

"If it is to offer me more powers, then I must refuse, although I appreciate greatly that offer."

"Actually, The One was ready to transform you into what our daughter is: a half-Human, half-Celestial being who could live forever and help others via enhanced powers, including that of mass healing. Do you really want to forego that, Ingrid?"

"Yes, I do, Michael, and here are the reasons why. While I have been staying young physically for all those decades, I have been watching my friends around me grow old, get sick and die. Most of the brave women who fought with me in the Pacific during World War 2 and during the First Korean War are now either dead or about to die from old age. My own first adopted child, Hien, is now 56 years-old and her son is already looking distinctly older than me. The two other children I adopted, Leonardo and Lucy, are now both 26 years-old and will probably soon form families of their own. I don't want to see all the ones I love die one after the others along the coming years while I stay young and powerful. To watch them wither and die would be too painful to me, Michael. If anything, I wish to be able to start aging again at a normal, human rate."

Those words brought tears on Nancy's face.

"But that means that I will lose you in the coming decades, Mom."

Ingrid, deeply moved, looked at her and replied in a soft voice.

"All the daughters and sons in this World eventually have to watch their mothers die, Nancy. That is called 'life' and it has happened to billions of Humans along the past millenniums. While I would like to be able to continue helping the others around me, I wish to finally be able to follow the same life and death cycle as that of my fellow Humans. I truly hope that my request will not disappoint The One and that he will grant it to me."

Michael stared into her eyes for a moment before nodding his head.

"He fully understands your reasons for your request and accepts them, Ingrid. While you will keep the powers you presently have, so that you could both defend yourself and help others around you, your immortality and ability to rejuvenate yourself

and others are gone as of now. From now on, your body will age at the normal human rate and you will one day look like the grandmother you already are.”

With a crying Nancy watching on, Ingrid tenderly kissed Michael on his lips while tightly hugging him.

“Thank you, Michael, and thank you to The One for granting me my wish. I do have another wish, though, and this one is to you directly.”

Ingrid then whispered into Michael’s ear, making him grin in amusement.

“I should have known! Nancy, if you could return to Washington D.C. now, I would like to be alone with Ingrid tonight.”

Wiping out her tears first, Nancy then got up and looked down at both Ingrid and Michael, still sitting on their sofa.

“I will leave now, Mom. Have a good night.”

“With Michael with me, it will definitely be a good night for me, Nancy. Say hello to Lucy and Leonardo on my part. You may also tell them about my decision.”

“I will, Mom.” replied Nancy before vanishing from where we stood. Now alone with Michael, Ingrid gave him a malicious smile.

“I hope that you are still as skillful as before in bed, my lovely Michael.”

“Do not worry about that, my perverted Ingrid. As they say here, I will fuck your brains out...as many times as you wish.”

## **CHAPTER 7 – REASONS TO CELEBRATE**



**A fighter aircraft assembly line.**

**16:01 (California Time)**

**Thursday, November 20, 2003 ‘C’**

**A-24 production line, Hiller aircraft plant**

**Palo Alto, California, U.S.A.**

The Hiller technicians surrounding Jeff Hiller, Ingrid and Major General Jesus Alba cheered in unison when their CEO and boss popped up the cork of a Champagne bottle in front of the first Hiller A-24 SHARK completed in the company’s newest aircraft assembly line. With Ingrid helping by popping open more bottles of Champagne, Jeff Hiller then started filling in succession the plastic cups held at the ready by his happy employees. Once everybody had a full cup, Jeff raised his own cup high and spoke out loud.

“Let’s drink to this first series production Hiller A-24 SHARK completed at this assembly line. TO THE SHARK!”

**“TO THE SHARK!”**

They then all drank a sip of Champagne while standing in front of the first series-built A-24, which had already been painted in the colors of the Filipino Air Force, the intended recipient of that particular aircraft. After taking his sip of wine, Major General Alba looked proudly at the big fighter-bomber bearing the insignias of his country’s air force.

"I can't wait to see this magnificent bird fly in the sky of the Philippines. This is a great day indeed for my country and a day it owes to you, Ingrid. You started your career as a fighter pilot in the Philippines 61 years ago, defending my country against the Japanese. Now, you gave us an aircraft which will help my country defend its airspace and maritime territory. You would truly deserve to have a statue of you erected in Manila."

"Not before I am dead, Jesus, and I am not dead yet." replied Ingrid, making both Alba and Jeff Hiller grin. "I will be available to coach your two designated pilots for this aircraft for a few more days before they will fly it to the Philippines. Me and Shirley will be flying in the prototype and will escort your new plane across the Pacific. I will repeat that procedure for each of the 54 A-24s which will be delivered to the Philippines. My A-24 may have proved to be a very dependable aircraft but, as they say, shit can happen."

"A wise precaution, Ingrid." said Alba approvingly. "I must say that my pilots and aircraft maintenance technicians are all most happy with the way you have been training them at your new SHARK School in Port Angeles. They also had only compliments to say about how they were received there by the local people."

Ingrid nodded her head at that.

"And I am proud of the people of Port Angeles. They are truly good people."

"You have received the first batch of Australians, French, Indonesians, New Zealanders and Vietnamese pilots and technicians to be trained on the A-24, right?" asked Jeff Hiller, making Ingrid nod again.

"They arrived last week, Jeff. To be frank, the businesses, hotels and restaurants around Port Angeles are not complaining one bit about that new influx of foreign tourists. Our plant and, especially, our new pilots conversion school in Port Angeles, are now proving to be a major boost to the local economy. That actually gave me an idea about eventually starting a small, specialized airline linking Port Angeles and Seattle with the countries of Southeast Asia, once my future Hiller TRAN-SONIC will be built. Think about this: the Hiller Trans-Pacific Airline."

"Sounds very nice to me, Ingrid." said Jeff Hiller, smiling. "If your future transonic airliner program proves to be a success, then we will be producing the only supersonic airliner in service in the World. Mind you, with the vastness of the Pacific Ocean, the actual subsonic airliners make any trans-Pacific air travel a very long, nearly

painful experience, so any supersonic airliner can only be welcomed by American travelers.”

“Didn’t the United States already have a supersonic airliner, the Northrop VC-5000?” asked General Alba.

“We did!” answered Ingrid. “It was a commercial variant of our B-50 heavy supersonic bomber and first flew in 1953 with Pan Am, but it was uneconomical to use as a commercial airliner and was more a prestige aircraft than anything else. The last VC-5000 was retired from commercial service in the 1990s, after the big OPEC oil embargo made it too expensive to continue to operate. Unfortunately for the would-be American travelers wanting to cross the Pacific, the loss of Hawaii to that North Korean thermonuclear bomb which exploded in Honolulu Harbor in 1975, by irremediably making the whole of Hawaii uninhabitable, took away a precious transit point for us in the Pacific. As a result, if you want to, say, fly from Los Angeles to Tokyo, Manila or to Sydney, in Australia, that means over twelve hours or more of non-stop flying in airliners which are too often what I would characterize as ‘cattle transports’. In contrast, I intend to make my future TRAN–SONIC the most comfortable airliner in service, on top of being the only supersonic one, all the while it being a commercially viable aircraft.”

“And how do you intend to achieve that, Ingrid? That sounds nearly impossible as a goal.”

“How? By thinking outside of the box, General, as I usually do. I am still debating about which design formula would be the best and am hoping to get some answers from a series of incoming wind tunnel tests, but I am confident that I will win that bet.”

“Well, whatever you decide to try, know that I am ready to invest heavily in that project, Ingrid.” said Jeff Hiller. “With the sales of our PELICAN and SKYTRUCK VTOL transports still booming and with a sizeable number of firm sales and buying options already in my books for the A-24, our company can afford to take some risk in order to build something new and out of the ordinary...again, all thanks to you. I say, go for broke!”

Ingrid grinned, most happy at hearing that.

“Thank you for your confidence in me, Jeff. I promise you that you will not be disappointed.”

Ingrid was then tempted to reveal something to Jeff but decided against it, since it could impact her personal safety if that information broke out in the open now. There was still

plenty of time for her before Jeff and the others around her would be able to figure out by themselves what she was hiding from the rest of the World.

**08:10 (Seattle Time)**

**Saturday, March 20, 2004 'C'**

**Main entrance to the Olympic Memorial Hospital**

**939 Caroline Street, Port Angeles**



Alicia Barnett, who was manning with another woman the reception desk at the main entrance of the Olympic Memorial Hospital, knew at once why the young woman escorted by another young woman was walking in the hospital. For one, she was obviously heavily pregnant and about to give birth. Also, Alicia had seen her come many times to the hospital during the last few months, as one of the physicians was following her pregnancy. As well, about everyone in Port Angeles who didn't live under a rock could visually recognize the most famous **Ingrid Dows**, thanks to her being known to be holding a number of supernatural powers and also thanks to her various exploits and achievements as a pilot and as an aircraft designer. As for the young woman escorting her, she was also widely known, but as a top list singer and musician whose hits were regularly at the top of the musical charts. Nancy Dows was probably as famous, if not more, than her mother.



To have her escort and support her mother in today was only to be expected. Alicia thus hurried to bring a wheelchair to Ingrid, who smiled to Alicia and sat in it.

"Thank you, miss! While my waters have not broken yet, I have started feeling the first labor contractions in the middle of the night."

"We will take care of you right away, Miss Dows. Your physician is Doctor Emerson, right?"

"Correct, miss."

"Then, I will advise him right away. I will also get a nurse to bring you to the natality section."

"No need, miss: I know where it is." said Nancy. "I will bring my mother there."

"That's alright with me, miss. You may go ahead while I call Doctor Emerson."

As Nancy pushed her mother's wheelchair towards the bank of elevators of the reception area, Alicia returned behind her reception counter and picked up the receiver of her telephone to call Doctor Ronald Emerson and advise him that his patient was in. She had just finished doing that call and was putting down her receiver when she noticed that her partner receptionist, a much more junior employee than her, was on her own telephone and speaking in a low, conspiratorial voice while turning her back to Alicia.

"Hello, Mike? This is Lizie! Guess who just walked into the hospital, ready to give birth: it is none other than... Hello?"

Having just lost her line, the puzzled Lizie looked up, only to face a visibly displeased Alicia, who then spoke to her in a glacial tone.

"I won't report your attempt at informing someone else about what is supposed to stay private medical information, Lizie, but if I see a bunch of reporters show up here in the next twelve hours, then I will report you to our director and you will then lose your job. Do you understand me?"

"But I was just..."

"DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME, LIZIE?"

"Uh, yes, I understand." replied the junior receptionist after swallowing the lump that had just formed in her throat.

"Good!" said Alicia before concentrating her attention on an approaching visitor who had just passed the entrance door of the hospital.

Some fifty minutes later, a tall and extremely handsome man entered the reception area and walked to the counter, stopping in front of Alicia Barnett and smiling to her, making her nearly melt.

"Good morning, miss! I would like to see Ingrid Dows: I was advised that she had been admitted to this hospital and is expecting her baby any time now."

"Are you a member of her family, sir?"

"I am the father of the baby, miss. My name is Michael Goodkind. Can I go see her?"

"Uh, one moment, sir: I must first advise her doctor and Miss Dows and see if they will agree to your visit. Just a minute, please."

Grabbing her telephone again, Alicia called the maternity section, getting a nurse there to answer her.

"Maternity Section, Nurse Vernon speaking."

"Hello, this is Alicia, at the front reception counter. A man is here to see Miss Dows. His name is Michael Goodkind and he says that he is the father of the baby carried by Miss Dows."

"One moment, I will go speak with Doctor Emerson and with Miss Dows."

Alicia patiently waited for the three minutes it took for the nurse to return to her telephone.

"Both Doctor Emerson and Miss Dows agree to let this man come to the maternity section. Do you have a hospital security guard handy to escort that Mister Goodkind up?"

"I have! I will have him escorted up at once."

Alicia then put down her receiver and signaled to one of the two private security guards present in the reception area to approach, then smiled to her visitor.

"You may now go up to the natality section, sir. This guard will guide you to it."

"Thank you, miss: you are very helpful."

Following closely behind the security guard, Michael ended up in one of the private rooms of the maternity section, where he found Ingrid lying in bed and being examined by a doctor, while a sitting Nancy was looking on. As soon as he entered the room, Nancy got up and quickly went to Michael to hug him happily.

"Thank you for coming quickly, Father."

"I couldn't miss such a joyous event, couldn't I?"



"Of course, you couldn't, Father."

Michael then smiled at Ingrid.

"So, how is the pregnancy going, Ingrid? How long before you give birth?"

"Doctor Emerson, here, says that the baby should come out within a couple of hours. Everything is fine up to now, although I am quite tired. Do you mind if I keep the sex of the baby to myself until its birth?"

Michael smiled at that: he already knew what was the sex of the baby, thanks to his celestial powers, but decided to play the game in order to please Ingrid.

"I don't mind: boy or girl, it will be a beautiful baby either way."

He next looked at Doctor Emerson, who had just finished his examination.

"Do you allow family members to be present in the delivery room at the time of birth, Doctor?"

"Yes, mister, as long as you and your daughter wash your hands and put on surgical garb."

"Excellent! I didn't want to miss that moment." said Michael, who then moved one of the two chairs available in the room to a position next to the bed's head and sat in it. As Nancy imitated him, placing the other chair next to his, on the same side of the bed, Michael gently took hold of Ingrid's right hand and spoke softly to her.

"Our baby will be a wonderful one, Ingrid."

"I have no doubts about that, Michael. Nancy was also a wonderful child and she has grown into such an exceptional person."

"Have you decided on a name for our baby, Ingrid?"

"Yes! If it is a boy, I will name him 'Michael', in your honor. If it is a girl, I will name her 'Sarah', the Hebrew variant of the name my late adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante, had in her incarnation as the wife of the patriarch Abraham, Saraï of Ur."

"What about the family name of our baby? Normally, by American tradition, it would be named 'Goodkind', the family name of its father, me."

"That is normally true, but I can insist on our baby using the name 'Dows' instead. After all, I am still officially Jewish, even though I am non-practicing, and Jewish descent comes from the mother's side. It could also have a compound family name: Goodkind-Dows. What do you think?"

Michael was most serious when he answered Ingrid.

"My name is a made-up one and I don't want our baby to bear a fake name, Ingrid. I would rather see it be named 'Dows', after you."

"Agreed! Then, it will be either 'Michael Dows' or 'Sarah Dows'."

"Those names are fine ones, Mother, and I will be proud to be the big sister of your baby."

"Even when it will be time to change its diaper, Nancy?" asked Ingrid, a malicious smile on her lips.

"Even then, Mother."

The three of them continued to converse together, mostly about anodyne matters, until Ingrid's contractions became continuous, prompting Doctor Emerson in moving her urgently to a delivery room of the maternity section, closely followed by Michael and Nancy. The two latter ones did wash their hands and put on surgical garbs and masks before entering the delivery room and taking positions along a wall, out of the way of the medical staff. Unbeknown to the doctor and nurses, Michael used his telepathic powers to reach the unborn baby's mind and soothe it, something which soon resulted in a problem-free delivery some twenty minutes later. Doctor Emerson then made a happy announcement after gently taking hold of the newborn.

"It's a boy! How would you like to name him, Miss Dows?"

"I will name him 'Michael', to honor his father."

"Then, you may hold little Michael while I cut his umbilical chord." replied Emerson, who had a nurse quickly clean up the wailing baby before she handed him to Ingrid. The latter smiled to her newborn son and kissed him on his forehead.

"You are so beautiful, little Michael. I love you!"

"He appears to be in good health, Miss Dows. Once we will have weighed him, we will wheel both of you back to your room, where you will be able to hold him while resting. The way the delivery went, and if there are no complications in the next few hours, you should then be able to leave this hospital in a day or two. Your husband and daughter are of course welcome to stay and help you here in the meantime."

"And we will be most happy to do so, Doctor." replied Michael, with Nancy nodding her head at that.

Half an hour later, a tired but happy Ingrid was back in her hospital room, her baby son in her arms and with Michael and Nancy at her side. Little Michael wasn't long in starting to cry for milk, prompting Ingrid to denude her right breast and offer her nipple

to the hungry baby, who started sucking it at once. As the baby was sucking milk, Michael spoke softly to Ingrid.

“Ingrid, I am truly honored for you to have named our son after me. Know that, in its previous incarnation, his soul was also named ‘Michael’. It does fit him like a glove.” Ingrid nodded at that, then returned her attention to feeding her baby.

**15:59 (Seattle Time)**

**Monday, March 22, 2004 ‘C’**

**Entrance lobby of the Olympic Memorial Hospital**

**Port Angeles**

As she had expected, a crowd of photographers, reporters and even a couple of television crews were waiting for her when Ingrid, sitting in a wheelchair and carrying her baby son in her arms, was leaving the hospital, her and little Michael having been given a clean bill of health by Doctor Emerson. Notably but not surprisingly, the reporters and cameramen paid nearly as much attention to Nancy and Michael, who were escorting her out of the hospital, as on Ingrid and her baby. After asking for silence, Ingrid then spoke to the media crowd while keeping her voice fairly low, in order not to disturb her baby.

“First, I would like to present to the World my son Michael, who was born on Saturday morning at 10:26. Second, I will greatly appreciate if you would then respect my privacy and avoid stalking me or my home in the days to come. As you may have deduced already, I will take a period of maternity leave from my job at Hiller, in order to fully care for my son Michael. However, I anticipate that I will be back at test piloting aircraft in at most six months. You may now ask questions but, please, don’t shout out loud.”

Unfortunately, her pious wish turned out to be only that, a wish, with the crowd of reporters and photographers then erupting in questions, trying to outshout each other in order to be first to get answers.

“WHO IS THE FATHER AND WHAT IS THE FULL NAME OF YOUR BABY, MISS DOWS?”

Michael then took a step forward to answer that question. Having anticipated a media circus at their exit from the hospital, he and Ingrid had mutually agreed on what they would say about themselves in public. In that, Michael was helped by the fact that his

present physical appearance, which he could change at will, was slightly different from the forms he had used during past appearances in this material world.

"I am the father and my name is Michael Goodkind. I am a spiritual counselor and I travel extensively throughout the United States and in other countries where my services are requested. Next question!"

"WHAT IS THE FULL NAME OF THE BABY, MISTER GOODKIND?"

"His officially registered name is 'Michael Dows-Goodkind-Weiss', but his usual name will be simply 'Michael Dows'. Ingrid is a non-practicing Jew and, as the mother, gave her surname to her son."

"SO, THE BABY IS JEWISH, RIGHT?"

"No! As I said, Ingrid is a non-practicing Jew and she will raise our son apart from any religious belief. Instead, we will raise him to be compassionate, generous, kind and tolerant towards others, as I preach myself."

"HER DAUGHTER NANCY IS HERE WITH YOU AND SHE HOLDS MANY SUPERNATURAL POWERS. WILL YOUR SON ALSO POSSESS SUPERNATURAL POWERS?"

"It is too early to speculate about that. Time will tell. Now, we would like to return to Ingrid's home, so she could rest and care for her baby. I will ask you not to follow us and to leave our house alone. I have already contacted the Port Angeles Police Department and local officers will patrol around Ingrid's house to ensure that she is not harassed in her home, so, please, show restraint and respect towards her."

"BUT, LIBERTY OF THE PRESS GIVES US THE RIGHT..."

Michael stared at the female reporter who had just shouted that and raised his own voice then.

"Liberty of the Press is no justification or excuse for harassment and breach of privacy, miss. Ingrid also has rights and I intend to make sure that those rights will be respected. That is all from us."

Michael then started walking towards the exit doors, followed by Nancy, who was pushing Ingrid's wheelchair. Something in Michael's attitude and expression made the media persons part, letting the trio go through and walk out in the open air. A van and driver rented for that occasion was waiting for them in front of the hospital and Ingrid, helped by Nancy, took place in it, her baby still in her arms, while Michael stood guard to keep the reporters at a reasonable distance. Michael got last in the van, which then drove us, filmed and photographed by the reporters and camera crews. Two Port

Angeles Police Department cruisers also rolled off, escorting the van away and signaling to the reporters that Michael's wish for privacy for Ingrid was to be taken seriously.

When they arrived at her house, Ingrid went at once to the new rocking chair she had bought and installed in her seaside lounge and sat in it, rocking her newborn son while singing a lullaby to put him to sleep. As for Michael and Nancy, they helped by carrying into the house her suitcase, baby bag and wheelchair. Michael then went to look at the baby over Ingrid's shoulder, admiring him.

"He is a truly beautiful baby, Ingrid. We can be proud of him."

"Indeed! Uh, at the hospital, you told me that the name of his previous incarnation was 'Michael'. What can you tell me about that previous incarnation and about the other ones before that?"

Michael made a mysterious smile before answering her, keeping his voice low in order not to disturb the baby.

"I could tell you a lot but I won't: you don't want to influence his development by such knowledge before he can remember by himself his past incarnations. The only thing that I will say about his previous incarnation is that he was a good man whose life was tragically cut short by destiny."

Ingrid nodded her head, understanding Michael's reasoning, then looked back at her baby.

"Then, I will make sure that his new incarnation will be a happy and long-lived one."

## **CHAPTER 8 – BAPTISM OF FIRE**

**06:18 (Philippines Time)  
Friday, December 03, 2004 'C'  
Ready apron, 16<sup>th</sup> Attack Squadron  
Danilo Alienza Air Base, Cavite  
Island of Luzon, Philippines**



Young Lieutenant Jesus Campañolo stopped for a moment and looked proudly at the Hiller A-24 SHARK attack aircraft he was about to get into with Major Francisco Marcos.

“This is a truly magnificent beast, Major. No wonder that the pilots from the other squadrons are jealous of us.”

“Who wouldn’t be jealous if you would be flying in a small twin turboprop armed aircraft and would be looking at our A-24s?” replied Marcos while smiling. “Our attack squadrons have been stuck with flying those OV-10 BRONCOs for over two decades, with no true jet fighter-bomber available to us...until now. As the first Filipino Air Force squadron to receive A-24s, we were truly lucky. Thankfully, the 17<sup>th</sup> Attack Squadron has now started to receive its first new A-24s and should be fully equipped in about seven months. From what I heard, Hiller is working extra shifts in order to build and deliver all the A-24s it has on order.”

“Yeah! I heard on my part from a visiting American Air Force pilot that he and his comrades are frustrated with the refusal by the Pentagon to even consider buying A-24s for their Pacific-based squadrons. That doesn’t make much sense if you consider the hugely superior range and autonomy of the A-24 compared to that of the actual in-service American fighter-bombers.”

“Politics! Nobody ever said that there is logic in politics, Jesus. Well, let’s get in our aircraft now: we have a patrol mission to fly.”

Francisco Marcos then stepped to the foot of the telescopic aluminum ladder extending down from the belly of the cockpit section and started climbing it, closely followed by Jesus Campañolo, who was his copilot and weapons officer for this mission.

Once inside the tiny compartment containing a chemical toilet, a small refrigerator, a microwave oven, a cold water dispenser and a folded bunk and which was situated behind the two ejection seats, they went to their seats and sat in them, then strapped themselves in. Once that was done, the two Filipino pilots proceeded into going through their pre-flight checklist, completing it in a bit over two minutes. With that done, Marcos made a hand sign to the mechanics team that had readied his plane, signifying them he was about to start his two jet engines. The mechanics reacted at once and stepped away from the large engine air inlets and exhaust nozzles, allowing Marcos to start in succession his two powerful Pratt & Whitney PW 3500 turbopfans, which started screaming at once. Doing first a quick check of the engines parameters, Marcos then saluted his chief mechanic standing on one side of the A-24 and started rolling his aircraft towards the sole runway of the Danilo Alienza Air Base. Once at one end of the runway, Marcos made his A-24 pivot, so that it would align with the runway's centerline, then looked at his copilot and smiled to him.

"Your aircraft, Jesus. Show me how you take off in this beast."

"Thank you, sir!" replied the overjoyed young pilot before speaking in the microphone of his oxygen mask.

"Danilo Alienza Tower, this is Eagle Two: request permission to take off."

"Permission granted, Eagle Two. Have a good flight."

Next, Campañolo progressively pushed forward the two engine throttles, bringing them to full power as Marcos watched their instruments, then released the brakes. The acceleration as they started rolling down the runway pushed the two pilots back in their seats, making young Jesus shout in delight, while Francisco Marcos grinned while watching their growing speed.

"Fifty knots... Seventy knots... Rotate!"

Showing off one of its chief assets, the A-24 took off after a ground roll of only 220 meters, then started climbing quickly in the grey, cloud-covered sky.

"Alright, Jesus: time to turn towards the Jolo region and our designated patrol box. Take heading 185 and fly at an altitude of 15,000 feet. I will take care of our navigation, so that you can continue concentrate on your piloting."

"Thank you, sir: you are truly kind."

"Hey, it is my job to train my young pilots. I wouldn't do that if I kept the controls to myself all the time, Jesus."

"Very true, sir."

Staying under the speed of sound in order to economize their fuel, Jesus flew South over the South China Sea, then over the Sulu Sea, heading towards their designated patrol box. His A-24 could have easily flown that leg at supersonic speed while still keeping a good autonomy but the goal of their present mission was to establish a long surveillance patrol in support of the Filipino Navy, Army and Coast Guard units operating in the Zamboanga and Jolo regions, where Moro Islamic rebels had been quite active lately. After some fifty minutes of flying, they reached the area of their patrol box, centered on the island of Jolo, a stronghold of the Moro Islamic Front. Jesus, following the instructions from his superior, then started flying a pattern of parallel North-South lines, methodically covering their patrol box while Francisco watched their radar screen and their infrared scanning sensors. They at once had multiple



dots on their sensors, something that they had fully expected: a lot of merchant ships and fishing boats of all sizes went through or around the Sulu Sea, day and night. Thankfully, the A-24 variant chosen by the Philippines came equipped with a long-range target identification camera, which had a powerful zoom lens and a stabilized optical head housed in the forward tip of the left side wingtip armaments pod. With that long-range camera, Francisco Marcos was able to zoom in and look in succession at the various ships they were detecting along their flight path, and this at distances of up to ten kilometers or more. Since that camera could be switched quickly between a day



lens and a low-light-level lens, it could be used at night as well as at day, another factor that had prompted the Filipino Air Force in adopting that option offered by Hiller.

As the A-24 approached the island of Jolo, Marcos and Campañoło redoubled their vigilance due to the reports about increased rebel activity on Jolo. As they were overflying at medium altitude the western tip of Jolo Island, Major Marcos, who was periodically consulting a ship recognition guide book while using their long-range camera, frowned and spoke up.

"What the hell is a Chinese Navy supply ship doing here, stopped just outside our territorial waters? I also see a sort of landing barge which is now sailing away from it and going towards a beach of the island. I am going to take still picture of those two, for retransmission via our datalink system to Cavite. Jesus, I want you to turn around once I will have taken and transmitted my pictures. You will then go down to an altitude of 3,000 feet and pass by the starboard side of that barge, so that I could better look at what it is transporting."

"Got it, Major!"

Jesus Campañoło had time to pass the Chinese ship and fly for another kilometer or so before Marcos told him that he could turn around. Doing so and then going down to the altitude of 3,000 feet, he also slowed down his aircraft in order to let Marcos have a better look at the content of the barge. It didn't take long before the latter let out a swear word.

"Shit! I believe that this barge is carrying crates and boxes which may well contain weapons and ammunition. I also see a large pile of similar-looking crates and boxes on the beach that this barge is approaching. Those Chinese bastards are probably clandestinely dropping off supplies of weapons and ammunition destined to those Moro rebels. I'm going to send more pictures to Cavite."

"Could the Chinese be this stupid to commit such a brazen hostile act, sir?"

"Well, Jesus, you have your answer right there under us. Our wing commander is not going to like this a bit."

"I bet so. He... INCOMING TRACERS FROM THE BEACH AREA! WE ARE BEING FIRED UPON!"

"EVADE AND ACCELERATE, BUT STAY IN THIS ZONE." ordered Marcos, who then got on the radio and called his wing's operation center in Cavite.

"Alpha Fifteen, this Eagle Two: urgent message, over!"

"Go ahead, Eagle Two."

"From Eagle Two: we have just spotted a Chinese Navy supply ship stopped just outside of our territorial waters, at the western tip of Jolo Island. We also spotted a landing barge from that ship, in the process of landing probable weapons and ammunition on a beach. While overflying that barge for better identification, we got fired at by machine guns or light cannons positioned on that beach. Request permission to return fire, over."

"From Alpha Fifteen, wait one, Eagle Two."

Francisco Marcos felt frustration on hearing that reply. They were probably going to waste precious minutes while some ground-based senior officer took the time to decide what to do now. He was thus surprised when the voice of his wing commander, Lieutenant Colonel Ferdinand Cruzeiro, came on the radio a mere twenty seconds later.

"Eagle Two, from Alpha Fifteen Six: permission to return fire is given. Concentrate first on that barge and on those machine guns and crates on the beach. If that Chinese ship tries to flee, shoot across his bow and order him to cut his engines. If it does not comply, then fire to disable its engines, so that our navy could arrive and board it, over."

"Understood, Alpha Fifteen. Out!" replied a happy Francisco Marcos, who then spoke to his copilot.

"Jesus, I am taking the controls. Select our rockets in short salvo mode and contact fuzing: I am going to first pepper that barge."

"You have the controls." said Jesus before punching a few buttons on his armament selection panel. "Rockets in short salvo mode and contact detonation modes, sir."

Francisco Marcos had a mean smile as he started diving on the Chinese barge, which was now attempting to turn around in order to return to its ship.

"You are not going to escape me, you treacherous Chinese bastards."

With his target firmly centered in the crosshairs of his Heads-Up-Display and with his millimetric wave gunnery radar locked on the barge, he then pressed briefly the trigger on his flight control stick. Two pairs of 81 mm hypervelocity, spin-stabilized unguided rockets flew out of their wingtip pods, blinding flashes from their rocket motors behind them. Quickly attaining their top speed of 1,600 meters per second, as fast as a tank gun sabot round, they got to the fleeing barge in just over a second. Two of the rockets

missed by no more than five meters, with their explosions powerful enough to violently rock the barge. The two other rockets made direct hits and exploded aboard the barge, one obliterating the pilot house in its aft section and the other exploding among the crates and boxes stored inside the cargo section of the barge. That explosion was immediately followed by a bigger, much more powerful explosion which was then followed by a series of smaller explosions, with ignited bullets or shells flying around, prompting Marcos in speaking again on the radio.

"Alpha Fifteen, from Eagle Two: I just hit that barge with rockets, following which big secondary explosions followed. That barge did indeed carry ammunition, over."

"I copy, Eagle Two. Are you still being fired upon by those machine guns on the beach, over?"

"Affirmative, Alpha Fifteen, but they are shooting like pigs, over."

"Good for you, Eagle Two! Return them the favor and make sure that those crates on the beach are also destroyed. Keep me posted on your progress, over."

"Will do, Alpha Fifteen."

Marcos again turned around and dived, this time targeting the beach area where crates were piled up and from where came the machine gun fire came. This time, he fired a total of twelve 81 mm rockets in three short salvos towards the beach. Those rockets in turn caused a huge explosion that also silenced the machine guns, their gunners probably killed instantly by the blast overpressure from the explosion of dozens of ammunition crates. While overflying the beach area and the big cloud from the explosion, Marcos gave a mean look at the Chinese supply ship, which was starting to move.

"Jesus, contact that ship on the international distress frequency and order him to shut its engines, on pain of being shot at next."

"On it, sir!"

Jesus then spoke in English on the radio, sending that warning twice but getting no response to it.

"They are not answering, sir, and are continuing to sail away from the coast."

"Then, I am going to fire across its bow with our cannons."

Selecting himself his two 30 mm Oerlikon cannons, Francisco Marcos then dove at the Chinese supply ship, pointing his nose slightly off the bow of that ship, then fired a one-second salvo, sending 45 30 mm high explosive-fragmentation shells into the sea. The reaction of the Chinese ship to that stunned him by its utter stupidity as he saw a puff of

smoke from the helicopter landing pad of the ship, followed by a trail of smoke heading his way.

“THAT FUCKER JUST FIRED A MANPADS<sup>10</sup> AT US!”

Without speaking further, Francisco punched the ‘launch’ button of its infra-red decoy flares launchers while brutally turning to the left and diving towards the sea. His tactic proved successful, with the incoming missile decoyed away from him by the dozens of flares he had just fired off. As Francisco was turning back towards the fleeing ship, Jesus was frantically speaking on the radio.

“Alpha Fifteen, from Eagle Two: the Chinese ship just fired a portable missile at us but we were able to evade it, over.”

The answer from Cavite came nearly at once in a firm tone.

“Eagle Two, from Alpha Fifteen. Stop that ship and sink it if it won’t stop, over.”

“With pleasure, Alpha Fifteen!” said Francisco, who then dove to just above the waves and sped towards the supply ship, targeting its center of mass before pressing his trigger again.

“Eat that, you bastard!”

This time, eight 81 mm rockets flew out at a dizzying speed towards the Chinese ship. Despite being a big vessel easily displacing over 8,000 tons, those rockets blew open the left side of the ship at the level of its engine room and funnels, starting at once a major fire. With its power supplies cut, the two medium guns of the Chinese ship went dead and were unable to target the A-24 as it zoomed overhead. This time, it was Marcos who got on the radio to Cavite.

“Alpha Fifteen, from Eagle Two: the Chinese ship is now immobilized and on fire. I will circle overhead to guide and protect our own boats when they will arrive, over.”

“Acknowledged, Eagle Two. Good job! A pair of patrol boats should be at your location in about three hours. Keep reporting as needed.”

“Will do, Alpha Fifteen. Out!” replied Francisco on the radio before grinning to Jesus. “So, how’s that as your first combat mission, Jesus?”

“I love it, sir!” answered his young copilot, also grinning.

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<sup>10</sup> MANPADS: Man-Portable Air Defense System. Typically, a shoulder launched infra-red guided anti-aircraft missile.

**10:39 (Philippines Time)****Operations Center of the 15<sup>th</sup> Strike Wing****Danilo Alienza Air Base, Cavite, Luzon**

At the 15<sup>th</sup> Strike Wing's operations center, Lieutenant Colonel Ferdinand Cruzeiro didn't waste time cheering up the success of his two pilots in this action: this was only the start of a very serious situation indeed, as the Chinese were not going to take this lying down. He thus got on a secure phone and called the headquarters of the Filipino Air Force, where he got Major General Jesus Alba on the line and informed him in a few sentences about the action around Jolo. He then finished his online briefing with a request.

"Sir, you understand that this could well mean the possible start of a war with China. Our political leaders should be briefed at once on the details of this encounter and see the proofs collected by our pilots, so that the Chinese could not lie easily their way out of this."

"I fully agree with you, Colonel Cruzeiro. Did our pilots transmit via encrypted datalink the images they took over Jolo?"

"They have, sir! I can patch together a compilation of the pictures and videos they took and then send it to your headquarters."

"That would be perfect, Colonel. I will call Malacanang Palace at once while waiting for your video compilation. Congratulation to your pilots: they did an excellent job."

"And so did our new A-24, General: our old OV-10s would have been overwhelmed by this scenario."

**22:02 (Seattle Time)****1402 South McDonald Street, West End District****Port Angeles, State of Washington, U.S.A.**

Ingrid was about to go to bed, with little Michael already asleep in his crib next to her bed, and was watching the latest news on CNN when the female newscaster interrupted her initial reporting with a flash news.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have just learned about a serious international incident around the Philippines that happened less than three hours ago. According to the preliminary information we obtained, a Chinese Navy supply ship was caught by a Filipino aircraft as it was ferrying to the shores of Jolo Island some weapons and ammunition, presumably destined to the Moro Islamic Front extremist rebel group. When the Filipino aircraft, a recently delivered Hiller A-24 attack aircraft, approached that Chinese ship and a landing barge launched from the said ship, it was fired upon by both machine guns posted on the shore and by a missile fired by the Chinese supply ship. The Filipino aircraft was able to evade that fire and then returned fire, sinking the barge, destroying the ammunition piled on the beach, along with the enemy machine guns, and hitting and immobilizing the Chinese supply ship. The Filipino government also just announced that patrol boats from the Filipino Navy have boarded the Chinese ship and are in the process of arresting its crew. On the part of the Chinese, their government have furiously denied the version of these events given by the Filipinos and are accusing the Philippines of an act of high seas piracy, promising retaliation for it. The State Department has not publicly reacted yet to this incident and has issued no comments about it. We will of course follow closely the developments of this situation and will keep you informed about them."

Ingrid wrung her left hand as the newscaster went on to cover other news.

"Wow! The shit is going to truly hit the fan in the Pacific with this."

Thinking for a second, she then decided to call Jeff Hiller, the owner and CEO of Hiller Aircraft Corporation, who lived in California. Hiller picked up his telephone after three rings.

"Jeff Hiller here!"

"Jeff, this is Ingrid, in Port Angeles. Were you listening to the news tonight?"

"Uh, no! Me and my wife were watching a musical show on television. What's up?"

"Well, it seems that our A-24 just got its fire baptism in the Pacific, around the Philippines."

Ingrid then spent a half minute to resume to Jeff what she had heard on CNN. That left her boss understandably concerned.

"Damn! While I am happy to see that our A-24 did its job well, this could announce the start of a violent and very costly war in the Pacific. I hope that the cooler heads will prevail in this crisis."

"I am afraid that they won't, Jeff. Chinese officials typically hate to recognize that they acted wrongly and will do everything to accuse the Philippines of engineering this incident."

"And what do you think will happen next, Ingrid?"

"War!" was the one word reply from Ingrid. "I will follow this situation closely, Jeff, so no need for you to personally worry about it."

"Alright, Ingrid. Keep me posted. Thanks for the call."

"You're welcome, Jeff." said Ingrid before hanging up her telephone. She then thought to herself for a moment before deciding that she had another call or two to do.

## **CHAPTER 9 – PACIFIC CAULDRON**

**14:08 (Washington Time)**

**Saturday, December 4, 2004 ‘C’**

**The Situation Room, The White House**

**Washington, D.C., U.S.A.**



President George W. Bush felt discouragement as he declared open this emergency meeting of his National Security Council. Barely a month ago, he had been reelected for a second term, squeaking by his Democratic opponent. Then, that victory had been quickly soured by what was now being called the ‘White House Shakeup’, with no less than ten out of his fifteen cabinet members resigning their posts and with more resignations on the horizon. Now, he may be ending up with a war in the Pacific on his hands while stuck with a cabinet in disarray, all this a mere three weeks before Christmas. He looked at his present secretary of state, Collin Powell, who was one of his cabinet members who had announced his resignation in November and who was sitting next to Condoleezza Rice, who had been nominated as his replacement but who had not yet been confirmed by the Congress.

“So, Collin, what do we know exactly about this new crisis in the Pacific?”

“From the information we have at present, Mister President, it seems that the Filipino caught the Chinese red-handed at smuggling in weapons and ammunition into the Philippines, with those weapons and ammunition probably destined to the rebels of the Moro Islamic Front. If our information is correct, then the Filipino acted well within their rights, while China has no valid excuse for their actions and should quietly withdraw from Filipino waters. Unfortunately, it seems that China is ready to deny everything and play hardball with the Filipino. Overall, this whole thing is like a powder keg with a lit fuse, Mister President. It could explode into war at any moment.”

Bush took a moment to digest that information before looking at General Peter Moss, the commander of all American combat forces, who was serving his second consecutive term in the job and was widely acknowledged for his competence, resolve and sense of initiative.



“What can we do to prevent, or at the least mitigate the risks of such a war, General Moss?”

“I have already ordered our Space reconnaissance assets to concentrate their attention on the South China Sea area and on the various Chinese military bases in Southern and Eastern China, Mister President. I also ordered one of our carrier groups to reroute and head towards the Philippines, where it will post itself North of the archipelago in order to watch for possible Chinese sea and air incursions. I would like as well to get permission for our forces around the Philippines to shoot if the Chinese actually attack the Philippines, Mister President.”

“It is a bit too early for that, General.” replied Bush, who was not enthusiastic about the idea of going to war against China. “Hopefully, the presence of our carrier group will be enough to deter the Chinese from attacking the Philippines. We however will give a public warning to China to stay away from the Philippines. If the Chinese ignore our warning, then we may harden our stance.”

Moss was tempted to insist on that point but, seeing that the majority of the other NSC members seemed to agree with President Bush, let that go. After another half hour of discussion that, in Moss’s opinion, only reflected the lack of resolve and the unwillingness of the administration to get involved around the Philippines, the meeting was adjourned with few concrete decisions being taken.

**15:42 (Manila Time) / 02:42, Sunday, December 05 (Washington Time)**

**Main tarmac of the Danilo Alienza Air Base, Cavite**

**Island of Luzon, Philippines**

Major General Jesus Alba and Lieutenant Colonel Ferdinand Cruzeiro were on hand at the main tarmac to greet Ingrid when she exited with Shirley Slade the brand-new A-24 she had just flown from Port Angeles. That A-24 was already painted to the colors of the Filipino Air Force, something General Alba greatly appreciated: right now, his air force could use every A-24 they could get. Alba and Cruzeiro were however surprised and confused when they were able to detail the flight coverall worn by Ingrid and got even more confused when she stopped at attention in front of Jesus Alba and saluted him first while presenting herself.

“Captain Ingrid Dows, from the Sixth Pursuit Squadron, reporting back for duty, General.”

Alba, shocked, returned her salute and eyed for a second the unit patch sewn to her flight coverall: it was that of the long-disbanded Sixth Pursuit Squadron, a unit which had fought with distinction against the Japanese in World War 2 and to which Ingrid had belonged for a few months in 1941 before being accepted in the U.S. Army Air Corps of the time.

"I...I don't understand, General Dows. Didn't you resign your Filipina commission in 1942, when you joined the U.S. Army Air Corps?"

"I never formally resigned from the Filipino Army Air Corps, General, nor did Lieutenant General Arnold asked me to do it. In fact, General Arnold and his staff never mentioned that, probably assuming that I had already officially left the Filipino forces. As a result, I should still be officially a commissioned officer of the Philippines armed forces, on top of being an honorary citizen of the Philippines since 1942. I thus request to be allowed to serve again in the Philippines Air Force, and this on a temporary basis while this crisis with China will go on."

"But you were a five-star general, Ingrid. Why the captain's rank insignias?"

"Because I left the Philippines in early 1942 as a captain and I wish to resume my service here at that rank level, General. However, I would expect that my tactical and strategic advice given to you and your staff be considered according to my past American service record."

Alba felt elation on hearing that, as Ingrid Dows was universally recognized as a master air tactician and overall strategic military genius.

"Ingrid, one would be utterly dumb to ignore your tactical advice, especially when it comes to air combat operations."

"Excellent, General! Were you able to find the kind of person I asked you about in my call last evening?"

"I have, but I still wonder why you asked me that, Ingrid."

Ingrid smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

"Easy: I will need a copilot, preferably a woman, while flying my A-24 in combat. A male copilot may tend to get distracted by my, uh, female attributes."

Both Alba and Cruzeiro grinned at those last words.

"A reasonable assumption I must say, Ingrid. Lieutenant Esperanza Alito is presently waiting at the headquarters of the 15<sup>th</sup> Strike Wing. She is fully qualified on the A-24, having been trained by your Hiller staff in Port Angeles, but was still waiting for her squadron to receive its first A-24."

"She will do just fine for me, General Alba."

"What about your present copilot, Miss Slade?"

"She will return to the United States today, so that she could ferry more new A-24s as they come out of the Hiller production lines. Could we go to your wing headquarters to discuss tactics and strategies, General? My A-24 would also need in the meantime to be refueled and fully armed in interceptor mode, with cannon ammunition, rockets and eight air-to-air missiles, including two short-range infrared guidance missiles."

"Our technicians and armorers will take care of that and will do a full maintenance check at the same time. If you and Miss Slade could sit in my staff car, we will then go to the headquarters of the 15<sup>th</sup> Strike Wing, so that we could discuss the present situation in full privacy."

"With pleasure, General." replied Ingrid before picking up her large kit bag, which she had brought with her aboard the A-24 she had just delivered. With her and Shirley soon sitting inside Alba's staff car with the Filipino general and Lieutenant Colonel Cruzeiro, the vehicle started rolling towards the buildings adjacent to the main tarmac.

### **18:50 (Manila Time)**

#### **Jose Paredes Air Station, Pasuquin**

#### **Iloco Norte Province, Island of Luzon**

It was already night, with the Moon still down, making for very dark conditions, when Ingrid landed on the short single runway of the Jose Paredes Air Station, which included a radar station which covered the northern sector of the Philippines Air Defense Identification Zone, or ADIZ. Young and very pretty Lieutenant Esperanza Alito, occupying the left side seat reserved for the copilot/weapons officer, was a bit nervous as Ingrid made her approach, then landed smoothly on the 1,200-meter-long asphalt runway, using the plane's NAWVS' battery of night vision cameras and forward-looking infrared cameras. Using her engines thrust reversers to cut her landing run, Ingrid got to stop her A-24 after a ground roll of only 250 meters, then turned around and slowly rolled back to the southern extremity of the strip, where she turned onto the small aircraft apron, which had a single small hangar connected to it. However, Ingrid didn't enter that hangar, instead turning her aircraft on the spot and making it face the runway, so that she could quickly roll onto it if need be. The small detachment of aircraft mechanics and

ordnance technicians who had arrived at the air station an hour ago with some support equipment, tools, spares, ordnance and fuel, greeted her when she and Alito climbed down from the cockpit section, using its belly access telescopic ladder and each carrying a small duffel bag. The chief mechanic, a stoutly-built man in his late forties, saluted her as soon as she set foot on the apron.

"Master Sergeant Basilio Fuentes! Welcome to the Jose Paredes Air Station, maam. As requested by you, we have prepared a small office annex of the hangar for you to serve as your private room. We also connected a direct telephone line between your room and the radar station's operation room. They will thus be able to call you as soon as they will detect suspect contacts coming from the North and China."

"Excellent! And your men, Master Sergeant, where will they sleep?"

"In the hangar, next to our equipment, tools, spare parts and reserves of ammunition and ordnance, maam. We also have a reserve of rations and a stove to heat them up and make coffee."

"Good! We may be here for only a few days, time for this crisis to subside, but we may also have to stay here longer, in order to protect this radar station, which is a critical part of the air defense system of the Philippines. We thus may get attacked by Chinese aircraft or even be bombarded from the sea by Chinese ships. I would thus strongly counsel that you have a few protective trenches dug for your men."

"Uh, what about you and your copilot, maam?"

"Me? I fully intend to be in the air and fighting by the time Chinese aircraft or ships attack this station. If I am not, then that would mean that I failed in my job. In a way, that will remember me of my time in Batangas in 1941, when I was on fighter alert and expecting the next Japanese air raid."

Her remark made the grizzled Filipino mechanic grin with amusement.

"Hell, for a young-looking woman like you, you sure talk like an old hand, maam."

"That's because I AM an old hand, Master Sergeant. Uh, would you have by chance a man who would be good at painting a name on my aircraft?"

Fuentes smiled at that and nodded his head once.

"I have such a man: me! I did a lot of aircraft painting work when I started up as a young mechanic. What would you like me to paint on your aircraft, maam?"

"I would love it if you could paint the name 'LADY HAWK' in pink letters with black contours on each side of the cockpit section, Master Sergeant."

"Consider it done, maam." replied the amused NCO. "But first, let me guide you to your private room and office."

Following the chief mechanic to the door of the hangar's annex, Ingrid and Esperanza entered what had to have been some kind of small waiting room with two windows, an internal door connecting it to the hangar proper and another internal door along its rear wall. Fuentes pointed at the rear wall door as the two women dropped their duffel bags next to two camp cots.

"That door gives in to a small washroom with a toilet and a sink. There is another washroom on the other side of the hangar, so that washroom will be for your exclusive use, maam. Unfortunately, there is no shower stall in this hangar."

"That's alright: we will take bird baths, Master Sergeant Fuentes. Thank you for this setup."

"My pleasure, maam. If you need anything, just ask." replied Fuentes before leaving the room. Now alone, the two women quickly arranged themselves, putting their duffel bags under the mosquito nets covering their camp cots, then taking off their parachutes, G-suits, life vests and flying helmets. Once that was done, Ingrid went to the field telephone resting on a low table near her cot and picked up its receiver before turning its hand crank. Someone answered her after about ten seconds, speaking in Tagalog.

"Radar operations room!"

Ingrid spoke as well in Tagalog in her receiver.

"This is Captain Dows, at the hangar annex. I just arrived with my A-24 SHARK and will soon be ready to scramble as needed to face any possible hostile contact which you will detect. Contact me via this phone if your radar picks up any suspicious aircraft or ship."

"Understood, Captain."

"Thank you, mister." said Ingrid, who then put down the receiver and looked at Esperanza Alito.

"Since we already ate supper in Cavite, I will take a nap in order to rest a bit from my trans-Pacific trip. Wake me up at no later than ten and watch for any call from the radar station."

"Understood, Gen...uh, Captain."

“That’s better! Hopefully, the Chinese will show some common sense and will cut down on their belligerent talk.”

“The Chinese haven’t shown much common sense or restraint lately, Captain. I bet that they will start attacking us within 24 hours.”

“Well, I won’t bet against that, as you are probably right, Esperanza. Remember: wake me up at no later than ten.”

“I will, Captain.”

Sitting in a chair set next to the table supporting the field telephone, Esperanza then started her vigil while Ingrid laid down on her cot, having removed only her boots. Ingrid was asleep in less than half a minute, leaving her young copilot and weapons officer to think in the darkened room. Esperanza had not said so to Ingrid but the latter had been the one who had inspired her into becoming a combat pilot less than two years ago. She had endured at first quite a few instances of sexual harassment and misogyny but her excellent flying aptitudes had gradually gained her the confidence of her male comrades. Now, to be the copilot of such a legendary female combat pilot was nearly like a dream come through for Esperanza. She very well may also learn much from Ingrid Dows while flying with her. The one thing she dreaded now was that the Chinese would launch a massive air and sea attack against the Philippines and possibly seize some of the islands they were disputing the sovereignty of.

### **21:58 (Manila Time)**

#### **Hangar annex office, Jose Paredes Air Station**

Esperanza was about to wake up Ingrid, as she had asked her, when the field telephone next to her rang. With her heart accelerating at once, she picked up the receiver and spoke in it.

“Lieutenant Alito here!”

“Lieutenant, this is Major Bandong, at the radar station. Five dots flying in formation just entered our radar screens, coming from the North. I request that your A-24 scramble at once and go identify and challenge those contacts.”

“What is the present heading, altitude and distance from us of these five contacts, sir?”

“They are coming from Heading 346, are flying at an altitude of approximately 40,000 feet and a speed of 370 knots and are presently some 230 nautical miles away.” Esperanza noted down those numbers while repeating them on the phone to confirm to Major Bandong that she had them right, then hooked down the receiver. That was when she saw that Ingrid was now awake, probably because of her conversation on the phone.

“Captain, we have five aircraft flying in formation and coming from Heading 346. They are presently about 230 nautical miles away and flying at an altitude of 40,000 feet and a speed of 370 knots. Major Bandong is asking us to scramble and intercept and identify those contacts.”

Ingrid replied to that while swinging her legs out of her cot and grabbing her boots to put them on.

“Those are probably Chinese bombers: their fighters don’t have the kind of range needed to come from that heading. Go alert our mechanics that we are scrambling and please don’t switch on the room’s light: I want to preserve my night vision.”

“Understood, Captain!”

Getting up from her chair and nearly running to the door giving on the hangar proper, Esperanza opened it and stuck her head out while keeping one eye closed, so that she could herself preserve part of her night vision.

“ALERT! ALERT! WE ARE SCRAMBLING ON AN INTERCEPT MISSION. STAND-BY WITH THE ENGINE STARTER GROUND UNIT AND GO REMOVE THE SAFETIES ON OUR AIR-TO-AIR MISSILES AND ROCKETS.”

With that done, Esperanza went to her flying gear and quickly put back on her G-suit, parachute, life vest and helmet, then ran outside on the apron, following an Ingrid who had been very fast in suiting up. One push on a button attached to the front landing gear of the A-24 made the belly trap of the cockpit section open and the retractable telescopic ladder lower to the ground. As soon as it was deployed, Ingrid climbed it quickly, closely followed by an excited Esperanza: this was going to be her first real-life combat mission for her. Both women went to sit at once in their ejection seats and strapped in, this after retracting the ladder and closing back and locking the belly trap. Once strapped in, Ingrid grabbed the small pocket-sized radio provided to her by her team of mechanics and called up Master Sergeant Fuentes.

“Dows to Fuentes: we are ready to start our engines. Have your men stand away from the air inlets and exhaust nozzles.”

"We are already out of the way, Captain, and our ground starter unit is ready. My men are presently removing the safeties on your missiles and rockets and should be done in less than a minute with that."

"Excellent! Once we will be airborne, break open the crates for our spare missiles and rockets and prepare eight fresh missiles: two short-range ones and six long-range ones. We may have five Chinese bombers heading our way."

"Will do, Captain... All safeties are now removed from your missiles and rockets, maam."

"Excellent! Stand-by for engines startup."

As she was about to press the engine startup buttons, Ingrid looked briefly at her copilot and weapons officer.

"Esperanza, switch on our electronic warfare suite and start looking for possible Chinese radio communications on the UHF band: with luck, they will prove to be busybodies and may help us home on them."

"On it, Captain!"

Ingrid had time to start both of her engines and to roll her aircraft on the runway before Esperanza spoke up, excitement in her voice.

"I just heard a short conversation in Chinese on the UHF channels, coming from Heading 346."

"Good! Switch that channel to me: I will be listening on it."

"You can speak Chinese, Captain?" asked Esperanza, a bit surprised by that, making Ingrid smile.

"Along with over twenty other languages, Esperanza. Here we go! Watch our I.R.S.T.<sup>11</sup> sensors but keep our nose radar switched off: those Chinese bombers are probably scanning for any active radar they could detect."

Esperanza did not have time to respond to that before she was pushed back hard in her seat as their A-24 started accelerating at high rate down the runway. Ingrid rotated its nose up after only 210 meters of ground roll, then started climbing up in the sky like a rocket, watched by their fascinated mechanics. Master Sergeant Basilio Fuentes came to attention and saluted the departing aircraft while speaking to himself.

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<sup>11</sup> I.R.S.T.: Infrared Search and Track sensor. Omnidirectional viewing thermal passive sensor used in many modern combat aircraft to detect flying sources of heat, like other aircraft and missiles. It can provide a target heading but not a distance.



“Good luck, Lady Hawk. May you defend again successfully the Philippines.”

Attaining quickly an altitude of 38,000 feet, Ingrid then leveled off her aircraft and kept her engines at full power, passing the sound barrier and then continuing to accelerate until she reached their top speed of Mach 2. She then surprised Esperanza by making a full ninety degree turn to the right.

“Why are we turning to the right, Captain? Those incoming contacts were still straight ahead of us.”

“An old trick in air combat: try as much as possible to approach the enemy from either one of its flanks or from the rear, so that their radars can’t pick you up as you approach them for an intercept. Chinese airborne radars notoriously have a rather narrow field of view, all in the frontal arc. I am going to perform a wide half loop and will approach those five aircraft from their rear sector. Keep our own radar off and concentrate on our I.R.S.T. sensors.”

Esperanza digested that before asking Ingrid a question.

“Uh, how many official air victories did you accumulate along your career, Captain?”

“I stopped counting after 200.” was Ingrid’s response, apparently made in all seriousness, as she was concentrating on calculating the right moment to veer back towards the incoming contacts. As she was two-thirds of the way through her wide half loop, Esperanza spoke up in triumph.

“We have those five contacts back on our forward-looking I.R.S.T., at heading 338 relative. They are slightly above our flight level.”

“Just as I wanted them.” said Ingrid, smiling to herself. “Esperanza, get on our long-range target identification camera and switch it to low-level light mode. Find out what kind of aircraft we are approaching.”

Doing so, Esperanza was able to give some information to Ingrid after some twenty seconds.

“They are Chinese bombers alright, Captain. I see five **Xian H-6** strategic bombers flying in ‘V’ formation.”



“Can you see what kind of ordnance is suspended under either their belly or their wings?”

“Uh, one moment, please... Four of them each carry two big, rather fat missiles under their wings. However, I see no missile under the leading bomber, just a big hump under its belly.”

Ingrid nodded once her head at that, recognizing what she was about to face.

“An electronic warfare variant of the H-6 leading four bombers armed with subsonic cruise missiles. I bet that this leading H-6’s job is to detect and then probably jam our radars, in order to facilitate the approach of its armed companions.”

“What do we do now, Captain?”

“We report by radio to our radar station, then we will challenge those Chinese bombers and order them to turn around at once. They are still over international waters and shooting them down without warning would be considered internationally as an unjustified attack on Chinese aircraft.”

“Screw international opinion!” spat Esperanza, making Ingrid grin.

“I agree with you, but we still have to respect the international rules if we want to continue being seen as a victim rather than as an attacker. Get on the radio with our radar station and advise them of what we found and tell them I am going to order these bozos to turn around. In the meantime, I will take position some 5,000 meters behind and slightly below them, ready to fire at them if needed.”

A bit over a minute later, and with their A-24 now in position far behind the bombers, Esperanza looked at Ingrid.

“Our radar station is now alerted and will pass that information to Cavite. You have the green light to challenge those bombers, Captain.”

“Good! I will switch to cannon fire mode but be ready to activate our missiles if those buggers do something stupid.”

Switching her microphone to the frequency used by the Chinese bombers, Ingrid then started speaking in Mandarin, her voice calm but firm.

“To the five H-6 Chinese bombers presently approaching the Philippines and flying on Heading 346, this is Philippines Air Force fighter aircraft on intercept course towards you. Turn around immediately and leave the Philippines Air Defense Identification Zone or I will be obliged to shoot your fat asses down, over. By the way, this conversation is being recorded, in case you are tempted to deny everything afterwards.”

The Chinese, understandably surprised and stunned by that radio call, didn't react or respond to it at first. Then, the probable flight leader spoke urgently on the radio to his wingmen.

"All Red Arrow One callsigns, from Red Arrow One Leader: program your missiles for launch towards your designated targets, then launch them before veering off."

Ingrid reacted at once to that and spoke again on the radio, her tone now harsh.

"Chinese bombers, the ones who will release their missiles will be immediately shot down by me. Here is something to convince you that I am serious."

Quickly lining up the leading bomber in her gun reticle, Ingrid then deliberately aimed at a point some fifty meters under it, then fired a short salvo from her two 30 mm cannons, sending a stream of tracer shells past the nose of the targeted bombers. Unfortunately, it seemed that the orders those Chinese pilots had been given were fairly inflexible ones, as the only reaction Ingrid got was a warning from Esperanza.

"I NOW HAVE INTENSE RADAR JAMMING EMISSIONS FROM THE LEAD BOMBER, DIRECTED AT OUR RADAR STATION FREQUENCY."

"That is enough to constitute an act of war for me." replied Ingrid before aiming straight at the lead bomber and pressing her gun trigger again. This time, she fired a total of forty high-explosive fragmentation 30 mm shells, which racked the belly of the jamming aircraft along most of its length. The Xian H-6 then suddenly turned into a flying torch and fell down in a deadly spiral. Esperanza didn't have time to celebrate that victory before she saw the first cruise missile fall off one of the four other bombers, quickly followed by another missile.

"THEY ARE RELEASING THEIR MISSILES!"

"Switching to unguided rockets." said Ingrid, her teeth clenched: preventing the destruction of the radar stations in the Philippines by those cruise missiles was now going to be a race against the clock. Quickly aiming at one of the three bombers still carrying missiles, she fired a salvo of four unguided 81 mm rockets at it. The hyper-velocity, spin-stabilized rockets, which were actually faster than cannon shells, quickly reached that bomber, with three of them passing very close to it while the fourth one made a direct hit on its long, slim fuselage and exploded. Unfortunately for that bomber, the three rockets which didn't make direct hits still exploded, their fragmentation warheads triggered by their proximity fuses. Utterly peppered by hundreds of steel balls from the exploding warheads and with one rocket penetrating one of its main fuel tanks

before exploding, the H-6 blew up in a huge fireball, with the fuel contained in the two cruise missiles it was carrying adding to the destruction. Ingrid veered brutally towards another bomber even before her first rocket salvo hit, confident about the precision of her shooting. The bomber she targeted next was just releasing one of its missiles when it fell victim to her second rocket salvo and broke in two, with the parts falling into multiple torches. The just released missile was in turn destroyed by those debris, freeing Ingrid to aim at her fourth target and firing a third rocket salvo, destroying that H-6 before it could release its missiles. Hearing on the radio the surviving Chinese bomber starting to call its base in a panicky voice, Ingrid turned yet again and peppered it with 30 mm cannon fire. Her shells broke the right wing of the bomber off, sending it down in a vertical, uncontrollable spiral. The last transmission from the Chinese bomber was a long scream of utter terror which shook Esperanza. Her face pale, she saw Ingrid turn around yet again while accelerating at maximum power.

“ESPERANZA, FIND THOSE TWO CRUISE MISSILES WITH OUR RADAR, QUICK!”

“Er, yes!... I have them: they are some three kilometers away and flying on heading 350 at a speed of 400 knots.”

“Switching to infrared air-to-air missiles. Firing now!”

Ingrid fired one missile at a time, letting time for her first missile to hit its target and destroy it before firing a second missile, in order to avoid confusing its guidance head with the fireball from the first target. Esperanza, now sweating heavily and breathing in short breaths because of the Gs she had sustained, shouted out in triumph when the second missile was destroyed, leaving their A-24 alone in the night sky.

“WE GOT THEM BOTH! YOU WERE FANTASTIC, CAPTAIN.”

“We shouldn’t rejoice yet, Esperanza. I doubt that these five bombers were alone to attack the Philippines tonight. In fact, they were probably tasked to take out our radars in order to facilitate the penetration of our skies by more bombers. Contact Pasuquin and tell them that we downed five H-6 bombers and their missiles after they started releasing subsonic cruise missiles towards the Philippines. Tell them to advise at once our air force headquarters about this and warn them to go to full alert. I expect more Chinese bombers to follow soon.”

“And what will we do in the meantime, Ingrid?”

“We will switch our radar off, go in passive infrared and electronic listening mode and take an ambush position while waiting for more Chinese bombers to show up. We

still have enough fuel for more than four hours of loiter time and enough remaining rockets and missiles to make the Chinese shit in their pants.”

“Uh, right! I’m contacting our radar station now.”

As Esperanza was making her radio report, Ingrid looked briefly at her electronic navigation map, which was kept current via GPS<sup>12</sup> positioning, and chose a good ambush position a good 400 kilometers away from the Philippines and to the West, over the South China Sea, so that she could detect Chinese bombers coming from the Chinese mainland as well as from the island of Hainan, a large island near Vietnam which supported many Chinese air and naval bases. She had started to fly in lazy ovals and with her engine power down to economic cruise when Esperanza looked at her.

“Our radar station is now giving the alert to our other radars and bases. Ingrid, you were simply fantastic.”

“Bof! Nothing that sixty years of air combat experience won’t teach you. So, what lessons do you think that you just learned about air combat, Esperanza?”

Taken short by that question, young Esperanza took a few seconds to think about her answer before speaking.

“Uh, use tactical surprise as much as possible and prioritize your targets by their degree of threat. Also, use our passive sensors to the utmost in order to help achieve surprise.”

“Excellent, Esperanza! I give you a ten.”

“But I would never be able to achieve your degree of shooting accuracy, Ingrid.”

“Now, no, but eventually you will get there. As they say, practice makes perfect.”

## **22:41 (Manila Time)**

### **Headquarters of the 15<sup>th</sup> Strike Wing**

#### **Danilo Alienza Airbase, Cavite**

A printout of the radio report sent by Lieutenant Esperanza Alito in his hands, Lieutenant Colonel Ferdinand Cruzeiro went to the large map table in the middle of his operations room, with Major General Jesus Alba and the commanders of his four attack

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<sup>12</sup> GPS: Global Positioning System. Worldwide navigational aid system using a large constellation of orbiting satellites and able to provide accurate locations down to a few meters.

squadrons standing at his sides as he studied the map, on which the location of the air battle which had just occurred was marked.

"According to the approach path used by the bombers Captain Dows destroyed, they must have come from an airbase situated along the East coast of mainland China, near or around Shanghai. I must agree with Dows that this is probably only the tip of what is going to be thrown at us tonight, so we will have to be ready to face more Chinese aircraft...many more. I intend to have three of my A-24s take off right now and take loitering watch positions here, here and here, so that they could detect any new wave of attacking Chinese aircraft and warn us of their approach. I will also tell our pilots to stay in passive detection mode, in order to keep the element of surprise. The rest of my aircraft will be waiting on heightened ground alert, armed for interception missions. My big worry is that our stocks of guided air-to-air missiles are very limited, always have been, with only a few missiles left in reserve once our aircraft will be rearmed for air-to-air combat. Maybe we should ask the Americans at Clark Airbase and in Subic Bay to loan us some of their stocks of missiles. It would also be prudent to warn them about this incident, so that they wouldn't be taken by surprise on the ground by any Chinese attack. After all, we share the use of those bases with them, making Clark and Subic Bay likely targets for the Chinese."

"I concur." said Jesus Alba. "I will also discretely advise the air attachés of Vietnam, Indonesia and Australia in Manila about this unprovoked Chinese attack. Maybe the political pressure which will ensue will be enough to convince the Chinese to turn around and stand down."

Alba was silent for a moment as Cruzeiro distributed orders to his squadron commanders, then spoke in a low voice to him once he was finished doing that.

"One thing I would want from you and your people, Colonel: don't mention Ingrid Dows by name to others outside of this headquarters and don't publicize her role in destroying those Chinese bombers. She already has been accused in the past by Washington of being a foreign agent working for us and I don't want this to attract more trouble to her."

"Understood, General: will do!"

Satisfied, Alba walked away from the map table, heading towards a telephone. In the process, he passed by the marker board on which the names and status of the aircrews of the wing were written in erasable black ink. One of the columns was titled 'Provisional 6<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron' and showed the names of both Ingrid Dows and Esperanza Alito

under it. Grabbing the attention of the sergeant who was in charge of keeping the board updated, Alba made a point of erasing Ingrid's name, leaving only that of Lieutenant Alito, then stared into the NCOs eyes.

"Captain Dows' name is not to appear on this board, ever! Do you understand me, Sergeant?"

"Uh, yes, General!" replied the thoroughly intimidated man.

### **23:16 (Manila Time)**

#### **Ingrid's loitering A-24, 60,000 feet above the South China Sea**

"Ingrid, I am starting to see dots appear to our relative heading 282 on our I.R.S.T. sensors: there are at the least a dozen of them."

"I see them, Esperanza. I also see another twenty or so dots which just appeared to our relative heading 176, but they are very faint, thus further away than your group of dots. I would say that we are looking at two separate groups of bombers: one coming from mainland China, the other coming from Hainan Island. What does our radar warning receiver system say about them?"

"The radar signals we are receiving are still weak and are well below detection threshold against us but they are definitely from Chinese-made radars."

"Then, send that data to Cavite via our encrypted datalink system. We want to warn your people well in advance, so that they can scramble their fighters. Too bad that Hiller couldn't deliver more than nineteen A-24s to the Philippines to date."

"We could indeed use a lot more A-24s, Ingrid, but those we have should hurt the Chinese like hell. Talking of hurting the Chinese, how do you want us to proceed, Ingrid?"

"Since the group coming from the North is closest to us, we will wait until they fly past us, then we will take position behind them and start shooting our missiles up their asses. You will be the one shooting our missiles, Esperanza."

Ingrid's copilot threw a look at her, utterly surprised and also stunned.

"Me?"

"Why not? You did very well during your type conversion training at Hiller and I believe that you have everything to become a great fighter pilot. You just need some extra practice. Once you will have methodically fired our six remaining air-to-air missiles

at those bombers, I will then engage the rest with our rockets and cannons, as I am a better shot than you with them.”

“But you could have claimed all of these bombers later on, Ingrid.”

In response, Ingrid gave a sober look at her young copilot.

“Esperanza, the job of a combat pilot is to defend his or her country and to defeat its enemies, not to pursue vain titles of glory. Braggards often end up being poor team players and, in war, you have to fight like a team. If not, you will end up with chaos and defeat, like Queen Bouddica in First Century Britain. Her army was ten times the size that of the Roman force she battled with but her Celtic warriors, while brave, were totally undisciplined and fought as if they were fighting a multitude of individual fights. As a result, Bouddica lost over 10,000 warriors in that battle, while the Romans lost less than a hundred legionnaires. Bouddica was then forced to flee with her two young daughters and ended up committing suicide with them, to avoid being taken prisoner by the Romans.”

“Wow! Talk about a lopsided defeat. You seem to know that story well, Ingrid. You studied ancient history?”

“I didn’t study history, Esperanza: I lived it! One of my past incarnations was as Brigid, one of the two daughters of Queen Bouddica. However, now is the time to think about the present. Send that encrypted data to Cavite and arm our missiles while I do a wide turn to end in the rear of that northern bomber force.”

Three minutes later, having received an acknowledge from Cavite and having flown to a position in the rear of the nearest bomber force, Ingrid was able to distinguish seventeen distinct thermal signatures on her I.R.S.T. sensors, four of which were much weaker than the thirteen other ones. Ingrid understood at once what that meant.

“Thirteen large thermal signatures, spearheaded by four weaker ones: I make them as thirteen bombers escorted by four fighter jets. The enemy commander apparently used his head after losing his initial wave of five bombers: he added some fighters as escorts for his second attack wave. You will have to target those fighter jets first, Esperanza, so that we could then deal with the bombers without being disturbed.”

The young Filipina pilot chuckled at those words.

“You make it sound like a bomber has no chances against a fighter aircraft, Ingrid.”



"Most of the time, it doesn't, Esperanza. With the advent of air-to-air missiles, defensive guns on bombers have basically become next to useless, unless the fighter pilot who is after them proves to be a complete idiot and goes for a gun pass instead of using his missiles. You now have the controls, Esperanza. Get those four fighter jets for me."

"Thanks, Ingrid. I will owe you for that."

"Bunk! I am the one who will owe you a cold beer for shooting those enemy planes down. Start with the fighter at the tail end of their formation and use one missile per target: with the number of targets we have now to deal with, we will need to make each of our shots count."

"Lining up on the rearmost fighter... Locking up on it with our radar... Target locked! Firing now!"

Esperanza, like Ingrid, closed one eye before firing her first missile, in order not to be blinded by the searing tail of flames trailing behind the departing missile. She then anxiously followed her missile as it flew towards its still unsuspecting target, until that Chinese fighter aircraft, which was carrying four big fuel drop tanks, turned into a flying torch. She then immediately locked on a second target, before it could react. Either through poor training or, more probably, rigid combat doctrine, that enemy pilot didn't react as quickly as he should and could have and was still in the process of dropping its external fuel tanks when Esperanza's missile exploded just below the exhaust nozzles of its two turbojet engines, breaking the Chinese fighter into multiple pieces and sending those flaming pieces down towards the ocean below. Esperanza's third shot proved trickier, as her third target had time to drop its external fuel tanks and was now doing a tight turn in order to face the A-24, some 5,000 meters away. Still, her third AIM-3B SUPER COBRA did explode while passing close to the Chinese aircraft, peppering it with deadly shrapnel. One of its engines now on fire, the Chinese pilot had no choice but to eject out of his doomed aircraft. That now left one remaining Chinese fighter, which was near completing its half turn and was about to face the A-24. Ingrid then spoke quickly two words in a firm voice.

"My aircraft!"

She immediately launched her aircraft into a zoom climb at maximum power, continuing to accelerate on her way up thanks to the tremendous power of her two engines, which produced more thrust than the present weight of her A-24. By the time the remaining Chinese fighter pilot faced towards where Ingrid had been, the limited detection arc of

his nose radar found no target in the night sky. With limited night time flying training to his credit and also being into his first true fight, the poor Chinese pilot swiveled his head in all directions, desperately trying to locate his deadly opponent. However, that opponent was already a good ten thousand feet above him and above a thick layer of grey clouds that was hiding the A-24 from the Chinese pilot, who swore violently in his oxygen mask: with his external fuel tanks now dropped, there was no way for him to continue escorting his bombers and still be able to return safely to base with the limited internal fuel he had. Turning around again to rejoin the bomber regiment he had been escorting, he spoke on the radio, calling the bomber commander.

“Red Arrow One, from Red Dragon One: I have lost radar contact with the enemy fighter and can’t locate him. It must have broken the fight after running out of missiles. I have now insufficient fuel to continue escorting you to the objective and will have to...”

The Chinese pilot didn’t have time to finish his sentence before his aircraft blew up in a big fireball, squarely hit by Esperanza’s fourth missile. The A-24, having performed a tight half loop at the top of its climb, followed by a half roll, then zoomed past the cloud of debris while leveling out of its vertiginous dive and pointing its nose towards the tails of the thirteen Xia H-6 bombers the Chinese fighter and his three comrades had been escorting. Having been given back the controls by Ingrid, a thoroughly exhilarated Esperanza aimed at the rearmost bomber, locking her radar on it and firing one of her two remaining missiles. The tail gunner in that H-6 bomber could only shout a panicked warning to his pilot before the AIM-3B SUPER COBRA zoomed past and very close to his tail gun turret before hitting and penetrating the bomber’s long and relatively thin fuselage, to explode inside a main fuel tank situated next to the bomb bay, which was filled with a good six tons of bombs. The whole bomber then disintegrated in a mighty fireball, with the bombs it carried adding to the force of the explosion. However, Esperanza, urged on by Ingrid, had not waited around to watch that and had already launched her sixth and last air-to-air missile, which blew one wing off another H-6, sending it down in an infernal spin.

“SIX! I SHOT DOWN SIX ENEMY AIRCRAFT! I NOW AM AN ACE!” shouted Esperanza, overjoyed. Ingrid was then quick to cool down a bit her enthusiasm.

“And we still have to deal with twelve bombers loaded with bombs and heading towards our bases in the Philippines. We will have to ration our remaining cannon shells and rockets if we want to be able to destroy them all. Time for me to take back the controls, Esperanza. Make sure to keep track of where all the bombers are.”

“On it, Ingrid!”

What followed could only be described as a methodical, one-sided massacre, as Ingrid started firing carefully aimed short salvos of 81 mm unguided rockets while staying out of the effective range of the 23 mm cannons arming the Chinese bombers. While the Chinese tail gunners only had a tail warning radar that gave them a limited ability to point their cannons, they had no night vision devices and had to point their guns manually. In desperation, those gunners started filling the night sky with tracer shells, hoping for a lucky hit, but their firing proved completely ineffective as the A-24 kept a distance of over 3,000 meters between itself and its targets. In contrast, Ingrid’s legendary shooting accuracy, millimetric wave gunnery radar associated to a fire computer, plus the fact that her 81 mm rockets were in effect hypersonic projectiles tipped with proximity fuses made the fight completely one-sided. She was also helped greatly by the Hiller NAWVS night vision system she had invented for the SKYTRUCK and had adapted to the SHARK, which gave her a clear and complete low-level-light and thermal visual coverage over the full sixty degrees frontal arc of her aircraft, with side, belly and tail cameras adding to her field of view. Esperanza Alito could only marvel at the fantastic accuracy demonstrated by Ingrid, while at the same time mentally praising the viewing and aiming systems of the A-24, as Ingrid destroyed one bomber after another in quick succession, firing no more than four rockets at a time per target. The Chinese bomber commander’ nerves finally broke when he was left with only four other bombers, ordering his pilots to drop their bombs in the sea and turn around to return to base in dispersed order. Esperanza, seeing this on her NAWVS display screens and heads up displays, looked at Ingrid, who was switching to a new target.

“They are dropping their bombs and breaking away, Ingrid. Should we let them go?”

“Nope! I am no psychopath or sadist and would normally give a second chance to live to my adversaries but, if allowed to return to their bases, those bombers could well be sent back to try attacking again the Philippines. We can’t afford that to happen.” While Esperanza doubted that decision for a short moment while thinking about the fate of the Chinese bomber crews, she quickly understood that Ingrid was right and resumed her watch of the sky around them on their radar and infrared sensors, helping to pinpoint to Ingrid where each of the fleeing bombers were. After another minute of air combat, Ingrid found herself alone in the night sky.

"We now are left with six 81 mm rockets and about 200 cannon rounds remaining aboard. Time to return to our air station to rearm and refuel."

Esperanza happily agreed with that, realizing how crushing a victory this had been over the Chinese. She however tempered her enthusiasm when she wondered how the rest of her air force had fared against the second bomber wave coming from Hainan Island.

### **23:29 (Manila Time)**

#### **Combat Information Center (C.I.C.)**

#### **American nuclear cruiser USS SOUTH CAROLINA**

#### **Transiting the South China Sea towards Japan**

"My God! Who is that guy? The Grim Reaper?" exclaimed Lieutenant Commander James Blackwell, the operations officer of the USS SOUTH CAROLINA, as he watched the air battle overhead on the giant display screens of his ship's radar systems. Captain Thomas Meredith, the commander of the nuclear cruiser, who was standing next to him, made a smirk at that.

"Well, if it is not the Grim Reaper in person, then that guy could apply for his position any time of the day. Seventeen aircraft shot down in less than twelve minutes: that's a truly incredible performance. The ordnance capacity of the Hiller A-24 the Filipinos are now flying is also very impressive. Do we have a data sheet on the A-24, James?"

"I believe we have, sir. One moment, please."

Blackwell punched a few commands on the computer of his work station, making a data sheet with a number of pictures and columns of information appear on its screen.

"Here you are, sir. The file on the A-24 is not as detailed as that on other aircraft listed in our databanks but I understand that Hiller has been quite avaricious about giving out information on their new aircraft."

Meredith bent forward to better read the data now appearing on the computer screen and whistled in wonderment after a few seconds of reading.

"That Hiller A-24 is a true flying arsenal. Look at that list of armament systems and weapons bays."

"Yeah, a flying arsenal with a huge fuel tank attached to it." said Blackwell. "General Dows sure designed an impressive aircraft with her A-24 SHARK."

"And I wish that our navy would think about buying a few of them: we sure could use dozens of them for the Pacific Theater. How are the Filipinos doing with that second bomber force, the one from Hainan Island?"

"That Chinese bomber force is presently being assaulted by eight A-24s which scrambled from Cavite some fifteen minutes ago. By what we can already see of that fight, I wouldn't want to be in the seats of those Chinese crews."

A few seconds later, the radar officer of the ship, Lieutenant Rhonda Smith, spoke up.

"Sir, the Chinese bomber group from Hainan has just turned back westward after losing fifteen of its 21 bombers to the A-24s. However, the Filipino A-24s keep pursuing them."

"Ouch!" said Blackwell. "This will definitely be a bad night for the Chinese air force."

Another operator, this one manning an electronic warfare station, spoke up in turn.

"Sir, we are hearing a radio message from that solitary A-24 over us, telling its base that it is returning to it to rearm and refuel. It's a woman's voice."

"What? Let me hear it, Lieutenant!" replied Captain Meredith, a nasty thought springing up in his mind. He however calmed down after hearing for a few seconds the female voice talking with the Jose Paredes radar station.

"That's not Dows' voice. For a moment, I thought that the kind of air massacre we just witnessed on our radar was just her typical combat signature."

"And what if it would have been Dows, sir?" asked Blackwell. "Why would that be controversial?"

"Why? Because we ourselves, along with the rest of the American forces in the Pacific, have been ordered by the Pentagon not to intervene in this conflict until the President decides how to react to it. Having our most famous combat officer, even when retired, involved in this conflict could prove, uh, controversial in some political and international circles."

Those last words made the operations officer grimace in distaste at what was in his opinion a cowardly and hypocritical political stance. He however kept that opinion to himself and resumed his watch of the radar situation over the South China Sea.

**00:11 (Manila Time)**

**Sunday, December 05, 2004 'C'**

**Aircraft apron of the Jose Paredes Air Station**

Having landed her A-24 back at the air station and having rolled it to the aircraft apron next to the solitary hangar of the station, Ingrid shut down her two engines, then looked at Esperanza.

"Go out and tell Master Sergeant Fuentes that I want our aircraft rearmed, refueled and checked out. However, he is to fill our tanks to only fifty percent of their capacity: we need to be nimble a lot more than we need a very long autonomy."

"Got it, Ingrid! Uh, what are you going to do on your side?"

"I am going first to copy on a portable data module the data and images recorded during our air combat, so that I could then retransmit it to Cavite, using the encrypted link at the radar station. We could at the same time go have a shower there while our mechanics take care of our baby. Then, we will need to get some serious sleep."

"A good idea about the shower and the sleep: I am soaked with sweat from the excitement and physical strain from air combat."

As Esperanza opened the belly trap of the cockpit section and extended down its telescopic ladder, Ingrid took out of one cargo pocket of her flight coverall a high-capacity data memory module and plugged it to the main computer of her aircraft. Three minutes were sufficient for her to select and download the data and video files she wanted to copy for further transmission to Cavite. With the precious data module back in her cargo pocket, Ingrid completed the shutting down of her systems, then climbed down the belly ladder, where she went to Basilio Fuentes, who was supervising his mechanics and armorers.

"Master Sergeant, me and Lieutenant Alito are going to visit the radar station, in order for me to use the encrypted link with Cavite there. We will also take that occasion to go have a shower: we are drenched with sweat. How many air-to-air missiles and rockets do we have left right now?"

"Unfortunately, we have only five missiles in stock right now: two short-range infrared-guided ones and three medium-range radar-guided ones. We are going to load them on your aircraft in the next minutes, Captain. As for our stocks of 81 mm rockets and 30 mm cannon rounds, we thankfully have plenty."

"About our 81 mm rockets, let's load a mix into the launch modules of my A-24: half of them to be HE-FRAG with proximity fuses and the other half being semi-armor piercing with delayed fuses."

"You are anticipating Chinese ships to attack us next, Captain?"

"Only playing it safe, Master Sergeant: up to now the Chinese leaders have been acting in less than a logical fashion in this crisis."

"Understood, maam! Your aircraft should be ready for more action in no more than an hour."

"Excellent! Do you mind if I borrow your jeep to go to the radar station?"

"Not at all, maam: after all, we brought it with us for just such a purpose."

"Good! Once I will be back from the radar station, me and Lieutenant Alito will catch some sleep. If anything happens in the meantime, don't hesitate to wake us up."

"Will do, maam."

With that taken care of, Ingrid joined back with Esperanza in their lounge cum bedroom, where they grabbed small bags of fresh clothes and hygiene products before jumping into the jeep parked next to the hangar and driving to the nearby radar station. Once inside the radar station, Ingrid told Esperanza to go take her shower first while she went to the station's operations center. There, an upbeat Major Bandong enthusiastically shook hands with her.

"That was a fantastic fight up there, Captain. You definitely lived up to your reputation."

"Well, right now I would prefer to not push my reputation around, Major, as I am not here with the approval of Washington. I came to use your encrypted phone and data links with the headquarters of the 15<sup>th</sup> Strike Wing, in Cavite. I need to send my mission report there, along with the data and video files from my plane's computer. Do you know how our other A-24 pilots fared with that bomber group from Hainan?"

"Yes, and they did very well indeed: they shot down nineteen of the 21 H-6 bombers they encountered while losing nobody themselves."

"Excellent! Show me where I could plug my portable data module, so that I could transmit its content to Cavite."

"This way, please, Captain, or should I really say 'General'?"

"Just 'Captain' will do, Major: I am retired, remember?"

"Well, the Chinese could be excused to think otherwise about that, Captain." replied Bandong with a malicious smile, before leading her to a computer station linked to a number of electronic boxes labelled 'Secret'. There was also an encrypted telephone set next to the computer, with a short list of numbers near it. Bandong pointed at one of the numbers as Ingrid sat down at the work station.

"This is the secure number for the 15<sup>th</sup> Strike Wing, Captain. As for your data module, I will plug it in for you and will open a secure data link with Cavite."

"Thanks, Major."

Letting first Bandong plug in her data module and punch a link for it on the computer console, Ingrid then formed the number for Cavite on the secure telephone, getting an answer after two rings.

"Captain Isidoro Makhanang, Headquarters of the 15<sup>th</sup> Strike Wing."

"Captain Makhanang, this is Captain Ingrid Dows, calling from the radar station at the Jose Paredes Air Station. I need to talk urgently with either Major General Alba or with Lieutenant Colonel Cruzeiro."

"General Alba has returned to Manila but I can get quickly Colonel Cruzeiro for you, Captain Dows."

"That will be fine with me."

"Then, hold the line for a minute, please."

"I will wait, Captain."

As promised by Makhanang, Ingrid had Cruzeiro on the line within a minute, with the wing leader sounding most satisfied indeed.

"Captain Dows, I must congratulate you on your incredible performance in the air. I must also tell you that your Hiller A-24 more than fulfilled its promises. My pilots are ecstatic about its combat performance."

"Glad to hear that, Colonel. I called your headquarters in order to download via data link the data and video files from my aircraft concerning my air combat. I believe that there are many useful lessons to be learned from them."

"I agree, Captain. You may now send your data."

"Alright, downloading the files now... Done here at my end. Did you receive the data correctly, Colonel?"

"I now have four data files and three video files in my computer, Captain. Anything else for me?"

"I effectively have a few questions for you, Colonel. First off, what is our situation in terms of ammunition stocks for our A-24s, particularly concerning air-to-air missiles?" Ingrid was able to detect a clear lowering of the enthusiasm in Cruzeiro's voice when he answered her.



"We are relatively well off in terms of HVSSR rockets but we are presently rearming our A-24s with our last air-to-air missiles, Captain. Our air force was never rich in terms of missile stocks and we just burned through nearly everything we had. This could in turn cause us some worries in the days to come if the Chinese persist in attacking us."

"Colonel, I believe that your pilots could learn from the video files I just sent you. Using 81 mm rockets with proximity fuses allowed me to shoot down H-6 bombers from beyond the effective range of their 23 mm cannons and your pilots could use rockets to good effect instead of firing off our last missiles. Did you ask the American units using Clark Airfield and Subic Bay if they could lend you a few missiles?"

From guarded, Bandong's tone of voice then became decidedly glum.

"General Alba asked them and their answer was 'no'. He was told that the American forces in and around the Philippines will not get involved in this conflict in any way until President Bush decides otherwise."

Ingrid closed her eyes for a moment while holding in a pungent swear word, then spoke in her telephone receiver.

"What about your allies around the Pacific, like Indonesia or Australia? I know for a fact that they were already holding stocks of AIM-3 SUPER COBRA air-to-air missiles even before ordering A-24s from Hiller."

"That is actually a good suggestion, Captain, which I didn't think about before. I will pass urgently your suggestion to General Alba, so that he could contact the Australia and Indonesian air attachés in Manila about that. By the way, how did Lieutenant Alito perform in combat?"

"Like a pro, Colonel. I can certify to you that she shot down with missiles four Chinese J-10 fighters and two H-6 bombers. You will be able to review her missile shots as part of the video files I just sent you."

"Six kills?! Wow! This young girl is on fire. Anything else, Captain?"

"One last thing, Colonel: warn your navy to watch for possible sea incursions by Chinese warships. After the pasting we gave to their air force, they may try something different next. On my part, I will go have a few hours of sleep, then will fly out and resume an on-station patrol loiter North of Luzon, South of Taiwan, so I could ambush any further air raids by the Chinese."

"Hopefully, the Chinese will become more reasonable after the defeat they just suffered but, to be frank, I don't really believe in that."

"Me neither, Colonel. Well, if you have nothing else for me, I will go have a much-needed shower and some sleep."

"Go ahead, Captain, and thank you again for the precious help you are giving to us."

"My pleasure, Colonel." said Ingrid before closing the line and then recuperating her data module before going for her shower.

## **08:02 (Manila Time)**

### **Aircraft hangar, Jose Paredes Air Station**

Thankfully, no other alert was called during the night and Ingrid and Esperanza were able after taking their showers at the radar station to sleep a full seven hours and then go eat breakfast with their mechanics inside the lone hangar of the air station. One of the permanent military staff of the air station had the nice idea to bring in and connect both a television set and an AM/FM radio receiver, so they were able to eat while listening to some music on that radio while waiting for the first morning television news, anxious to see what would be said, if anything, about the night air battles. Personally, Ingrid preferred that as little would be said about these battles, as the enemy could exploit any information given in those news broadcasts. As she had expected, the eight o'clock news on the main Filipino television channel spoke at once about the air battles, with a male newscaster looking sober while speaking in a calm, professional voice in Tagalog.

"Dear viewers, we are announcing to you that China tried to attack the Philippines last night, sending multiple waves of heavy bombers armed with missiles and bombs towards the Philippines. Those bombers are said by the Ministry of Defense to have taken off from military airfields in mainland China and on Hainan Island, in the South China Sea. However, those Chinese bombers were challenged by Filipino fighter jets and, when they refused to turn around, were engaged and shot down. In one instance, two Chinese bombers fired their cruise missiles towards the Philippines before being shot down. However, our fighters were able afterwards to destroy those missiles, which were flying slower than the speed of sound, well before they reached our islands. In the air engagements of last night, a total of 42 Chinese aircraft were destroyed, with no Filipino aircraft destroyed nor damaged. Consequently, the government has lodged a strong protest against China at the United Nations and is expelling the Chinese

ambassador in Manila, along with his staff. We are still waiting for official reactions from the United States government and those of our friends and allies around the Pacific but have heard nothing to date. Despite those hostilities, the government is enjoining our citizens to continue living and working as usual and to not give in to fear or hoard food provisions..."

Ingrid nodded her head, satisfied, as the newscaster went on other news.

"A good, balanced and reassuring newscast, with no sensitive military information divulged. That guy knows his job well."

"What do you think that the Chinese will do next, Captain?" asked a junior mechanic eating at the same folding table as her and Esperanza.

"It will all depend on how obtuse and vindictive their political leaders are. Unless their air force commanders are complete idiots, they will not wish to try again to attack us, as we showed them that we are far from defenseless. However, those military leaders do not decide what they will do: their political leaders will. In view of the number of utterly stupid moves those Chinese politicians did to date, including sending a Chinese Navy ship to drop off arms to Islamist rebels inside Filipino territorial waters, I am not too optimistic about seeing the Chinese become reasonable. A lot will now depend on the reactions from other countries, especially the United States."

"What if they don't react and simply clam up, Captain?"

"Then, expect more Chinese attacks in the days to come, Corporal. From what I know about the megalomaniac presently in charge of China, I don't expect him to decide by himself to ask for peace."

### **13:10 (Manila Time)**

#### **Aircraft apron, Jose Paredes Air Station**

"Ready for a really long patrol flight, Esperanza?"

"I am, Ingrid. Thankfully, our A-24 has its own toilet so, at the worst, I will have to take off my parachute and drop my flight coveralls around my ankles."

"That's the spirit! Well, time to climb aboard."

However, Ingrid barely had time to put one foot on the access ladder of her plane when Master Sergeant Fuentes, who carried a pocket radio linking him with the operations room of the radar station, suddenly shouted out in alarm.

"CAPTAIN, MANY INCOMING BALLISTIC MISSILES SIGNALLED ON APPROACH. SOME OF THEM ARE ABOUT TO HIT OUR AIR STATION."

"SHIT! UNPLUG THE GROUND STARTER SET AND GET YOUR MEN TO THE PROTECTIVE TRENCHES. I WILL TAKE OFF WITHOUT AUXILIARY STARTUP SUPPORT."

Without wasting time, Ingrid then quickly climbed the ladder of her A-24, closely followed by Esperanza. As soon as she was inside the cockpit section, she jumped into her ejection seat and strapped herself in, then started remotely her engines as Esperanza was still strapping herself in. With a quick look at her external view cameras to make sure that her mechanics were safely out of the way, she then started to roll towards the nearby runway of the air station. As soon as she was on it, she turned her aircraft to line it on the centerline of the runway, then gunned her engines to full power just as she was receiving a radio warning from Major Bandong, at the radar station.

"MISSILES IMPACT IMMINENT! GET OUT OF HERE, LADY HAWK!"

"DOING JUST THAT! GET YOUR PEOPLE TO THE SHELTERS."

Esperanza, who was watching the sky above them, then shouted herself.

"I SEE AT LEAST TWO OF THEM."

With its two engines at full power, the A-24, heavily loaded with fuel, raised its nose after 600 meters of ground roll, its wheels coming off the runway at the 740 meter-mark. Something hit the far end of the runway at that time and exploded, creating a huge crater and projecting upwards a large cloud of dirt and asphalt debris. Ingrid nearly lost control of her aircraft when the blast wave of the missile explosion hit her aircraft but managed to return it to a stable climb. Three more powerful explosions on the ground rocked the A-24 as it was quickly gaining altitude. Mortally worried about her mechanics and about the personnel of the radar station, Ingrid looked out and down to check on the damage on the ground. What she saw made her heart sink: one missile had squarely hit the radar station, obliterating the big radome of its main radar antenna, while a second missile had blown away half of the operations building. As for the last missile to hit, it had thankfully missed her aircraft hangar by some sixty meters but had still blown off most of its corrugated metal roof and had more than probably blown in all of its windows.

"Let's hope that our people will have had time to reach some shelter."

"What do we do now, Ingrid?" asked Esperanza, clearly shaken.

"We go take our patrol station as planned and wait for those Chinese bastards to show up. If they took the time to aim at our radar stations with missiles, then that means

that manned aircraft will soon follow them, counting on our radar stations to be neutralized in order to safely penetrate Filipino airspace.”

Esperanza then had an awful thought.

“Our other A-24s, in Cavite. Could they have been targeted with missiles as well, Ingrid?”

Ingrid clenched her teeth at that question.

“Could well have been. Contact our wing headquarters and see what their situation is.”

Her fears appeared to have been justified when an unsettled Esperanza looked at her after repeatedly calling Cavite on the radio.

“I get no response from Cavite, Ingrid. We may now well be alone in the air to defend the Philippines, Ingrid.”

“That Wu bastard in Canton! I could strangle him for this.” said Ingrid, referring to the Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party and his capital in Canton, which had been so since the nuclear destruction of both Beijing and Shanghai in 1973 as part of the American retaliation for the Chinese destruction of Taipei, in Taiwan, by a tactical, nuclear-tipped ballistic missile. By moving their capital to Canton, the Chinese leaders had hoped that its proximity to British-governed Hong Kong would deter any American strikes against it. In that, their bet had worked well for them. As far as she knew, the Chinese nuclear arsenal and industries, wiped out with American conventional weapons in 1996, had not had a chance to recover and rebuild, thus she was pretty certain that the Philippines was not now at risk of getting hit by Chinese nuclear weapons. However, ballistic missiles with conventional warheads could still cause a lot of damage, as the strike on the Jose Paredes radar station had just demonstrated. Ingrid was still climbing fast when Esperanza grinned and spoke up in triumph.

“Our 16<sup>th</sup> Attack Squadron was able to scramble in time from Cavite, Ingrid. Their squadron leader just called me back. He however reports that the Danilo Alienza Air Base has sustained some serious damage, including two craters along its runway.”

“He should still be able to land and take off from it if careful about it, thanks to the STOL performance of my A-24. Tell him to take a loiter patrol position some 250 nautical miles to the Northwest of Manila, so that he could ambush any Chinese air raid which could show up in the next few hours. Tell him to economize his fuel as much as possible and to fly high while keeping radio silence: we may have to stay on watch for

many hours before the Chinese will show up. As for us, we will cover the approaches to the Philippines' Northern ADIZ."

"On it!"

As Esperanza spoke on the radio, Ingrid continued to climb until she reached the maximum service ceiling of the A-24: 60,000 feet, or 18,000 meters. She then leveled off and reduced her speed to 350 knots, adopting a long East-West oval racetrack pattern. As she flew her patrol pattern, she furiously thought about what the Chinese were truly hoping to achieve with all this. Unfortunately, for a power-hungry megalomaniac like Wu Wey, power by itself, or the illusion of it, was often enough to push them to do things which would appear illogical or counter-productive to others. Right now, the best she could do was to be patient and stay vigilant.

One piece of good news reached them when Lieutenant Colonel Cruzeiro sent out an encrypted transmission some 35 minutes later, informing his pilots about the status of his headquarters and of the Danilo Alienza Air Base. Thankfully, the damage there was proving fairly limited, while casualties amounted to 27 killed or wounded on the ground and one precious A-24, which had been getting a maintenance check, seriously damaged on the ground. Cruzeiro also confirmed the validity of Ingrid's instructions to the other Filipino pilots in the air. The one bad news was that all three main military radar stations covering the Northern and Western approaches of the Philippines were down for many days at the least. That essentially meant that the A-24s now in the air would have to manage by themselves to detect and block any Chinese air raid to come. Esperanza gave a sober look to Ingrid after speaking with Cruzeiro on the radio.

"We will prevail over the Chinese, Ingrid. That I am certain of."

"Good! Confidence and fortitude are two desirable qualities in a fighter pilot. You will go far, Esperanza."

"Thanks! Coming from a great ace like you, that is the best compliment I could get."

Both of them then stayed mostly silent during the next two hours, only exchanging brief observations about what their sensors were detecting or not detecting.

Then, at around three in the afternoon, a large group of dots appeared on their I.R.S.T. sensors, with Esperanza reporting them at once to Ingrid.

“Woah! Large group of infrared contacts at Heading 010, coming from mainland China and heading towards Manila. They are flying below our flight level, probably at around 40,000 feet.”

“I see them! I count over forty dots, possibly a mix of bombers and escort fighters. I am going to step aside their flight path, so that they will fly past us without being able to detect us. Those Chinese airborne radars are still a couple of steps behind those made in the U.S.A. or in Europe. Once we are in their back, we will then shoot them in the ass one by one. We have five air-to-air missiles with us: you will be in charge of firing them, Esperanza. I will then continue the job with our rockets. Use our encrypted directional datalink to inform Cavite about this attacking wave but keep it short. Those Chinese may well be accompanied by an electronic warfare support aircraft, like with the first group we shot down yesterday.”

“Understood!”

Some twenty minutes later, as Ingrid was moving to a position behind and above the Chinese air armada, Esperanza was able to give a better count of their numbers.

“I confirm 24 H-6 heavy bombers escorted by sixteen J-10 long-range fighters and two electronic warfare variants of the H-6. That’s a lot of airplanes to shoot down, Ingrid. We will never have enough ordnance to take care of them all.”

“We will do our best, which is the most we can humanly do, Esperanza. When firing your missiles, concentrate on the escort fighters: they will be the biggest threats to us. Heck, they will be about the ONLY threats to us: those bombers’ cannons are no match for our rockets. Select your targets carefully and start firing your missiles when ready.”

“Acknowledged!... Firing first missile now.”

As they were flying in daylight and good weather, the tail gunners of the bombers were able to see the trail of smoke left by the first AIM-3B SUPER COBRA air-to-air radar-guided missile and shouted warnings to their pilots, who in turn warned the fighter pilots escorting them about the incoming missile. However, that did not save the fighter first targeted by Esperanza, who was blown to pieces as it was in the process of dropping his external fuel tanks. However that first missile did a lot more than just destroy one Chinese fighter: it also condemned the other fighters to have to return to base after this

fight, as their internal fuel would be woefully insufficient to allow them to continue escorting the bombers. That precise thing had been one big motivation for Ingrid to put such large internal fuel tanks in her A-24 and avoid entirely the use of drop tanks. At the same time, that design point had also allowed her to keep aerodynamic drag of her A-24 to the minimum, as carrying external fuel tanks increased very significantly a plane's drag coefficient, especially at supersonic speed. Ingrid let Esperanza fire two more missiles, which destroyed two more Chinese fighters, before speaking up.

"My aircraft! I will fly away at supersonic speed for a while to sucker in those Chinese fighters into lighting up their afterburners and go supersonic in order to pursue me. Then, with luck, many of them will burn so much fuel that they will then have no choice but return to their base, on pain of ending to have to parachute out over the ocean."

"Hey, that's brilliant, Ingrid!"

"Flattery will get you nowhere, Esperanza." replied a grinning Ingrid while she turned her aircraft towards the East. "That is a simple enough air tactic, but you are best using it when you fly a flying fuel tank like my A-24."

Pushing her two turbofan engines to full power, Ingrid quickly broke through the speed of sound and then accelerated to Mach 2.0, the maximum speed of the A-24, and this at a dizzying acceleration rate. In contrast, the Chinese J-10 could only accelerate much more slowly, so were outpaced from the start by the A-24 and ended up far behind it, too far to fire their own missiles. Two of the Chinese pilots still fired one missile each, wasting them through their poor tactical training and seeing them fall harmlessly into the ocean before they could reach the A-24. After a minute of that vain pursuit, and seeing the levels in his fuel gauges drop rapidly, the escort fighter commander understood his mistake and bitterly ordered his fighters to return to base right now, something that attracted an angry reaction on the radio from the bomber commander. Ingrid, who was listening to the Chinese radio traffic, chuckled to herself then.

"Well, if that bomber commander survives this mission, he will more than probably have this escort fighter commander court-martialed. I must say that I wouldn't blame him for doing that. Isn't it fun when your enemies are quarreling among themselves?"

"Sure is, Ingrid. You should write a book on air tactics titled 'Ingrid Dows' Book of Little Dirty Air Tactics'."



Ingrid's eyes and mouth opened wide on hearing that.

"YES! FANTASTIC IDEA, ESPERANZA! I will start writing it as soon as I am back in the States."

"Shouldn't you wait until we survive this mission before thinking about writing a book about it?"

"A good point!" conceded Ingrid, still smiling. "As soon as those J-10 fighters are gone, fire our last two air-to-air missiles at those two electronic warfare aircraft leading the bomber wave. Then, I will take over and shoot down those bombers one by one with our rockets."

"A good plan. Do we show mercy this time if those bombers abandon their attack and turn back towards China, Ingrid?"

"Did they show mercy to our people on the ground in the Philippines? No! China's combat air power must be broken for good. What we have faced yesterday, plus what we are facing today, represents pretty much the sum of the bomber force China has been able to rebuild since the pasting I served them in 1996. Chairman Wu is definitely a megalomaniac bastard but he is also a total incompetent when it comes to military strategy and has refused to accept the fact that China's military might is now only the shadow of what it had been. Let's nail that reality in his head. Then, maybe, someone with more brains in China will decide that it is time for Wu to go."

Esperanza could only nod her head at that, realizing that Ingrid was as much a master military and geo-political strategist as she was a master air tactician.

The 'battle' that followed the departure of the Chinese escort fighters barely was worth that name, with Ingrid and Esperanza again shooting down bomber after bomber while staying out of the range of the 23 mm cannons of the H-6 bombers, with achieved little more than fill the sky with tracer shells. Even that didn't last long, the Chinese gunners running out of ammunition after a couple of minutes. That allowed Ingrid to get a bit closer and to thus increase the already deadly accuracy of her rocket shooting. Now able to consistently hit each bomber with salvos of no more than two 81 mm rockets, she was thus able to shoot down all of the 24 H-6 bombers, which had given up and had turned North after losing half of their numbers. At the end of that air engagement, Ingrid still had 48 rockets left in her launchers, on top of having an intact load of 30 mm shells. While satisfied with her results, Ingrid shook her head after shooting down the last of the fleeing bombers.

"This is not true air combat. When I think of all those young men, now dead because of the hunger for power of one bastard in Canton. Esperanza, contact our other A-24s and see how they are doing."

"On it!"

Less than a minute later, Esperanza smiled at Ingrid, clearly pleased.

"Our pilots also massacred the bomber force attacking from Hainan Island, thanks to following your tactics, and are now about to land back in Manila, using the international airport's runways while the runway at the Danilo Alienza Air Base is being repaired. Also, we didn't lose a single plane today, except for that one hit on the ground by a ballistic missile. Should we return to the Jose Paredes Air Station now?"

"Yes! I doubt very much that the Chinese will try again to hit us today: they lost too many bombers, while they already fired most of the limited inventory of ballistic missiles they had in their arsenal."

"But, if their arsenal was this limited from the start, why did the Chinese attack us at all, Ingrid? That doesn't make sense."

"Most dictators in history didn't follow common sense when starting their wars of conquest, Esperanza. They only follow their greed for more power, their belief in their own invincibility and their illusions of grandeur. Chairman Wu most probably started this war with the intent to seize from the Philippines control of the South China Sea and its rich deposits of fish, oil and natural gas. Now, he is going to end up with nothing. Hopefully, his military officers will not be as much ass-licking puppets as the North Korean generals proved to be in the past and will effect a coup and throw Wu out...or kill him. The future of this war is now mostly in the hands of Chinese military leaders. What truly riles me in all this is that the government of my country still hasn't reacted other than by issuing a lame diplomatic condemnation of China, while refusing military assistance to the Philippines. I may just call President Bush once I will be back in Port Angeles, to tell him what I think of his weak-kneed policies concerning China. Wanting to preserve the commercial links with China is one thing, but to leave a good ally like the Philippines in the cold is inexcusable to me. I bet that he was listening to the 'Realpolitik' counsels of that Henry Kissinger asshole, who still has way too much political influence in Washington to my taste."

"Maybe you should run for a political position of power in Washington." suggested in zest Esperanza, making Ingrid grunt in disgust.

"Me, in politics? I will die before that happens. Well, time to return to our air station. Hopefully, the damage there will not be too extensive."

Ingrid landed back at the air station some 25 minutes later, the STOL qualities of her aircraft allowing her to easily avoid the single missile crater cutting the northern extremity of its single runway. Then anxiously rolling down towards her aircraft apron and hangar, she felt relief when she saw Master Sergeant Fuentes and all of his ten mechanics and armorers waiting for her in front of the damaged hangar.

"Thank God! Our mechanics are safe. I hope that the people of our radar station were able to also get to safety."

After reaching the parking apron and stopping her aircraft on it after pivoting it towards the runway, Ingrid shut down her engines, then all of her systems, before leaving her seat and going down the belly ladder after Esperanza. As soon as she was on the ground, she happily hugged Fuentes and every one of his mechanics.

"Guys, I am so happy to see you all in good health. How did our people at the radar station fare?"

Basilio Fuentes sobered up at that question.

"Major Bandong is dead, Captain. He stayed at his post while sending his personnel to their underground shelter. He was the sole casualty there but our radar station will be out of commission for a long while. Our purpose here may just have gone with our radars."

"You may be right about that, Basilio. Do they still have an encrypted link with Cavite at the radar station?"

"I believe so, maam. How did your air mission go?"

"You will be able to paint an extra 27 red stars on the sides of our aircraft, Basilio. I will however ask you to refill my rocket tubes and fill to half capacity my fuel tanks before you do that. Is your jeep still intact?"

"Yes, Captain!"

"Then, I will go place a phone call at the radar station. Esperanza, you go freshen up a bit and rest in the meantime."

Basilio Fuentes watched Ingrid as she went to their jeep and drove off in it towards the damaged radar station.

"What a woman!"

He then looked at his men and gave out a series of orders to them.

“ALRIGHT, MEN, TIME TO RETURN TO WORK. LOAD 81 mm ROCKETS WITH PROXIMITY FUSES IN THE EMPTY TUBES OF OUR A-24 AND FUEL IT UP TO HALF-CAPACITY. ALONZO, EMILIO AND MIGUEL, YOU START A SERIOUS CHECKUP OF OUR AIRCRAFT. I WANT THIS AIRCRAFT READY TO RETURN TO COMBAT IN LESS THAN AN HOUR.”

When Ingrid returned to the hangar, it was with a mix of good and bad news, which she passed on to Esperanza and to her assembled aircraft mechanics while speaking in Tagalog and in a calm voice.

“Alright, here is the poop from Cavite and Manila. It will take a day or two to repair the runway at the Danilo Alienza Air Base, so our A-24 will operate from Manila’s main airport for the time being. Our wing headquarters building suffered some damage but is now essentially back in operation. Unfortunately, the hangar sheltering the spare parts for our A-24s was hit and destroyed by a missile. General Alba already contacted Hiller in Port Angeles to order some emergency stocks of spares to be brought in from the United States. That will however take a day or two before those spares arrive in the Philippines. Since the radars here are down for the count, Colonel Cruzeiro asked us to return to Manila, where we will join up with our other A-24s. A SKYTRUCK will soon arrive to pick you and your equipment and remaining stocks of ordnance up and bring you to Manila’s Ninoy Aquino Airport.”

“What about our chances of getting more air-to-air missiles for your plane, maam?” asked one of the armorers. “We are now completely out of them.”

“On that point, we have had some luck, Fernando. The Australian government has promised to send up part of their stocks of missiles, and this within 24 hours. We will thus be fully back in business tomorrow.”

While the mechanics cheered that news, Esperanza appeared less than enthusiastic in her response, looking soberly at Ingrid.

“What about the United States and their air units based in the Philippines, Ingrid? Are they finally going to help us or at the least loan us a few missiles?”

Ingrid sobered up at that question, as what she had just learned about that subject during her phone call had truly infuriated her.

“Not yet, Esperanza. Washington is, quote, still studying the situation here, unquote.”

**09:32 (California Time) / 01: 32 (Manila Time)**

**Monday, December 06, 2004 'C'**

**Jeff Hiller's executive suite, Hiller corporate headquarters**

**Palo Alto, California, U.S.A.**

"Jeff Hiller here!"

"Hello, Jeff. This is Ingrid, calling from Manila." said a voice he knew well but that sounded a bit distant on the telephone line.

"Ingrid? Are you alright? I was worried sick about you."

"Don't worry about me, Jeff: I am fine. I called to ask you how that shipment of A-24 spares is going along?"

"A SKYTRUCK loaded to the hilt and piloted by Shirley Slade and Elizabeth Gardner left for the Philippines three hours ago. Apart from carrying spare parts, they are also ferrying for the Philippines Air Force a gift from the owner and CEO of Raytheon, Ronald Sperling: sixty AIM-3 SUPER COBRA air-to-air missiles, which Sperling is giving to the Filipinos for free."

"Wow! That's mighty generous of him. What pushed him to do that?"

"Basically, the disgust he felt at the refusal of Washington to support the Philippines in the present conflict. Sperling is a veteran of the Air Force who fought against China during the war of 1996. And he is far from alone in feeling that way: political pressure is mounting from all sides against President Bush's neutrality stance. Condoleezza Rice, his secretary of state designate, has already resigned from his cabinet over his present policies about the Philippines. By the way, you may not be surprised to learn that Bush has enlisted Henry Kissinger as his private advisor in international affairs."

"That hypocritical, opportunistic asshole! He should be banned from Washington for good. Look, it seems right now that the Chinese have run out of steam in their attacks against the Filipinos. They already lost over sixty aircraft, mainly heavy bombers, in air combat, with only one A-24 destroyed on the ground by a ballistic missile falling on Cavite. From what I remember of Chinese orders of battle from my time at the Pentagon, they should now have little left worth talking about in their arsenal. I spoke earlier on with Major General Alba, the commander of the Philippines Air Tactical Command, and told him that I was planning to return to the United States on the SKYTRUCK due to deliver spares to Manila, so that I could then ferry to the Philippines

the next A-24 that will be completed and ready for delivery. Do you have a date for that due completion, Jeff?"

"Yes, I do! Our next A-24 will be ready for delivery four days from now, this coming Friday."

"Excellent! Could you please have it painted in advance to the colors of the Philippines Air Force before delivery?"

"I certainly can do that, Ingrid. Anything else?"

"No, that's basically all I wanted to know and ask. I will see you in Palo Alto next Friday."

"And I will be happy to receive you, Ingrid. By the way, you are now a big hero for the American-Filipino community...and for a large portion of the rest of American citizens. Your exploits have by now become known here in the States, thanks to the fact that you are flying around in a plane with 'Lady Hawk' painted on it."

"Damn! My personal vanity got the better of me on this. Could this put me in trouble with Washington?"

"With some in the White House and in the Pentagon, yes, but if they make any move against you, they will risk a very strong reaction from the general American public. Hek, if you were not born in Germany, then you could run for President here and win in a landslide."

"You know that I will never go down to turning into a politician, Jeff, so I have no interest to get elected...to any office. On this, have a nice day, Jeff."

"You too, Ingrid. And stay safe!"

"Me, stay safe? I thought that you knew me better than that, Jeff. Bye!"

The line was then cut, leaving Jeff Hiller to look for a moment at his receiver before hanging up.

Two days later, the morning news announced the death of Chairman Wu, deposed and killed in a military coup in China, with a massive purge of the Chinese Communist Party following his demise. That same day, Jeff Hiller received requests for information concerning the possible buying of A-24s by Norway and Canada, two northern countries with relatively small military forces but both with huge areas of land and sea territories to patrol and protect, making that week a very good one for the Hiller Aircraft Corporation. By Friday, the new Chinese leaders approached the Philippines with an offer of peace and of compensations for the damage caused by Chinese strikes

in the Philippines. By then, Henry Kissinger had become too politically toxic for President Bush, who publicly dropped him as an advisor and then pledged the United States support to defend the Philippines from external aggression, a move that was then described by many in Washington as 'too little, too late'. As for Ingrid, she was finally able to return her full attention to her little Michael, while also returning to her regular job as Hiller's chief designer. However, she didn't return to Port Angeles empty handed, as the President of the Philippines very publicly honored her before her return to the United States by conferring on her the **Philippines Medal of Valor**.



## **CHAPTER 10 – A FAMILY CHRISTMAS**

**14:50 (Washington Time)**

**Friday, December 43, 2004 'C'**

**The 'D.C. Fives' mansion**

**26 Woodland Drive Northwest**

**Washington, D.C., U.S.A.**



Nancy, who was working with the help of her four band members to finish setting up and decorate their Christmas tree in the main lounge of their mansion, suddenly froze and listened, then smiled as a familiar noise of aircraft propellers grew nearer and louder.

"Ingrid is arriving in her AIRCAR!"

"Oooh! I can't wait to be finally able to kiss little Michael." said Sarah Weissman, the dedicated pianist, violin and bass player of the band, as she ran with the other girls to the entrance door. Nancy smiled to her as she unlocked the front door.

"How about you carry the portable baby chair for Ingrid, while I carry her bags, Sarah?"

"Deal!" replied at once the young Jewish woman. The five women barely took the time to put on a coat before rushing out of the mansion and going to the Hiller AIRCAR, which was now rolling inside the multiple bay garage of the residence. Nancy was in time to hug and kiss her mother when Ingrid stepped out of her VTOL flying car.

"Mom, it's so nice to have you for this Christmas. Do you mind if we help you with little Michael and with your bags?"

"Please, do, but don't fight about who will carry Michael."

"Too late: I won that fight, Ingrid." replied a smiling Sarah, who was about to open the door of the vehicle on the passenger side. The first thing she did with the nine-month-old toddler when she reached inside for him was to kiss him on the forehead.

"Hello, Michael! You are so beautiful! Let me take you out of your car safety seat."

Undoing the safety straps holding the toddler in his seat, Sarah then gently grabbed him and took him out of it, then proudly straightened up, little Michael in her arms. The other



band members, save for Nancy, who was helping Ingrid to take out her things from the aircar, ganged up at once around Sarah, all of them wanting to kiss and cuddle the child. That prompted a sarcastic remark from Nancy.

"Hey, girls, how about some help here, so that we could get little Michael out of this cold air?"

Her band members, properly chastised, did let Sarah bring Michael inside and helped with taking out of the aircar the portable baby crib and three bags stored inside the luggage compartment of the Hiller AIRCAR. They were all in the process of walking back in the house when they saw a Porsche 911 sports cabriolet turn into the driveway of the mansion. Nancy grinned with joy on seeing that car arrive.

"Leonardo is here, girls!"

She however took the time to bring inside the bag she was carrying before running out again and hugged and kissed her brother by adoption.

"Thanks so much for coming to our Christmas reception, Leo. Now, the family will be complete for the festivities."

"Not quite, Nancy: don't forget that we will be missing Hien, who needed to prepare the Christmas reception for her embassy staff in Hanoi."

Nancy nodded her head at that, acknowledging that forgotten fact.

"I wish that she could have been here with us, especially since we now have little Michael. After all, Hien was the first child adopted by Ingrid, back in 1953 Vietnam."

"And she is now 57 years-old and has a family of her own, Nancy. I am sure that she will have a nice Christmas and New Year in Hanoi."

"Still, it would have been nice to have her here tonight. Well, let's get inside now. As you could see, Ingrid just arrived with little Michael."

"I can't wait to hug and kiss both of them. Uh, don't repeat that to Ingrid but I was quite scared for her when I learned that she was fighting in the air again, in the Philippines."

"And you think that I wasn't scared for her as well? On the other hand, she was doing what she does best: fly an aircraft into combat, all for a good cause."

"Well, I am sure that she will tell us all about her exploits in the Philippines during this evening."

The two of them each grabbed one of the two pieces of luggage stored in the tiny trunk of the Porsche and, closing the garage door behind them, walked up the short flight of stairs of the entrance before entering the mansion. Nancy then led her brother by

adoption to one of the three guest bedrooms to be found on the ground level. Leaving Leonardo alone to unpack his suitcases, Nancy returned to the main lounge, so that she could finish decorating her Christmas tree. While she, like the four members of her band, were essentially atheists and did not believe in Christian stories, they all used Christmas to celebrate as a group the approach of a new year and to exchange gifts.

Nancy was finished with her decoration work and was in the process of lining up the group's various gift boxes and card under the tree when Ingrid came down to the lounge with little Michael while also carrying a large, bulging sports bag. Nancy ran at once to her to help her with the bag but Ingrid withheld it from her, instead giving her her toddler son.

"Don't touch that bag, Nancy: it contains the gifts I brought for you girls and for Leo. Here, take Michael instead."

"Sounds like a fair exchange." quipped Nancy, who then took the little boy in her arms and kissed him on one cheek. "You are so handsome, my little brother: girls will flock to you in a few years, of that I am sure. In fact, they are already flocking to you." She then handed the boy to Carmen Estrada, who had come to her and was waiting expectantly next to her.

"Here you are, Carmen. Don't monopolize him too much: Erika and Lucy are also waiting to hold him."

"Thanks!"

Nancy just had time to give little Michael to a happy Carmen when someone rang at the front door, surprising her and her band members.

"Who could that be at such an hour before Christmas?"

"Be careful, Nancy." cautioned Erika Lang, the band's drum player. "You do have a few enemies and detractors around Washington, and so does Ingrid."

"Well, if this really is someone with a beef against me or Ingrid, then he will regret coming here today." replied Nancy. She however did take the time to look through the peephole of the thick, armored door, before unlocking it. The person she saw, waiting patiently outside while standing in front of the door, made her exclaim in disbelief.

"NO! THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE! NANCY?"

With Ingrid, Leonardo and her four band members freezing while staring at the entrance door, Nancy quickly unlocked the door and threw it open, then stood aside to let in a tall,

athletic woman in her mid-thirties with long black hair and green eyes. Ingrid gasped in disbelief when she recognized at once the newcomer.

"Nancy? But you died decades ago. Wait! You must be Natai, in **Nancy Laplante's** form."

"Correct, Ingrid. I am Natai and I came in the shape of your dead adoptive mother so that you could truly have a family reunion for this Christmas. After all, my soul essence is what was your adoptive mother and, even though I am now an angel of The One, I still have strong emotional feelings about you and your family. So, I came here to complete the family picture and, of course, to be able to kiss your cute little Michael."



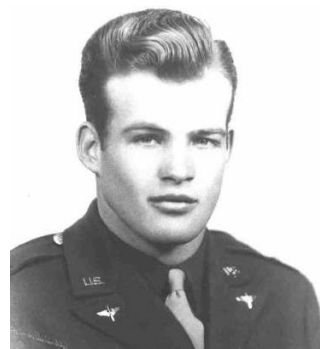
"Of course, Mother." replied Ingrid, now smiling. "Too bad that Mike's soul can't be here as well to celebrate with us."

"Oh, the soul of your deceased adoptive father is here with us, Ingrid, and will celebrate with us."

"Uh, what do you mean by that, Nancy? Mike died in an airplane accident back in 1942. Is he now here as some kind of ghost or invisible soul?"

Natai/Nancy Laplante made an enigmatic smile then and pointed at little Michael, still in the arms of Carmen Estrada.

"His soul is here, but in a very much visible form, Ingrid. Mike's soul was due for his next reincarnation a year ago and The One decided that the most appropriate...and worthy life he could next have would be as your son Michael. While he is still too young to start remembering his past incarnations, your Michael will eventually remember his prior life as my late husband and as your adoptive father, **Mike Crawford.**"



"Mike?" could barely say Ingrid, tears coming out as she stared at her toddler son. In response, little Michael calmly stared back at her and made a gentle smile.

## **CHAPTER 11 – NEW ASSIGNMENT**

**09:01 (Eastern Standard Time)**

**Monday, January 9, 2006 ‘C’**

**Office of the commander, 6<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment / 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Division**

**Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, U.S.A.**



“Sir! First Lieutenant Greta Visby, reporting back for duty, sir!”

“At ease, Lieutenant!” replied in a friendly tone Colonel Chris Walters, the commandant of the 6<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment. “Please, have a seat.”

“Thank you, sir.” said Greta, who was wearing her camouflaged combat uniform, before sitting in an easy chair set in front and to one side of Walters’ desk. The latter looked at her in silence for a second before speaking again.

“Lieutenant Visby, I have reviewed your academic record from the University of Alaska in Fairbanks and was very pleased with the high marks you obtained while completing your degree in Security and Emergency Management, along with a minor in Military Security Studies. I also noted your top performances in athletics while studying in Alaska: to win both the local biathlon and snowshoes competitions over both male and female opponents proved to me that you took good care of your physical fitness, something important for every true marine. Now that you are back in Camp Lejeune, you must understandably be anxious to learn what your new position will be here. Know that I saw the three top preferences for assignments which you stated in your most recent personnel form. They were all judicious choices which had lots of merits for both you and the Corps. However, a request for us to fill a particular position came recently from the Pentagon, prompting me to nominate you for that position.”

Greta felt immediate anxiety and worry on hearing those words: having the Pentagon decide where you went, rather than let the local Marine Corps unit commanders decide on a marine’s next assignment, was often not what the said marine desired. She however stayed silent and hid her reaction as Walters went on.

“That position is to be filled by early June this coming Summer so, in the meantime, you will take over command of the heavy weapons platoon of Bravo Company of the First Marine Battalion, and this until you depart for your new posting. I

know that you are a true fighting marine, Lieutenant, and that you want to command marines on combat assignments and in operations, but the Pentagon truly wants your services...as the Assistant Officer for Defense Cooperation at our embassy in Stockholm, Sweden.”

Walters, who had intentionally managed his announcement for maximum effect, grinned when his words made Greta shout out in joy while nearly jumping out of her chair. He waited until Greta calmed down before continuing.

“Your new bachelor’s degree from the UAF, along with the fact that you are fluent in Swedish, having been born and raised in Sweden, were the two main factors which designated you to the Pentagon. If you are in turn worried about ending up behind a desk and doing paperwork for the next two to four years, be reassured. From what the Pentagon told me, your job will involve a lot of field visits to Swedish military units and observation of Swedish field exercises and sea operations. You will also serve as a liaison officer between our embassy and our European Command Headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany and, as such, will often carry in person highly classified documents between our embassy in Sweden and the EUROCOM Headquarters. So, what do you think, Lieutenant?”

“That it sounds like a great job and will also be a golden opportunity for me to see again my country of birth, sir.”

“Excellent! To finish here, know that you will need the rank of captain before you could fill that post in Sweden, along with getting your security clearance raised to ‘Top Secret Codeword’. However, I am sure that you will prove yourself worthy of that rank and assignment. You are now to report to Major Kenneth Gomer, the boss of Bravo Company. You are dismissed, Lieutenant.”

Getting up and coming to attention, Greta saluted Walters, a smile on her lips.

“Thank you very much, sir, for nominating me for that position.”

“You’re welcomed, Lieutenant.”

She then pivoted on her heels and walked out of Walters’ office. She waited until she was walking out of the regimental headquarters’ building before shouting out her joy.

**15:24 (Sweden Time)**

**Thursday, June 15, 2006 ‘C’**

**International Arrival Hall, Arlanda International Airport**

**Stockholm, Sweden**

As requested by the U.S. State Department, Greta was wearing civilian clothes, in this case a female suit, instead of her Marine Corps uniform, for her trip to Stockholm. Since most of her personal effects and military kit had been sent in advance in shipping boxes, she had traveled with only one large suitcase, one travel bag and her laptop computer carrying bag. When she emerged from the jetway's corridor which linked her plane to the arrival hall, she immediately looked around for the immigration wicket reserved for diplomats and, seeing it at one end of the hall, walked to it, joining a short lineup of three other persons. When her turn came, the Swedish immigration officer took her American diplomatic passport and, quickly looking at the identification page in it, smiled and looked up at Greta.

"You were born here in Sweden, miss?"

"Yes, in Skaulo, near the border with Finland." answered Greta, speaking in Swedish. "I emigrated to the United States with my father at the age of fourteen but I always stayed a Swedish girl at heart and I am most happy to be back for at least a couple of years."

"Then, have a nice stay in Sweden, Miss Visby." said the immigration officer, smiling to her while saluting her."

"Thank you very much, sir."

Recuperating her passport and grabbing her laptop bag and small travel bag, Greta then headed towards the luggage carrousel hall, one level down from the arrival hall, where she quickly recuperated her large suitcase. Again, her diplomatic passport made passing the Swedish customs counter a breeze and she soon emerged into the arrival reception hall, where about forty family members and friends of the incoming passengers were waiting. Looking around quickly, she saw a mature man in a civilian suit and tie who was holding high a sign saying 'U.S. EMBASSY WELCOME'. Going to that man while pushing her luggage cart, Greta stopped next to him and extended her right hand for a shake.

"Major Kearny, I presume? I am your new assistant, Captain Greta Visby."

To her surprise and confusion, instead of smiling to her, the man reacted with clear embarrassment while still shaking hands with her and then spoke in an English tainted with a strong Swedish accent.

"I am sorry, miss, but I am not Major Kearny, but a locally engaged embassy driver. My name is Gunnar Almstrom."

"But I was expecting Major Kearny to come and greet me on arrival. Is he sick?"

"Er, no, miss: he is presently busy with another business at the embassy."

Greta frowned at that, rather non-plused by that reply. By the usual military etiquette, she had every right to expect her new superior at an overseas posting to come in person to greet her at the airport. However, since this was by no way the driver's fault, Greta nodded her head and smiled to him while speaking in her flawless Swedish.

"Well, that's alright, Mister Almstrom. Are we going direct to the embassy?"

"No, miss: I am going to drive you to the apartment reserved for you near the embassy, where you will find your shipping boxes waiting for you. You will have the time to unpack and install yourself in your apartment before having to report to the embassy tomorrow morning, at eight thirty. I will come and get you at eight fifteen tomorrow."

"How far is my apartment from the embassy, Mister Almstrom?"

"About 300 meters at the most, miss."

"Then, I will walk to the embassy tomorrow morning. You will just need to pass by the embassy before dropping me off at my apartment. I already have a fair knowledge of Stockholm: I visited it many times while I was a teenager."

"Then, I will pass the word to Lieutenant Colonel Merrick, the Defense Attaché."

Now frankly puzzled, Greta gently stopped the driver from picking up her suitcase and looked him in the eyes.

"Why report that to the Defense Attaché rather than directly to Major Kearny, Mister Almstrom? What is going on, really?"

The poor driver, looking more embarrassed than ever, finally decided to answer her frankly.

"I was not supposed to say this to you, Miss Visby, but Major Kearny has apparently gotten into some serious personal trouble and is due to be escorted back to the United States tomorrow."

That left Greta quite dismayed, to say the least. However, realizing that the embassy driver would not have been told any details about Major Kearny's case and probably had only heard rumors, she did not insist and grabbed herself her big suitcase.

"Very well, lead me to your car, Mister Almstrom. And don't worry about what you told me: I never heard it."

Almstrom nodded his head and smiled weakly, appreciating her accommodating attitude. A fairly short walk then led both of them outside of the airport terminal, where a big Volvo sedan with diplomatic plates was parked in a V.I.P. spot. Loading first her pieces of luggage in the trunk of the car, Greta then sat in the front passenger seat of the Volvo. Almstrom was soon driving the car away from the airport, taking the road leading south towards downtown Stockholm, some 45 kilometers away. While driving, Almstrom started conversing with her, providing her with some useful information.

“You were given Apartment Number 11, at Number 46, Lovisag, just west of the embassy, which is in the Diplomatstaden section of the Ostermalm District, in downtown Stockholm. Your apartment is already fully furnished, including a full kitchenware set of plates, cups, pots, pans and utensils. However, the pantry and the refrigerator were not filled, to avoid possible food wastage. You may take the time to go do some shopping on your own after your arrival, or you could go to one of the many restaurants lining up the waterfront to the south of your apartment building. There are five other diplomatic couples or families residing in your building, including Major Steve Harvey, the American Assistant Defense Attaché, and his wife and two kids. If you need anything or have a question, you can go see the concierge, Madam Lena Sarsgaard. She is a sweet, very helpful old lady.”

“I will certainly go say ‘hello’ to her on arrival, Mister Almstrom. You have been working for the American embassy for how long, if I may ask?”

“I have been employed there for over eleven years already and know pretty well all the staff, both American and Swedish. I also know Stockholm like the inside of my own pocket.”

“I will remember that, Mister Almstrom. May I just call you ‘Gunnar’?”  
The driver smiled at that, relaxing at seeing how friendly and informal she was.

“Please do, miss.”

“Then, please call me simply ‘Greta’ when in private.”

“Understood, Greta.”

They continued conversing in a relaxed fashion during the rest of the trip, with Greta asking for or getting quite a lot of useful tidbits of information, like the opening hours of various types of shops and commerce, the public transit system in Stockholm and the cost of various items and foodstuff in Sweden. Turning on Valhallavägen, a major boulevard which connected with the highway from the airport, Almstrom went



down next to the waterfront of the Diplomatstaden district and passed by a large, five-story building surrounded by a tall linked fence. The driver then pointed at it and then at a well-guarded and solid-looking entrance gate and guardhouse.

“The **American embassy, with its main entrance gate**. I will now go to your apartment building.”



Continuing on the Dag Hammarskjöld avenue, on which the embassy was situated, Gunnar crossed the next intersection and turned right on Ulrikag, a small street opening next to the Nobel Park (or Nobel Parken), then turned left after about fifty meters on Lovisag, before stopping in front of an old-style apartment building with a pink façade, pointing at it.



“Your new home in Stockholm, Greta: **46 Lovisag, in the Ostermalm District**. We will now go see Madam Sarsgaard to get the keys to your apartment, Unit 11.”

“I like it: it has a quiet, intimate look to it.” said Greta, smiling while detailing the five-story building, with its small balconies, pink bricks façade and rooftop dormer windows. Both of them exited the car, taking out Greta’s bags before entering the lobby of the apartment building, where Gunnar knocked at the door of Unit 01, next to the main staircase. A mature but still solid-looking woman answered him after about twelve seconds, half opening her door and smiling on recognizing him.

“Aah, Gunnar! What may I do for you today?”

“I am bringing in a new tenant for Unit 11, Lena. This is Captain Greta Visby, who just arrived from the United States. She speaks Swedish, by the way.”

Lena looked at Greta, eyeing her for a second before grinning to her.

“Welcome in Sweden, Miss Visby. Your name is decidedly Swedish-sounding, I must say.”

"I was born in Sweden, Madam Sarsgaard, and lived here for fourteen years before my father and I moved to the United States. I am here to take a position at the American embassy for the next two years."

"Good for you, my child. Just give me a minute and I will go get your set of keys."

The concierge then walked towards her kitchen while leaving her door open, something few people would do in the United States. She was soon back with a ring that held three keys, which she gave to Greta.

"Here you are, miss. You have a key for the building's main entrance, a key for your apartment and a key for your mailbox, which is next to the foot of the staircase. I must caution you that this building doesn't have an elevator: it was built many decades ago."

"That's alright, madam: I am big on physical fitness and climbing the stairs will be a good exercise for me."

The concierge looked her up and down and nodded her head.

"You certainly look like a strong girl, miss. Well, let's go up to your apartment: it is on the third floor."

Greta and Gunnar then followed the woman upstairs, with Greta noticing that the concierge was still quite vigorous despite her age of around sixty. She also couldn't help ask a couple of questions to her while climbing the stairs behind her.

"Gunnar told me that there are five other diplomatic couples or families occupying this building, including one American family."

"Correct, miss. The Harveys live next door to your apartment, in Unit 12. They are really nice people and have a fourteen-year-old daughter and an eleven-year-old son."

"And what are the other four diplomatic tenants of your building, madam?"

"I have one Finnish single man, one French family, one British single woman and one Norwegian family, miss. The rest of the building is occupied by Swedish tenants. About your apartment, your kitchen stove uses natural gas piped from a central system. As for your bathroom, it is small but was completely renovated to modern standards six years ago, along with the rest of the building... Aah, here we are! I will let you unlock the door of your apartment, miss."

"Thank you, madam."

Unlocking the door of her new residence and opening it, Greta took three steps inside, so that Gunnar and Madam Sarsgaard could enter as well, and looked around her. The apartment was fairly small and was composed of a living room combined with a dining space, a small semi-enclosed kitchen, a bathroom and a bedroom, with a large closet situated next to the entrance door. At the end of the living room was a door giving on a small balcony. Having just spent four years living in a university residence, followed by six months in a military room for singles, Greta didn't mind the small size of her new apartment. In fact, she had always been quite frugal about her personal needs, with most of her spare money going to buying outdoor clothes and sports gear and training equipment. Seeing the two shipping boxes that she had sent from the United States, now sitting in the middle of her lounge, she nodded her head at Gunnar and at Madam Sarsgaard.

"This will be perfect for me. I am now going to start to unpack my boxes and bags. I will walk to the embassy tomorrow morning, Gunnar. Thank you for driving me."

"It was my pleasure, Greta. Have a good evening and night."

"Thanks! And thank you for your help, Madam Sarsgaard."

"You are welcomed, my child."

Once both of them were gone, Greta went to her two shipping boxes and quickly inspected them. Thankfully, they did not appear to have been mishandled and looked intact. Greta then took about one hour to unpack her things and place or store them around her apartment. Once she was finished, she looked at her watch, which she had set to Swedish time while being driven from the airport, and saw that it was nearly six o'clock. An idea then came to her mind and she walked out of her apartment, going to the door of Unit 12 and knocking on it. A woman in her mid-thirties and with brown hair cracked open the door after a few seconds and looked at her with curiosity.

"Yes, miss?"

"Hello! My name is Greta Visby and I just arrived from the United States to take the post of Assistant to the Officer for Defense Cooperation. Is your husband home, by chance?"

"He arrived from the embassy some ten minutes ago, miss. Please come in."

"Thank you, madam."

As Greta entered and closed the door behind her, the woman shouted down the main hallway of the apartment.

“STEVE! CAPTAIN VISBY IS HERE TO SEE YOU!”

What followed then surprised Greta to no little amount. Before Major Steve Harvey could show up, the head and torso of a teenage girl sprang out of the door of a bedroom lining up the hallway, with a grin appearing on the face of the girl at her sight.

“THE VIKING SHIELD MAIDEN IS HERE, DAD!” the teenager shouted before running to Greta and stopping right in front of her, enthusiasm on her face.

“You’re a captain now, miss?”

“I am! May I ask where you heard one of my nicknames, girl?”

“It was mentioned a number of times in the news, while you were fighting in Somalia and in Afghanistan and you have since become my heroine. Oh, sorry: I didn’t name myself. I am Danica Harvey.”

Quite amused by all this, Greta shook hands with the teenager.

“Pleased to meet you, Danica. I am flattered to see that I am so well known around.”

A fit man in his mid-thirties and wearing a U.S. Army trousers and short-sleeved shirt came to them at that time and shook Greta’s hand.

“Nice to see you in Stockholm, Captain Visby. I am Major Steve Harvey, Assistant Defense Attaché. Please excuse my daughter’s exuberance: she considers you like a near superheroine since learning of your exploits in Somalia and Afghanistan.”

“Well, many other marines fought bravely there and I was simply doing my duty, sir.”

“Modest, too? I like that! So, what could I do for you this evening, Captain?”

“Uh, no disrespect to your wife and daughter, but could we speak in private for a moment, sir?”

Harvey apparently understood at once what she wanted to discuss about and nodded his head.”

“Sure! Let’s go to the lounge. Danica, could you stay in your room for the moment?”

“Sure, Dad!” replied the teenager in a less than enthusiast tone. Harvey’s wife also got the message and disappeared inside her kitchen. Following Harvey to the nearby lounge, Greta sat next to him in a sofa and spoke to him in a low voice.

“Sir, I was expecting to be greeted at the airport by Major Kearny. Instead, I found a local embassy driver waiting for me. That driver told me that I was expected to

report only tomorrow morning at the embassy, instead of reporting today to Major Kearny. What gives, sir?"

Major Harvey took a second to choose his words before answering her.

"Captain Visby, the sad truth is that Major Kearny has been relieved of his post yesterday evening and is due to be escorted back to the United States tomorrow by two of our embassy marine guards. To make a long story short, Kearny, who got divorced a few months ago, started seeing a local woman during the last few weeks. The problem is that we learned yesterday, via the Swedish counter-intelligence services, that this woman was in reality a foreign clandestine agent and that Major Kearny may well have unwittingly provided her with classified information. As far as I can figure it out, Kearny is going to face a court-martial and will probably be booted out on a dishonorable discharge...if he doesn't end up spending some time in Fort Leavenworth<sup>13</sup>."

"My God! Then, who will direct and supervise my work here, sir? This is my first embassy posting and I know little about ODC protocols and rules. Major Kearny was supposed to teach me that stuff."

"I understand that this could be quite difficult for you, Captain, but we at the Defense Attaché Office will help you as much as we can and you will have full access to Major Kearny's current affairs dossiers. Besides, your military record is quite glowing, so I have no doubt that you will manage and, as you say in the Marine Corps, will adapt and overcome the difficulties. By the way, my daughter Danica is genuinely in awe of you, due to your combat record in Somalia and Afghanistan, which was quite publicized by the Pentagon around the United States in order to bolster female recruitment in our forces."

"Great! I'm now a recruitment poster." said Greta in a dejected tone, making Harvey chuckle briefly.

"Hey, no good deeds go unpunished, Captain. Talking of deeds, you collected the Silver Star and a Purple Heart in Somalia, right?"

"You can add the Bronze Star to that, sir, for taking down in unarmed combat a suicide bomber in Afghanistan. The Afghans fighting the Taliban at the time gave me the nickname of 'The Lioness of the Khyber Pass' for that and for other combat actions there. That's on top of 'The Viking Shield Maiden' and of 'Calamity Jane', which I earned in Somalia."

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<sup>13</sup> Fort Leavenworth: Military jail in the United States.

“Well, if that could console you, know that many in my infantry division, The Big Red One, admire your battle record, Captain. Those same guys of course admire you as well for other reasons.”

That last sentence, said in an amused tone, made Greta shake her head in false indignation.

“Men! They will never change.”

“Definitely not! With that said, maybe I should let you go before my wife suspects me of some ill intentions towards you.”

It was then Greta’s turn to chuckle.

“Right! Thank you for clarifying the situation for me, sir. I will show up at Colonel Merrick’s office tomorrow morning at eight thirty.”

“We will be waiting for you then, Captain Visby.”

“Uh, before I go, could you tell me if there is a gymnasium or exercise room with weight-lifting equipment at the embassy? I am a bit of a fitness nut.”

“Don’t worry, Captain. Our physical fitness room is very well equipped indeed.”

“Then, I will bring my fitness training outfit with me tomorrow, sir.” said Greta before getting up and leaving Harvey’s apartment.

**08:02 (Sweden Time)**

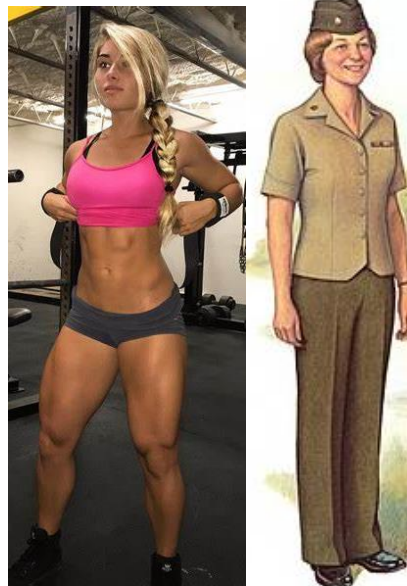
**Friday, June 16, 2006 ‘C’**

**# 46 Lovisag, Ostermalm District, Stockholm**

When **Greta** left her apartment in the morning to walk to the U.S. embassy, she did so while wearing her kaki **female Marine Corps service uniform with short-sleeve shirt, slacks, pump shoes and garrison cap**, plus carried a large black service purse.

A service dress kaki skirt existed for female marines but Greta didn’t like wearing skirts, mostly because her

legs were so muscular that they detracted with the wearing of a skirt. Her Marine Corps superiors had actually agreed with her on that point and had promulgated a special rule for her that allowed her to wear slacks instead of skirts at her convenience, and this with all types of Marine Corps uniforms. The people who crossed her path on the sidewalk as she walked at a brisk pace towards the embassy did eye or stare at her out of



curiosity but many wondered especially about her unusually muscular arms for a woman. In truth, she had won hands down the University of Alaska at Fairbanks competition in female weightlifting all categories, even equaling or surpassing the performances of the smaller weight male competitors and creating a sensation on the campus and in Fairbanks. Another thing that attracted quite a lot of attention and passing comments among the passersby was her impressive four rows of medal ribbons and her rifle sharpshooting and pistol marksman badges.

As she approached the main entrance gate of the American embassy, the two Marine guards on duty there spotted her from a distance and discretely detailed her while making comments between themselves.

"Check this out, Antonio: here comes our new ODC officer, Captain Visby. She's a real looker."

"Yeah, a looker with a killer reputation in combat. Look at all those medal ribbons: she is no simple paper pusher."

When Greta arrived at the main gate, the two marine guards came to attention and saluted her, prompting her to salute back.

"Good morning, maam, and welcome to the U.S. embassy. Which section are you heading to?"

"I am first going to pay a visit to Colonel Merrick, at the Defense Attaché Office. On which floor is it, Corporal?"

"On the fourth floor, maam, near the western corner of the embassy. Uh, may I see your passport and military identity card, maam?"

"Of course, Corporal." replied Greta, who appreciated the fact that this marine guard didn't assume who she was just on the strength of her uniform. Handing both her Marine Corps I.D. card and her diplomatic passport to the marine guard, she got them back after a few seconds, with the corporal saluting her again.

"Everything is in order, maam. You may proceed."

"Thank you, Corporal." replied Greta while saluting him back. First putting her two documents back inside her purse, she then walked briskly to the embassy building proper, entering its reception lobby and climbing at a near run the main staircase instead of calling one of the elevator cabins. She was barely breathing faster when she stepped on the fourth level floor, proof of her high level of physical fitness. Walking down the west section of the main hallway while looking at the brass plaques on the doors lining it,

she soon arrived at a door marked 'Defense Attaché and Defense Cooperation Sections'. Opening that door, Greta found herself in a fairly large anteroom/waiting room where a black woman was manning a work desk next to the door. Greta thus went to what was apparently a secretary and smiled down to her.

"Hello, miss! I am Captain Greta Visby and I came to see Colonel Merrick, at his request."

"He is indeed expecting you, Captain. I will inform him of your arrival." replied the secretary. While the latter grabbed her telephone and made a quick call, Greta looked around the room, noticing that there were actually six doors opening on the room. Three were marked as being respectively the offices of the Defense Attaché, the Assistant Defense Attaché and of the Administrative Assistant to the Defense Attaché. On the opposite wall stood three doors marked as the offices of the Officer for Defense Cooperation, the Assistant Officer for Defense Cooperation and, finally, the office of the Regional Security Officer. She was finishing her visual tour of the room when the secretary spoke to her.

"Colonel Merrick will receive you now, Captain Visby."

"Thank you, miss."

Knocking first on the door of the Defense Attaché, Greta entered on hearing a 'come in' and made a few steps inside before stopping at attention and saluting a senior officer wearing an Airforce uniform.

"Sir, Captain Greta Visby, reporting for duty, sir!"

The lieutenant colonel in his mid-forties sitting behind the work desk got up from his chair to salute her back, something Greta appreciated. He then walked around his desk to come shake hands with her.

"Welcome to Stockholm, Captain Visby. I am truly sorry that your arrival was preceded by a royal snafu<sup>14</sup> on the part of your would-be superior here. However, we certainly can use your services here at the embassy and I will do my best to help and support you during your transition to your new job. But let's sit and talk."

Stanley Merrick then offered to Greta one of the four easy chairs set around a low coffee table in a corner of his office, then sat opposite Greta in another chair and eyed her soberly for a moment, noting her four rows of medal ribbons on her chest.

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<sup>14</sup> SNAFU: Situation Normal, All F..cked Up. Common expression in the American military, used to describe a chaotic or really bad situation.



"Captain Visby, I have read your military resumé and I must say that I was impressed by it. You have proved yourself to be a first-class combat leader, with lots of intelligence, courage and strength of character. Also, the degree in security and emergency management you obtained at the UAF is something that fits perfectly with your new job here. Have you been explained back in the United States what your job here is supposed to be about?"

"Yes sir! I also read through the more recent archives at the Pentagon concerning the various reports and correspondence which emanated from the ODC office here in Stockholm, and this while obtaining my Top Secret Codeword clearance level."

"Excellent! Please tell me in a few succinct words what the job of the Office of Defense Cooperation in Stockholm is about, Captain."

"Basically, the ODC Stockholm is a subordinate unit of the U.S. European Command, or USEUCOM, and is also an integral part of the Embassy of the United States in Stockholm. The ODC supports the U.S. Ambassador, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency and the Government of Sweden. ODC Sweden provides a bridge between the U.S. and the Swedish military and defense sectors, with a view to enhance partnerships, maintain close cooperation, build near and long-term host country military capability and increase interoperability between Sweden, the U.S. and NATO. Specific areas in which the ODC provides assistance to the Government of Sweden include security cooperation and security assistance, foreign military sales, international military education and training programs, bilateral agreements, cooperative technology exchanges and research, standardization and interoperability of defense systems and munitions and, finally, technology security through end-use monitoring procedures."

Merrick could only nod his head slowly then, truly impressed: this was no dumb blonde.

"Very good, Captain. You nailed it perfectly. How is your Swedish?"

"I am completely fluent in speaking, reading and writing it, sir, since I was born in this country and spent my first fourteen years here. I am also fairly fluent in Finnish: while being raised in a tiny village in the Lapland region, near the Finnish border, we had many Finnish neighbors and I often played with their kids. I also learned a fair Inuktuk while living with my father in Alaska after we emigrated there in 1990, plus I learned a few words in Somali dialect while fighting piracy there."

"Wow! Better and better! Apart from being fluent in Swedish, what other skills do you have which, in your opinion, would facilitate your job in cooperating and liaising with Swedish military units and entities?"

"Well, I am accustomed to cold climates and arctic conditions, am a first-rate skier and snowshoer, am a qualified rifle and pistol sharpshooter, can hunt, fish and skin game and have plenty of battle experience. I will thus be more than able to follow a Swedish infantry unit engaged in a Winter field exercise, in order to report on its level of combat preparedness."

"Gee, Captain, you sound like a really tough cookie."

"That's because I am, sir!" replied Greta, smiling. Merrick also smiled then, decidedly liking this young officer.

"Captain Visby, I believe that you will fit perfectly in your new position here."

"Thank you, sir. Uh, are they going to replace Major Kearny soon as ODC officer?"

"They should but I doubt so, Captain. Finding qualified candidates is quite hard these days and choosing a new one may take months. Consider that you will probably be acting effectively as the new ODC Sweden during most if not all of your tour in Stockholm. However, me and my office will support you to the maximum in your job."

"I am most thankful for that, sir. About Major Kearny, in how much shit is he in right now, if I may ask?"

"He is in over his nose, Captain. After the Swedish counter-intelligence alerted us about his girlfriend being in reality a clandestine Russian agent, he was immediately suspended from his duties and placed under house arrest. Then, our embassy Regional Security Officer, Mister Charles Doherty, had our computer technician unlock Kearny's laptop computer, where we found a shocking mix of illegal copies of highly classified documents and of a large quantity of pornographic material, some involving pedophilia. Worst, that laptop also contained hundreds of exchanged emails between him and his Russian girlfriend, who was by the way passing herself as a Finnish immigrant. We thus suspect that Kearny may have passed on some classified information to that woman. The FBI is presently going through his bank transactions to see if he got any suspicious money transfers to his bank account."

Greta grimaced while wringing her hand.

"All this could mean years in jail, sir. At a very minimum, this will mean for him a dishonorable discharge and the loss of his benefits and military pension. If I would be our RSO, I would put him under suicide watch, sir."

That last sentence made Merrick freeze and open his mouth as he realized the truth in Greta's words.

"Shit! Excuse me for a second, Captain: I won't be long."

Merrick then nearly ran out of his office, leaving Greta to wonder if she had hit some nail that nobody else had hit before.

Merrick returned to his office after a surprisingly long delay of over four minutes, to then sit down heavily in his chair facing Greta, visibly shaken.

"Your words were prophetic, Captain Visby. I just went to see our RSO to tell him about your counsel. He then radioed one of the two marine guards posted at Kearny's residence, who in turn went inside to check on him. He just found Major Kearny, dead from hanging himself. The RSO is now going to inform the ambassador about this."

Greta closed her eyes for a moment on hearing that: Major Kearny may have committed some major mistakes or even crimes, but death was still a severe and tragic end to all this.

"May God have his soul! What a way to start a new posting."

"You can say that again, Captain Visby. Well, I was planning to present you to Ambassador Scott after our interview but I believe that will now have to wait."

"Indeed, sir! By the way, what can you tell me about the ambassador?"

"Well, Ambassador James Scott is a political appointee, not a career diplomat, and was a bank executive before coming here. However, he is an intelligent and caring man and is doing his honest best. He is married but his children are all grown up, so he didn't bring them with him to Sweden. I believe that you will like him, Captain. With all this now said, I think that I will show you your new office and open its secure file cabinets and safe, so that you could start studying the files and dossiers Kearny was working on. Follow me, Captain."

Before leaving his office again, Merrick took out of his own safe a small envelope and a small set of keys which Greta recognized as being keys for high security padlocks. He then gave her the envelope and keys.

"Here are the combination numbers for the 'Top Secret' level safe and the 'secret' level reinforced file cabinet in Major Kearny's office, plus the key to the padlock securing the 'confidential' level file cabinet he used, along with the keys to his office. I hope that you know how they should be secured before you leave after work, Captain."

"I certainly do, sir." answered Greta while taking the envelope and keys from Merrick.

"Good! Let's install you in your new kingdom...or queendom, if you prefer."

Following Merrick out of his office, Greta crossed the waiting room and ended into the office marked as 'ODC Officer'. As she was glancing around the fair-sized office, Merrick went to a small framed picture showing a balding U.S. Army major and unhooked it from one of the walls.

"You will now have a spot to hook your own picture, Captain. Did you bring one with you from the United States?"

"Uh, no, sir: I am not into narcissism and, contrary to many other weightlifters, I don't kiss my muscles in the morning. I let men do that."

That made the Airforce officer chuckle briefly at her joke.

"That's a good one, Captain. Here is another joke in the same vein, one that us transport pilots tell about fighter pilots: how many fighter pilots does it take to change a lightbulb?"

"Uh, I don't know, sir."

"One! He holds the lightbulb while expecting the Universe to rotate around him."

"Nice! I wonder how ex-General Dows would have reacted to that joke, sir."

"Knowing how unconventional her thinking was, I am sure that she has a good sense of humor. Well, let's get back to your new line of work. Before yesterday, Major Kearny had two main files he was working on at the time. One concerned a proposal by USEUCOM to enlist the help of the Swedish Army into training some of our infantrymen on Winter warfare and survival techniques. The other was about a recent bid by the Swedish ordnance manufacturer FFV to propose to us a new light antitank weapon to be used by infantrymen. Do you have experience in using antitank weapons, Captain?"

Greta grinned at that question and nodded her head.

"I sure do, sir! In Armenia, I stopped an enemy BTR-70 armored personnel carrier by firing my rifle-mounted grenade launcher unit, while I took out an armored Range Rover car with the same weapon in Somalia. In Afghanistan, my platoon's

antitank detachment took out four Pakistani T-55 medium tanks while we were defending the Khyber Pass. Anything that could help our foot soldiers oppose enemy armor is of high interest to me, sir.”

“Excellent! Your job concerning that file will mostly be to check out that new FFV weapon and see if their proposal is worth passing on to the Pentagon for technical and field evaluation. On the other current dossier, you are to get all the details you can get about that Swedish Army training proposal and to evaluate its worth. In view of your extensive arctic experience, I believe that you will be the perfect person to evaluate that training proposal. Read as well through the other files in Major Kearny’s ‘in’ basket but concentrate mostly on those two files.”

“Understood, sir! I will get on these right away.”

“Excellent! I will now leave you in peace, so that you can start looking at those files. Don’t hesitate to come and see me if you hit any kind of glitch or have a question.”

“I will, sir.”

Merrick nodded once his head at that, then left Greta’s new office.

It took her only a few minutes to unlock her safe and her two secure file cabinets and to take out of them all the classified files marked as ‘ongoing’ or ‘under evaluation’, spreading them on top of the large work desk that was now hers. Going through them, she did a quick triage, separating the current files of primary interest from the less pressing ones and sat down to start reading them while taking notes. It was past ten in the morning when Lieutenant Colonel Merrick came to see her, knocking first on her office door before sticking his head inside.

“The ambassador wishes to see you now, Captain Visby.”

“Just give me a minute and I will be with you, sir.” replied Greta before quickly grabbing the classified files and putting them into her safe, then locking back her safe and cabinets. Merrick nodded in approval as she did so.

“You do know and apply the correct security rules about classified material, Captain. Well done!”

As soon as her last file cabinet was closed and locked, Greta then followed Merrick out of her office and out into the main hallway of the fourth floor. Going to the central staircase section, she followed him up to the top floor and went down the hallway with him before entering what proved to be a secretary’s anteroom, to which the ambassador’s office was connected. After presenting both of them to the ambassador’s

secretary, Merrick then led Greta inside the ambassador's office, a large room with carpeted floor and polished wood furniture. Ambassador James Scott proved to be a man in his early fifties with graying brown hair and short beard, brown eyes and a bit of a paunch. Scott came at once from behind his big work desk to come shake hands with Greta, who saluted him on her entrance.

"Captain Greta Visby, reporting as requested, Mister Ambassador."

"I am happy to meet you, Captain Visby. I just wished that the circumstances and timing of your arrival would have been less dramatic. Did Colonel Merrick brief you on your new job?"

"He did, sir. I already started reviewing the work files in the ODC's office."

"Good! Have you had time yet to make your administrative 'in' clearances into the embassy?"

"Not yet, Mister Ambassador."

"Then, take the rest of the day to do your administrative 'in' clearances, then go back to your apartment, so that you could stock it with fresh foodstuff and domestic products. If you wish so, you may also take this weekend off, so that you could get acquainted with your new neighborhood."

"Saturday will be ample enough for me to do so, sir. I already know Stockholm fairly well from the past visits I paid it while living my first fourteen years in Sweden."

"So, you must be fluent in Swedish, right?"

"I am, sir! I also am fluent in Finnish."

"Excellent! Do you have any question about your new posting that is bothering you, Captain?"

"Only one, sir! I did read about Swedish laws and regulations concerning firearms possessions, and this before departing the United States. I have sent in advance five firearms I own via diplomatic courier bag, but I am still not clear about legal weapons carry as a member of the embassy staff, Mister Ambassador."

"Well, Major Kearny's misadventures have in fact raised the profile of that matter and I have asked the Swedish government to clarify who in our embassy staff is cleared to carry weapons outside the embassy and in what circumstances. You may ask my administrative officer, Mister Rolf Eyerdahl, about that while making your 'in' clearances. Anything else, Captain Visby?"

"No, sir!"

"Then, I will not hold you longer. Again, welcome to Stockholm and to my embassy, Captain."

"Thank you, Mister Ambassador." said Greta before saluting Scott and then pivoting on her heels to march out with Merrick. Once back in the main hallway, Merrick stopped for a moment to face her.

"Due to the brouhaha about Major Kearny, I will have to go take care of a few urgent things. You are now free to go see Mister Eyerdahl, whose section is on the second floor, and to start your 'in' clearance procedures. I will probably see you next on Monday, Captain. Take all the time you need to install yourself in Stockholm."

"Thank you, sir. I however intend to come work on Sunday in order to continue getting acquainted with my ODC work files. Most stores in Sweden are closed on Sundays, while I don't practice religion, so will have little to do that day but work."

"I appreciate your dedication to duty, Captain, truly. See you on Monday." Merrick then walked away to return to his office, leaving Greta free to go down to the second floor in order to start her 'in' clearances. Despite having just been given a free rein for the next three days, Greta knew that she was going to be quite busy during her first weeks in Stockholm, both with her work and with establishing herself in her new apartment and neighborhood.

## **CHAPTER 12 – MANAGING PARENTHOOD AND WORK**

**07:43 (Seattle Time)**

**Tuesday, June 20, 2006 ‘C’**

**‘The Little Angels’ Daycare, Hiller aircraft plant**

**William R. Fairchild International Airport**

**Port Angeles, Washington State, U.S.A.**



When it was time for **Ingrid** to return to full-time work after taking a six-month maternity leave, she had been faced with a problem common to all working mothers: how to ensure that her child would be properly cared for while she went to work. At first, she had used a sweet, mature woman neighbor to care for little Michael. Then, as her son passed his first birthday and needed more and more vital attention from her to his upbringing and development, Ingrid had resolved to have him within easy reach of herself while she worked at the Hiller aircraft plant. At first, she had arranged for a small room near her office to be converted into a nursery and had engaged the services of a young babysitter. However, not completely satisfied with that solution, she had pushed a special project to Jeff Hiller to build a new annex to the aircraft plant which would serve as a daycare center to be used by the babies, toddlers and kindergarten-age children of the Hiller employees, and had offered part of her not inconsiderable fortune, made through the royalties from her various aeronautical engineering patents, to help finance the construction, staffing and operation of that planned daycare annex. When the word had spread around the airport about the building of a local daycare, Ingrid had then received dozens of requests for places in it once completed, coming mostly from female employees of the airport and of the local airlines flying from Port Angeles. Ingrid's reaction to that had been to scale up the project, in order to provide more places, and had also thrown in more of her money to finance that expansion, adding things not normally found in most American daycare centers of the time, while keeping the cost to parents for getting a space in it for their children low. As a result, the daycare center had become a booming success and had helped many young mothers who had been struggling before to find adequate care for their children while preserving their present jobs.



This Tuesday morning, Ingrid was in good spirits as she was in the process of dropping off her little Michael at 'The Little Angels' daycare. Now two years and three months-old, little Michael was proving to be a real sweetheart and an easy child to care for, possibly due in part to him being more mature for his age thanks to him starting to remember his past incarnations. There was also of course the fact that he was a half-Celestial, like Nancy, and had a link to The One. Whatever the reasons, the employees of the daycare positively adored Michael, something that made Ingrid immensely proud. As Ingrid was about to hand over her son to one of the daycare employees, a young woman named Katy who had a diploma in child education, little Michael threw his arms open and looked up at his mother, speaking two words in his little voice.

"Kiss, Mommy!"

"Of course, my little angel." replied Ingrid before picking him up and holding him against her. Katy smiled as Michael and Ingrid exchanged kisses on their cheeks.

"Oooh, that is so sweet, Ingrid. You have a truly beautiful boy."

"Thanks! However, I dread the time when he will start chasing girls."

Katy chuckled at that.

"And I am sure that he will attract them like bees to honey, Ingrid."

"That is exactly what I am afraid of, Katy. Here you are! I should come and pick Michael up at around five this afternoon."

"Then, it will be Kimi who will be in charge of him at that time. You put his little bathing suit in his bag? He loves so much playing in the toddlers' pool of the daycare."

"I know and I did include his bathing suit in his bag. He also loves it when I bring him to the shores of the Juan de Fuca Strait, near my home. Well, have fun with him. Be nice with Katy, Michael."

Her son waved back at her as she started to walk away, making her sigh with regret at having to leave him to go to work.

Climbing the set of stairs leading to the upper section, which contained the staff's offices and storage rooms of the daycare center, Ingrid then used her Hiller magnetic security pass to unlock the thick glass door of the overhead communication bridge linking the daycare annex to the main building of the Hiller aircraft design and production plant. That covered bridge, lined with tough glass walls, had been built to allow the Hiller employees who dropped off their children at the daycare center to then get quickly to

their work and to be able to pay short visits to their kids during the day, something she herself did often. With that overhead bridge connecting directly with the executive and administrative offices floor of the plant, she then walked into her aircraft design section a mere two minutes after leaving the daycare center. Entering her personal office, she sat behind her desk and unlocked her work computer, a powerful model designed to handle large amount of data at very high speed. In fact, her work computer was about the fastest and most powerful model one could find on the market, short of a mainframe computer. That was no frivolous choice, as the computer-aided design program she used for her work needed to be fast and powerful, with lots of memory capacity. Once her computer had booted up, she immediately checked her email 'in' box and grinned when she found one email sent to her yesterday evening by the research and design department of the aeronautical engine division of General Electric, a major producer of advanced jet engines. That email had in fact a pretty large data file attached to it.

"Yes! G.E. has finally completed its study via supersonic wind tunnel and computer simulation of their G.E. 120 combined with a DSI air inlet."

First taking the precaution to pass that email's file attachment through an anti-virus program, she then saved a copy of it into her personal work databank. Only once that was done did she open the said data file and started avidly reading it. It took her a good fifteen minutes to review the text, aerodynamic flow charts and equations in it, taking some hand notes as she read through the file. By the time she finished reading it, she sat back in her chair, very satisfied by the results of the study done by G.E. She now had the perfect engine to power her proposed TRAN-SONIC supersonic airliner. The fuselage of the TRAN-SONIC, the main part of the aircraft that would transport the passengers and the cargo payload, had already been designed by her, with her team of engineers and technicians now busy producing the detailed production sketches for that part of her aircraft. The wings had also been designed separately, with their production sketched also being done. Only the engines sections, to be added and adapted to the wings and fuselage, had to wait until she could select a proper type of engine for her TRAN-SONIC. Now that G.E. had done its part, her supersonic airliner project could now be finalized, with a prototype to be then built once all the design drawings would be completed. If her TRAN-SONIC design proved a success, then Hiller was going to be in the enviable position of being the sole producer in the World of a commercially viable supersonic airliner of the kind that could at last make trans-Pacific trips reasonably short.

## **CHAPTER 13 – INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION**

**08h50 (Sweden Time)**

**Monday, June 26, 2006 ‘C’**

**Defense Materiel Administration (FMV)**

**# 62 Banèrgatan, Stockholm**



Freja Lindstrom, a civilian employee of the Swedish Defense Materiel Administration, or FMV, had been tasked by her superior, Major Björn Holmgren, to post herself at the main entrance of the FMV headquarters building in order to greet and then guide the new American ODC officer up to his office. The only thing she knew about the American officer she was expecting to arrive at any time now was that she was a female U.S. Marine Corps officer named Captain Greta Visby and that she spoke fluent Swedish. Holmgren was particularly anxious to meet that new American ODC officer, as the suicide of Major Kearny had sent a shockwave through the FMV headquarters. There were strong suspicions that some of the classified information which had been passed on to the American embassy could well have been compromised in the sordid espionage case in which Kearny had been entangled. There were thus many still unanswered and very serious questions about the security of that information.

Freja was expecting this Captain Visby to arrive by car at the FMV headquarters, so was surprised to see a tall, blond American Marine Corps female officer walk into the parking lot of the building, coming from the sidewalk along Banerg Street. She wore a khaki two-piece uniform consisting of a short-sleeve shirt and a pair of trousers and also wore on her back a small backpack, while a wedge-shaped service cap crowned her head. Her walk was energetic, yet she didn't seem to be fatigued in the least. As she got closer to the main entrance where Freja was waiting, the latter couldn't help note the impressive collection of medal ribbons pinned to her shirt's left-side chest. While Freja knew little about American medals, the number of ribbons pinned on the blonde was out of the ordinary for such a low-ranking officer. Compared to her, most Swedish officers had only a handful of medal ribbons on their uniforms. Freja was also able to read the

nametag worn by the newcomer as she got closer to the main doors. As the American woman, who appeared to be about the same age as her, stopped in front of her, Freja offered her right hand for a shake and smiled to her.

“Good morning, Captain Visby! I am Freja Lindstrom, secretary to Major Björn Holmgren, and I was tasked by him to guide you to his office.”

“Pleased to meet you, Miss Lindstrom.” replied Greta while shaking hands with the secretary. “Show me the way.”

“We are going up to the third floor, Captain. Uh, do you have any weapons with you? Visitors to FMV headquarters are not allowed to be armed.”

Greta rolled her eyes at those words and her expression showed some frustration then.

“No, I am not armed, miss. My request for a gun carrying permit is still being processed by your police administration, even though I have diplomatic status. I am as well still waiting for gun possession permits for the firearms I brought from the United States via diplomatic bag. The Stockholm police firearms permit department is proving particularly obtuse about delivering a permit for my **DESERT EAGLE .50 caliber pistol**, which I am very proud of, by the way. According to them, handguns can only get a permit for shooting club use and they didn’t believe me when I told them that I use that pistol to hunt, not to simply practice. Worse, even if I registered my pistol for a practice shooting permit, no Swedish gun club allows handguns of .50 caliber, saying that they are too powerful. So, I am stuck in limbo right now. The only place I will be able to keep my DESERT EAGLE right now is at my embassy. Thankfully, our marine security detachment has an indoor gun range in the basement of the embassy, so I will at least be able to practice with it there.”



Freja didn’t comment about that as she led Greta towards the bank of elevators at the end of the reception lobby. While Swedish citizens could legally acquire firearms, either for the purpose of firing practice at licensed shooting clubs or for hunting, after filling the legal requirements for firearms ownership and getting the necessary permits from their police station, carrying a handgun and using it for self-protection was illegal in Sweden, except in a very few special cases. That was in sharp contrast to what Freja believed to be the crazy free-for-all situation in terms of weapons possession and carrying in the United States. As they were waiting for a cabin to arrive on the ground level floor, a

young Swedish Airforce officer couldn't help stare at the impressive four rows of medal ribbons on Greta's chest, which contrasted to the two ribbons worn by him. Greta smiled on noticing the young lieutenant's interest, suspecting that part of it was directed at her chest proper instead of at her ribbons.

"Uh, may I ask what are the medals you won, Miss?"

"Sure, Lieutenant! From the top down and in order of precedence, you have the Silver Star, the Bronze Star, the Purple Heart, the Navy Commendation Medal, which I won in 1996 in the Caucasus, the Combat Action Ribbon for the Caucasus and Somalia, the Marine Corps Good Conduct Medal, the Marine Corps Expeditionary Medal, again for the Caucasus and Somalia, the Caucasus War Campaign Medal, the Somalia Anti-Piracy Campaign Medal, the Overseas Service Ribbon and the Sea Service Ribbon. Below my medal ribbons are the Rifle Sharpshooter Badge and the Pistol Marksman Badge. May I ask you in turn about your two ribbons, Lieutenant?"

The young Swedish officer blushed a bit then, definitely intimidated by the amount and precedence of her medals.

"I got the Armed Forces International Service Medal, for service in Cyprus, and the Armed Forces Reserve Officer Medal. Those two top medals of yours, aren't they for bravery, Miss?"

"The Silver Star and the Bronze Star are effectively bravery medals and come directly after the Congressional Medal of Honor and the Navy Cross. My third medal, the Purple Heart, is given for wounds sustained in combat. In my case, I suffered a commotion from the blast of a suicide bomber in Somalia. Thankfully, I didn't suffer any lasting sequel."

Their elevator cabin arrived at that time, with the young lieutenant keeping to himself any further questions to her as the trio entered the cabin.

Greta followed Freja out of the elevator once on the third floor and walked down a large hallway with a floor covered with linoleum tiles, until they arrived at a door marked 'Major Björn Holmgren, Army Ordnance Materiel'. Freja opened at once that door and led Greta in what had to be her secretary's anteroom, with a polished wooden door connecting with her office. Going to the polished wooden door, Freja knocked on it and waited to get a muffled invitation before opening it and entering with Greta.

"Captain Greta Visby is here, Major."

"Thank you for bringing her in, Miss Lindstrom." said a tall, fit and decidedly handsome man with short black hair and green eyes. As Freja left the office and closed the door, Greta came to attention and saluted Holmgren, who had risen to his feet from his chair.

"Captain Greta Visby, ODC Officer at the American embassy. Thank you for receiving me, sir."

"The pleasure is mine, Captain. But please sit: we have plenty to talk about." replied Holmgren after returning her salute. Greta took off her small backpack before sitting in an easy chair set close to Holmgren's work desk, then took out her laptop computer, a notepad and a pen. Sitting back behind his desk, Holmgren eyed her in silence for a moment before speaking again.

"First, let me express my sadness at the death of Major Kearny. He may have gotten himself into trouble but he didn't deserve to die because of that. However, what is done is done. Was your security officer able to ascertain which, if any, classified information he may have passed on to that suspected Russian spy before being discovered?"

"My RSO's investigation on that matter is still ongoing but, in conjunction with the investigation led by your counter-intelligence services, he believes that Major Kearny had not had the time to be cultivated long enough by that Russian woman to have deliberately passed on any significant classified information, sir. The search of his emails and electronic files didn't find any trace of an exchange of such documents. Your counter-intelligence services also told us that, from the recorded calls and emails made by that Russian agent to her presumed superiors, she was still in the process of softening up Major Kearny and had only heard from him hints that your government wished to offer a new anti-tank weapon to the United States. I thus believe that the secrets of your new FFV AT-5 disposable anti-tank rocket launcher are still safe."

"I sure hope so, Captain Visby. We are still testing a first pre-series batch of AT-5s and have not yet introduced it into Swedish Army service. In view of the advanced features of our new AT-5, we definitely don't want for the Russians to learn about it. Have you had time yet to look at the document concerning the AT-5 which I sent to your embassy?"

"I have, sir, and I must say that your new rocket launcher looks extremely interesting in terms of its performances, and I am talking as an experienced combat user of infantry anti-tank weapons and munitions."

"Oh? Please tell me about your experience, Captain."

"Basically, apart from firing on the practice range your FFV AT-4, which is in widespread American service, I also have fired dozens of times our 60 mm rifle-mounted grenade launcher, both in training and in combat. I have destroyed one BTR-70 and one truck in the Caucasus with my AGL-95 60 mm grenade launcher, then destroyed a number of light trucks and armored cars in Somalia, plus a couple of trucks in Afghanistan. I also fired the M68/1988 90 mm recoilless rifle in use by the Marine Corps and had two of them under my command while my platoon was holding the Khyber Pass in Afghanistan."

"Impressive indeed! I suppose that you would like to witness at least one test firing of our AT-5, Captain."

"You suppose right, Major. I..."

A buzz and vibration from her small cell phone then interrupted Greta, who excused herself with Holmgren and took out her telephone, a flip-cover model provided by her embassy.

"Captain Visby speaking!"

She recognized at once the voice of her caller, even before he named himself.

"Greta, this is Stanley Merrick. Where are you right now?"

"I am presently in the office of Major Holmgren, at FMV headquarters, sir. What's up?"

"Greta, don't react in a visible way to what I am going to say: we want the Swedes to stay ignorant about this, at least for the moment, as we now know something quite disturbing: Major Kearny's death was not a suicide."

Greta had some difficulty not overtly reacting to that shocking piece of news but still managed to keep a mostly straight face.

"Alright, sir. I am listening."

"I don't want to discuss this on the phone, Greta. Find a reason to cut your meeting with Major Holmgren and return to the embassy as fast as you discretely can."

"Understood, sir." replied Greta before terminating the call and pocketing back her cell phone while looking back at Holmgren.

"I will have to go back to my embassy, Major: we just received a list of urgent requests from the Pentagon and I need to review it and respond to it today. When do you think that I could watch an AT-5 field test firing?"

"I believe that I could arrange something for sometimes next week, Captain. Would that do?"

"It would be perfect, sir. I will wait for your call about that. If you will now excuse me, I will make my way back to my embassy."

Holmgren got up at the same time as Greta, then went around his desk to shake her hand.

"Thank you for coming, Captain Visby. I will call you as soon as I will have a firm date and time for that field test firing."

"And I will be eagerly awaiting your call, sir."

Greta then saluted Holmgren before putting back on her backpack and walking out of his office. She forced herself to walk at a normal pace until she was out of the building and had walked some distance along Banérg Street before flagging a passing taxi.

She was feeling something approaching dread when she walked into Lieutenant Colonel Merrick's office. That feeling intensified when she saw that Merrick was already hosting his assistant, Major Steve Harvey, the embassy's regional security officer, Charles Doherty, and the F.B.I. senior agent attached to the embassy, Fred Sumner. She took care of closing the door behind her before approaching the four men and saluting Merrick.

"I told Major Holmgren that we had just received a list of requests from the Pentagon and that I needed to respond to it quickly, sir. What have we found exactly about Major Kearny's death?"

"I will let Senior Agent Sumner give you the details, Greta. Have a seat."

Sumner waited until she had taken a chair, then spoke while looking somberly at Greta.

"After Major Kearny was found dead from apparent suicide by hanging, I watched the Swedish police as they took out the corpse and conducted a cursory search of his apartment. Not satisfied with the thoroughness of their work, I conducted my own search and investigation after they were gone and found a few clues they had not found. Basically, I found traces of forced entry by one of the rear windows of his apartment, plus faint traces of footprints on his carpet, footprints which didn't belong to him and which were in a room not visited by the Swedish police. I am thus fairly certain that someone stealthily entered his apartment and then possibly killed Kearny in a way that would appear like suicide."



"But this puts a wholly new light on his death, Fred. I can see only one plausible suspect for that: the Russians. That in turn suggests that they wanted to silence Kearny and prevent us from learning something a lot more serious than just a dalliance with an undercover agent."

"You should have joined the F.B.I., Greta: I came to the same conclusion. Know that I received yesterday the results of an investigation done by my agency concerning Kearny's transactions touching his bank accounts in the United States. That investigation showed a number of highly suspicious bank deposits made by Kearny along the last few months, which suggests that he had been receiving clandestine money, possibly from the Russians, for quite a while before his death. I now believe that Kearny was a lot more than a man deceived by a lover. Rather, I believe that he had consciously been spying for Russia in exchange for money, and this over a period of at least a year."

"But, that's nothing less than catastrophic, for both us and for the Swedes, Fred."

"It sure is, Greta. This could in turn hurt very badly our relations with the Swedes, whom we want to keep as good friends and allies."

"We may indeed want to protect that relationship but this probably means that the Swedish AT-5 design is now seriously compromised, along possibly many other military projects and plans."

"And that is my main concern here, Greta," said Merrick, who looked quite gloomy. "The main question we may face now is to how to react to all this. What do we tell the Swedes?"

"I say: be totally frank with them about this, sir. If we really want to continue to be their friend and ally, then we must be completely honest with them about this. After all, it is their secrets that Kearny may have passed on to the Russians. If we clam up and if the Swedes eventually learn about this, then our relations will be irremediably shot."

"I would tend to agree with you on that, Greta. However, I am not sure that Washington will agree with us on that. I suspect that the Pentagon would rather cover its ass on this and keep the Swedes in the dark. Unfortunately, if that is what Washington decides to do, then we will have no choice but to play along with a coverup."

Merrick could see at once from her reaction that Greta intensely disliked that possibility.

"I know, Greta. I know. This may go against your sense of honor and honesty but, if we are ordered by Washington to cover this up, then we will have to obey its directives."

"If we do that, then how am I expected to look straight in the eyes of Major Holmgren the next time I meet him, sir? Do you have anything else for me, sir? If not, I will go take care of some of my files."

"That's all on my side, Greta. You may be free to go now."

"Thank you, sir!"

Greta got up from her chair and saluted Merrick before pivoting on her heels and leaving his office, closing the door behind her. Charles Doherty watched her go, then looked at Merrick, misgiving evident on his face.

"That girl was born here in Sweden and lived half of her life here. What tells us that she won't side with the Swedes on this?"

In response, Merrick threw a most unfriendly look at Doherty: in truth, he didn't like the embassy's RSO much, never had.

"That 'girl' as you call her, distinguished herself in combat in three different theaters of operations, got decorated multiple times and got wounded in battle. She amply proved her loyalty to the United States, so I would appreciate if you would respect her and understand her sense of honesty and honor."

Doherty didn't reply to that, instead keeping a closed expression that Merrick nearly found insulting. The Defense Attaché then decided that he would need to talk to Ambassador Scott about this, to preempt any attempt by Doherty to create doubts about Greta Visby's loyalty.

## **19:14 (Sweden Time)**

### **Unit 11, # 46 Lovisag, Stockholm**

Closing and locking her door behind her, Greta took off her small backpack and put it down next to the closet near the entrance, then went to her living room and sat heavily in her sofa, feeling down and dejected. Her initial joy at finding herself back in the country of her birth was now being tempered by the distaste she felt at the prospect of having to lie and hide to Swedish officials and officers something they had the right to know, and all this for political reasons. The word had come quickly enough from Washington in late afternoon: the full extent of Major Kearny's treason was to be hidden

from the Swedes, and this in the name of 'national security and to protect bilateral relations'. While she was still going to do her job here honestly and diligently, she was now starting to regret not having asked for a combat field position instead after completing her university degree. After a moment of reflection and introspection, Greta then decided to go have a long open-air jogging and exercising session and got up from her sofa to go change into her civilian exercise outfit. Hopefully, the fresh air and physical exertion would chase away her bad mood. Thankfully, this area of Stockholm had a number of really nice jogging paths, many of which ran along the shorelines of the lagoons around which the city was built.

**20:23 (Sweden Time)**

**Friday, July 21, 2006 'C'**

**The 'Nordic Wellness' fitness club**

**# 100, Karlavagen, Ostermalm District**

**Stockholm**



Greta had discovered the 'Nordic Wellness' fitness club, situated only 600 meters from her apartment, about three weeks earlier, while strolling around her neighborhood. She had immediately fallen in love with the vast, superbly equipped fitness center, which had all the kinds of weightlifting and exercising equipment she needed. Since then, she had made a point of going there every evening, whenever her work made it possible. That allowed her to both keep in top shape and to change her mind from the frustrations she often felt about her embassy work. The place was also very close to the barracks of the Swedish Life Guards Regiment and thus was quite frequented by Swedish Army officers and soldiers. While Greta was no sex fiend and was very mature for her age of thirty, she was starting to miss the comradery she had known while serving with her battalion in Camp Lejeune. As well, the social and moral tolerance to be found around the Swedish society was for her a refreshing change from the often prudish and hypocritical morality of too many Americans, so she had started during the last couple of weeks to open herself more to others when off work.

As she was bench-pressing an impressive amount of weights, a tall, blond and impossibly handsome man in his late twenties sat on the bench facing hers and started pumping a pair of small weights up and down. He at first stayed polite and discrete,

avoiding to stare at her, but the remarkable display of strength and stamina by Greta soon took the better of him and, while still not staring, threw more and more frequent looks at her. On her part, Greta started herself to throw discreet glances at the athletic young man as he pumped weights up and down. Once she finished her present series of weight-lifting, she sat up on her bench to recuperate from her effort and smiled to the man.

"Hi! Do you come here often, mister?"

"At least three times a week, when my duties allow me enough free time. I serve with the Life Guards Regiment and work next door, at the cavalry casern. By the way, my name is Alexander Akerman."

"And I'm Greta Visby." replied Greta, who got up from her bench and took two steps to go shake hands with the man before returning on her bench. "I work at the American Embassy."

"You're a local employee there, Miss Visby?"

"Hell no! I am a captain in the U.S. Marine Corps and am part of the embassy attachés."

Akerman suddenly had an air of revelation appear on his face and he smiled while pointing an index at her.

"Greta Visby, from the U.S. Marine Corps? Are you the one who got nicknamed 'the Viking Shield Maiden' while serving in Somalia and Afghanistan?"

"That's me!" said Greta, grinning. Alexander Akerman also grinned in turn.

"Fantastic! You made the front pages of the local newspapers and online blogs in Stockholm more than once."

"Really? I didn't know that my reputation extended beyond the United States."

"Well, it does, especially here in Sweden, for obvious reasons. After all, you are said to be Swedish by birth and you do bear a very Swedish-sounding name. I even caught one of my troopers with a poster of you stuck to the inside of his kit locker at the barracks."

Greta couldn't help chuckle at that.

"That's rich! And how much clothes was I wearing on that poster, Mister Akerman?"

"Please, simply call me 'Alex'. To answer you, don't worry: it was a blown-up picture of you showing you standing in the middle of a dirt street in Somalia and aiming

your rifle. I believe that it was taken as you were about to blow up with your rifle-mounted grenade launcher an armored car coming at you.”

“That’s correct, Alex. I destroyed an armored Range Rover belonging to a pirate kingpin who was trying to flee our assault force. Another nickname I earned from that incident was ‘Calamity Jane’.”

“Calamity Jane?” repeated Akerman, obviously confused. “Who was that?”

“Calamity Jane was the nickname given to a Far West woman adventurer of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century who was known to be a top rifle shot and who also was considered quite a shit disturber.”

“Sounds like she was an interesting woman, Greta.”

“She definitely was, Alex. You said that you had troopers under your command. Are you an officer?”

“Yes! I have the rank of captain and my unit is part of the royal guards.”

*‘Better and better!’* thought Greta, who was starting to warm up to Alexander Akerman, who could easily be described as a young Viking god. She then prodded him as delicately as possible.

“Do you live at the barracks or do you have an apartment here in Stockholm, Alex?”

“I live in the single officers’ quarters of the casern, Greta. My room is small and far from luxurious but it is more than sufficient for me: I always was the frugal type.”

“Me too! I was raised in a small log cabin in Lapland until the age of fourteen, then moved with my father to Nome, Alaska, after my mother died. I spent those early years hunting, fishing and trapping, until I joined the U.S. Marine Corps at the age of nineteen. Do you have many women in the Swedish Army?”

“Uh, not as many as you may think, Greta. Women are still exempt from conscription and, if they join voluntarily, they can’t serve in what you would call a combat unit.”

“Oh?! I thought that the Swedish society would be more open to women’s military service than that.”

“Well, we are quite open and liberal about many things, Greta, but there is still some public resistance to the idea of women fighting in wars. That was one of the reasons why your story got so much coverage here in Sweden. Talking about your nickname of ‘Viking Shield Maiden’, you could easily play that role at the historical

reenactment fight club I belong to. It is situated in Uppsala, about one hour drive to the North, and it teaches fencing with longswords, shields, sabers and rapiers.”

“Hey, that interests me!” happily exclaimed Greta. I always wanted to learn sword-fighting but never found the time or occasion to do so. Does your club do reenactment of combat in the Viking Era?”

“It sure does”, replied Alex, grinning, “and I am sure that they would love to have you as a member. By the way, the club is named the ‘Uppsala Historical Fencing School’. I was due to drive tomorrow morning to Uppsala, to go practice at the club for the weekend. Would you like to come with me, visit the club and watch us train?”

“Hell yes!” answered Greta before thinking about something. “But I don’t own old swords or armor, except for an Arab scimitar I bought at a bazaar in Somalia. By the way, you should have seen the panoply of firearms, blade weapons and even explosives you could have found in that public market.”

“Don’t worry about finding and buying swords and armor here: they have a couple of shops well stocked with period reproduction pieces. I could pick you up tomorrow morning before leaving for Uppsala.”

“That would suite me fine, Alex. If you are finished training for tonight, I could show you where my apartment is, so that you could find it more easily tomorrow.” Alex repressed a smile with difficulty at that thinly veiled invitation.”

“Deal! How about having a short sauna session together before leaving the fitness center? Saunas are a great way to relax your muscles after exercising.”

“Uh, saunas in the U.S.A. are segregated by gender. Are saunas in Sweden still open to both genders?”

“They are, Greta. The only rule is to have a towel with you, so that you could sit on it rather than put your bum directly on the benches: it is more hygienic that way.”

“Then, I will meet you at the sauna.” replied Greta before getting up and walking towards the women’s locker room.

A few minutes later, Greta showed up at the door of one of the three saunas, marked as ‘Men and Women allowed’ in Swedish and English. She was wearing only a towel wrapped around her torso, with the towel barely going down to the level of her groin, plus a pair of plastic slippers. She removed her towel as soon as she was inside the sweltering sauna, which was occupied by three men and one woman, all equally as

naked as she was now. While the men, including Alex, simply glanced at her nude body, the woman stared with near shock at her powerful, muscular legs.

"My God! I wish I had legs as strong as yours, miss. You must be some kind of fitness champion."

"I'm only a soldier, miss, but I do take care of staying in top shape. You need strong legs to walk long distances with big loads on your back."

"I didn't know that we had women infantrymen in the Swedish Army, miss."

"I am in the U.S. Marines, miss, not in the Swedish Army."

"Oh, okay!"

Alex, who was listening to that exchange, chuckled and patted the place next to him on the top bench, where the temperature was highest.

"I saved a spot for you, Greta."

"Thanks, Alex!"

Climbing the two lower benches, Greta then laid her towel on the burning wood planks before sitting on it, gluing herself to Alex' side. It took only seconds before she started sweating quite profusely.

"Whew! This is about as hot as in Somalia, but way more humid."

"You visited Somalia, miss?" asked the same woman who had stared at her legs.

"Er, not exactly, miss. I went there to fight Somali pirates and Islamist extremists."

That earned her a renewed attention from the two other men present in the sauna, while the woman finally started to realize who she was.

"Wait! Your name is Greta, you serve in the American marines and you fought in Somalia. You aren't the famous 'Viking Shield Maiden', by chance?"

"I told you that you were famous in Sweden, Greta." said triumphantly Alex, making Greta do a facepalm.

"God! I am not sure that I like being this well known around."

## **22:49 (Sweden Time)**

### **Unit # 11, # 46 Lovisag, Ostermalm District**

"My apartment, provided to me fully furnished by my embassy."

Alex looked around the long room, which included a kitchen corner, a dining area and a living room, with a small balcony visible through the windows giving on the façade.

“Not bad at all, Greta. My own suite at the barracks is quite smaller than this.”

“Wait! You haven’t seen yet my bedroom and the bathroom. Follow me!”

Walking behind her, Alex ended up in a fair-sized bedroom containing a large bed, a chest of drawers, a closet and a chair. As he looked around, Greta walked to him and stopped nearly nose to nose with him while smiling.

“You want to try the bed, Alex?”

“Of course! The bed is the most important piece of furniture in a single’s apartment.”

Both of them enlaced together and exchanged a long kiss, while their hands roamed up and down. They then quickly undressed but, before they jumped on the bed, Alex knelt in front of Greta and started giving her cunnilingus while she held his head with both hands. She had to keep in her scream of pleasure when she attained orgasm. However, Alex was not finished with her. Quickly making her lay down on the bed while she was still on her plateau, he then penetrated her and started pumping inside her while grinning to her.

“Watch out for the cavalry charge by the Swedes, you American marine.”

### **07:58 (Sweden Time)**

**Saturday, July 22, 2006 ‘C’**

#### **Greta’s apartment**

Both of them were still in bed and exchanging caresses when Alex’ phone buzzed, making him sigh in exasperation.

“Damn! What a lousy timing for a call. Sorry about that, Greta: I won’t be long.”

Sitting on the edge of the bed and grabbing his flip-phone, he opened it and pressed the ‘talk’ button.

“Captain Akerman speaking!... Yes!... What’s up, sir?... Uh, I understand, sir. I will be at the caserne in half an hour.”

Closing his phone, Alex then gave a dejected look at Greta.

“I’m sorry, Greta, but our trip to Uppsala will have to wait another weekend: my unit has to prepare for an unannounced welcoming parade for a visiting European royalty.”



"I understand, Alex. Duty is duty. Will that parade take long?"

"The parade itself, no, but my unit will have to practice it to perfection, so that may take most of today, while the parade will take place tomorrow morning at the royal palace."

"Do they allow tourists to watch such parades, Alex? I would like to go see you on parade tomorrow."

That attracted a gentle smile on Alex' face.

"Yes, they allow spectators to watch from a distance. I will be happy indeed if you could come tomorrow."

"Then, I will be there, I promise, my beautiful stallion."

Both of them chuckled at that joke before Alex dressed up and left with regret Greta's apartment.

## **CHAPTER 14 – BACK IN LE BOURGET**

**09:20 (Paris Time)**

**Monday, June 18, 2007 ‘C’**

**Le Bourget Airport**

**Northeast suburbs of Paris, France**



The French air controllers on duty this Sunday morning in the control tower of the Le Bourget Airport were particularly excited with anticipation as the prototype of the mysterious Hiller TRAN-SONIC supersonic airliner was due to arrive soon, in order to participate in the 47<sup>th</sup> Le Bourget Airshow. The Hiller Corporation had been unusually secretive about the development and testing of its new TRAN-SONIC, going as far as conducting all of its test flights from Port Angeles at night and without prior notice. While a few enterprising professional photographers specializing in aeronautical news had managed to take some pictures of the Hiller TRAN-SONIC with cameras equipped with night vision lenses, very little was publicly known about its performances, as its nocturnal test flights had been conducted over the waters of the Pacific, away from preying eyes. The one thing that Hiller had divulged about its new airliner was that it was a supersonic aircraft with very long range, just enough information to make those interested in anything aeronautical water at the mouth. The fact that Hiller had chosen to fly its TRAN-SONIC in Le Bourget on the first day of the airshow, when commercial and government customers would be flocking to it, indicated that Hiller's timing was definitely meant to attract the maximum of publicity for its new and very anticipated airliner.

Francine Vadeboncoeur, one of the air controllers on duty this morning, felt her heart jump when a new radar transponder signal appeared on the edge of her radar, coming from the West at subsonic speed.

"Heads up, guys! I now have the transponder signal of the Hiller TRAN-SONIC on our radar. It is now 248 nautical miles from us at Heading 261 and flying at 405 knots at an altitude of 35,000 feet."

"I'll watch for it." announced her shift supervisor, Pierre Ricard, who then grabbed a pair of binoculars and posted himself next to a West-facing side window of the

control tower. Some twenty minutes later, Francine Vadeboncoeur announced that the Hiller TRAN-SONIC was now less than twenty kilometers from the airport and was starting a wide turn to line up with Runway 03. Raising his binoculars to his eyes, Ricard searched the sky for a moment before speaking up.

"I have it! However, it is still too far to distinguish it in detail... I can now see some details of it. It has two huge turbofan engines located under its wings, a classic 'T' tail and a long, slender fuselage. Up to now, a fairly classic aircraft architecture, I would say."

"Don't speak too quickly, Pierre." warned his assistant supervisor, Robert Lemieux. "Ingrid Dows and Hiller have a habit of hiding surprises in their aircraft designs. Remember their Hiller 24 SHARK: it proved to have some incredible range and also had a surprising choice of armament."

"True! We will soon see if this TRAN-SONIC has something really special to it."

"Well, Pierre, it is a supersonic airliner. Isn't that special enough for you?"

"It is but the real question then is: will it prove to be a commercially viable supersonic airliner? Remember the American Convair 5000 of the 1950s: it was never profitable and was a money-loser as an airliner, although its original bomber variant was a complete success."

On the static aircraft display area of the airshow grounds, hundreds of airline company representatives, aircraft and avionics manufacturers, government officials and specialized reporters and photographers were now watching the Hiller TRAN-SONIC as it approached the airport, many of them pointing cameras or binoculars at the incoming airliner. One of these spectators, a Boeing engineer who worked at the main Boeing aircraft plant near Seattle, was watching the Hiller TRAN-SONIC with particular interest: he had been trying for over two years now to learn what he could about its design and performances, as it could well hurt badly the Boeing business in the category of long-range airliners. Already, the Hiller SKYTRUCK, which was extremely popular around the World in the air freight business due to its VTOL capabilities, impressive cargo capacity and incredible versatility, had drastically cut the part Boeing held in the air cargo market.

"When I think that I spent all that time trying to learn about this plane being built next door to Seattle, only to finally see it here, in Paris."

Another commercial representative standing next to the Boeing man, an executive of the famous Pan Am Airlines company, reacted with much more glee to the sight of the approaching TRAN-SONIC.

“At last: a supersonic long-range airliner with true potential. This could help revive the trans-Pacific passenger routes, which took a serious hit after the loss of Hawaii years ago to a North Korean nuclear bomb.”

Hearing that, the Boeing man gave a dubious look at the Pan Am man.

“And what makes you think that this new Hiller aircraft will be successful, mister? There is next to nothing known about it, thanks to Hiller’s secrecy.”

“Well, for one, this will be our chance to learn about it, Mister Boeing.” replied the Pan Am executive, who had spotted the Boeing pin on the engineer’s suit lapel. “Also, have you ever heard about an aircraft design by Ingrid Dows that proved to be anything but a resounding success? That girl is a true genius when it comes to aircraft design.” The Boeing engineer had to concede that point and resumed his observation of the approaching airliner. Something then started bothering him as he watched the TRAN-SONIC slow down to land.

“Hey, he is slowing too much in my opinion: he could be in danger of stalling.” The Pan Am executive, who had also noticed the slow approach speed of the Hiller airliner, didn’t reply to that but watched it even more attentively. Murmurs and worried exclamations started to go around the crowd of onlookers as the Hiller TRAN-SONIC slowed down to a landing speed more akin to that of a small private aircraft than that of a large airliner. The Pan Am man then understood what was up when he saw whirlwinds of hot gases form on the runway’s surface under the airliner.

“It is using thrust vectoring to slow down for landing. THIS IS A STOL<sup>15</sup> AIRCRAFT!”

“WHAT?!” shouted the shocked Boeing engineer. If that proved to be true, then the effect on the portion of the long-range airliner market held by Boeing could be downright disastrous. The Pan Am man, a wide grin on his face, then looked at him.

“Of course! Hiller is presently the king of vertical flight with its AIRCARS, PELICANS and SKYTRUCKS. I should have expected this.”

“But, how?” said the flabbergasted Boeing engineer. “This is supposed to be a supersonic airliner, not a simple subsonic cargo aircraft.”

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<sup>15</sup> STOL: Short Take Off and Landing.

"I don't know about the how but, if anyone could succeed in designing such an aircraft, it is Ingrid Dows. I... WHAT?!"

The Hiller TRAN-SONIC, which was now overflying the runway with its landing legs extended, had slowed to an impossibly slow speed of about no more than maybe sixty kilometers per hour and was now turning to follow a taxiway leading to the aircraft exposition area...while flying some twenty meters above the ground! The Boeing man then understood the whole truth about the Hiller airliner.

"IT'S...IT'S A STOVL<sup>16</sup> OR VTOL<sup>17</sup> TRANSPORT!"

In response, the Pan Am executive shouted out in triumph while pumping his left fist up and down.

"YES! THIS COULD SERVICE DIRECTLY EVERY ISLAND IN THE PACIFIC. BORA BORA<sup>18</sup>, HERE WE COME!"

The heart of the Boeing engineer sank as he watched the Hiller TRAN-SONIC land smoothly at the vertical on the surface of the taxiway before continuing by rolling on the ground.

"Shit! Our goose is cooked!"

By the time that the Hiller TRAN-SONIC stopped in its assigned spot in the aircraft ground display area, Elliot Goulding, Hiller's Vice-President for Marketing and Sales, was already being assaulted with questions from dozens of excited commercial airline executives and government representatives. In response, he started distributing the information pamphlets on the TRAN-SONIC which he had been hiding and holding on to...until now. Those pamphlets were grabbed in record times, forcing him to open his reserve boxes of pamphlets and distribute their contents. However, he did keep aside three of his reserve boxes for the next few days, while promising himself to have more pamphlets delivered from Port Angeles by express air freight. He was having a large display board showing the characteristics and performances of the TRAN-SONIC set up to help him answer the questions of the visitors when an American major general

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<sup>16</sup> STOVL: Short Take Off and Vertical Landing.

<sup>17</sup> VTOL: Vertical Take Off and Landing.

<sup>18</sup> Bora Bora: small island which is part of the French Polynesia territories in the South Pacific and is a popular tourist destination. Its sole, 1,505-meter-long runway is considered too short for most large airliners.

wearing the uniform of the U.S. Air Force and the wings of a transport pilot came to him, his expression most serious.

“Mister Goulding, could you tell me if Hiller is planning to make a military transport variant of your TRAN-SONIC? This plane would be perfect to ferry troops and cargo on an emergency basis to a hot spot overseas.”

‘*Bingo!*’ thought Elliot, repressing a big smile with difficulty.

**17:58 (Paris Time)**

**Hôtel Izmir – Café du Nord**

**126, Avenue du 8 Mars**

**Le Blanc-Mesnil District**

**Next to Le Bourget Airport**



Elliot Goulding was all smiles when he walked into the restaurant occupying the ground level of the small hotel he and the rest of the Hiller team occupied for the duration of the airshow. Seeing Ingrid Dows sitting at one of the tables with Shirley Slade and Elizabeth Gardner, he went straight to them and stopped next to Ingrid.

“Ingrid, your idea of making a vertical landing on arrival and in front of all those potential customers was an absolute stroke of genius. I already have over a dozen important potential customers in line to buy our TRAN-SONIC, including the U.S. Air Force, which would like a military mixed passenger/cargo variant of our plane. Uh, I hope that you were planning to design such a variant, right?”

“First, yes: I already had that in mind. Second, please sit down and have supper with us.”

Once Elliot had sat, Ingrid gave him the menu she had been studying.

“Choose your supper, then you will tell me which potential customers we have hooked up. By the way, I counsel you their lamb couscous: it always is very good.”

“Uh, alright: I will have the couscous and a beer. As for my list of interested customers, I have the U.S. Air Force, the French Air Force, Air France, Pan Am, American Airlines, Quantas, Air India, Scandinavian Airlines, Iberia, Air Canada, Korean Airlines and Japan Airlines. We are already looking at an orders book of at least 200 aircraft.”

“Wow!” exclaimed Elizabeth Gardner, thoroughly impressed by that number. However, she sobered up when she thought about something.

“Wait! How is Hiller going to produce so many TRAN-SONIC airliners in a timely fashion? It had to open two completely new aircraft assembly lines in the last five years in order to build all the SKYTRUCKs and A-24 SHARKs ordered by our customers. Those assembly lines are presently working full tilt and will never be able to build our new TRAN-SONIC as well.”

“You are very right about that, Elizabeth.” said Elliot in a sober tone. “However, Ingrid has already anticipated that problem and has discussed it with Jeff Hiller and me. We were only waiting until the interest in our TRAN-SONIC would be confirmed before implementing the solution proposed by Ingrid. Now that our stand in Le Bourget is being besieged by potential customers, Hiller will now go offer to the North American Aircraft Company a contract to produce our TRAN-SONIC under license. As you may know, North American has been having serious financial difficulties lately, having run out of government contracts. It is now on the verge of bankruptcy and its workers are afraid of soon ending on the unemployment line. With North American’s CEO and workers union desperate to avoid foreclosure of their aircraft plants, Jeff Hiller will propose to buy a controlling majority of North American’s shares, on top of contracting them to build our TRAN-SONIC under Hiller license. North American does have three well-equipped assembly plants and a competent workforce and it would have been a truly sad affair to let such a historic company disappear. With that deal, we will be able to start mass production of our TRAN-SONIC as soon as it will obtain its official FAA certification. It may also help our existing plant in Palo Alto by producing as well more of our A-24s, which is still in high demand. It may be a big financial gamble for Hiller at first, but the possible rewards could be huge for our company.”

“I like that plan!” said Shirley Slade in an enthusiastic voice. “I believe that it should work.”

“I believe so too, Shirley.” said Ingrid. “It would save North American from bankruptcy, save the jobs of thousands of employees and help us build our TRAN-SONIC quickly and in large numbers, something which would otherwise be impossible for Hiller to do, in which case we would have designed and developed our new airliner for nothing.”

Pouring some water in the glasses of her group, Ingrid then raised her glass high.

“Let’s drink to the success of our TRAN-SONIC and to the continued success and growth of the Hiller Aircraft Corporation.”

“TO THE TRAN-SONIC AND TO HILLER!”



## **CHAPTER 15 – REMEMBERING PAST INCARNATIONS**

**13:05 (Seattle Time)**

**Tuesday, June 26, 2007 'C'**

**1402 South McDonald Street**

**Port Angeles, State of Washington, U.S.A.**



The moment that Ingrid opened the front door of her house, three-year-old **Michael** ran to her with his arms wide open while shouting in joy.

“MOMMY!”

Letting go her two suitcases and travel bag, Ingrid bent down to grab her young son, then straightened up before kissing the young boy repeatedly on his cheeks and forehead.

“My sweet Michael: I really missed you while in Paris.”

“I missed you too, Mommy.”

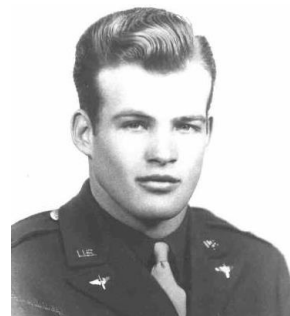
Ingrid kissed Michael once more, then looked at her daughter Nancy, who had been watching the scene from the entrance of the lounge.

“So, how did it go with Michael, Nancy? Did he behave or was he like a little devil?”

“A bit of both, Mother. You remember how I was at his age?”

“Oh yes! That was also the time when you started remembering your past incarnations. Has Michael started to remember his own past incarnations? When I left for Paris, he was starting to remember his past life as **Michael Crawford**, my defunct father by adoption. Does he remember more now?”

Ingrid became a bit alarmed when she saw that her question was apparently embarrassing Nancy.



“Well, I did help Michael remember his past incarnations, Ingrid. He now remembers them, all fifteen of them, back to his first ever incarnation on Earth.”

"All of them? But he is only three years and three months-old, Nancy."

"So? I was barely four years-old by the time I remembered all of my twenty past incarnations. Please remember that Michael, like me, is half-Celestial and half-Human. As for superpowers, he has started using and practicing them and I helped him in that as well."

"Oh God! I will now have Superboy in my home." half-joked Ingrid. She then looked back into her son's gray eyes and grinned to him.

"Are you going to fly around the house all the time, my sweetie?"

"Only if you allow me to, Mommy." was the boy's disarming response. Ingrid took a second to digest that, then put Michael down, so that she could grab back her three pieces of luggage. Seeing that, Michael ran to grab first her travel bag.

"Let me help you, Mommy."

"But it will be too heavy for y..."

Ingrid didn't have time to complete her sentence before her son lifted her bag with apparent ease, despite it weighing a good five kilos.

"Uh, okay! I do have Superboy living in my home. Just follow Mommy up to my bedroom."

Her second surprise came when she saw that Michael did follow her up the stair to the upper floor...while flying silently with her travel bag. Her head now swimming a bit, she entered her room and put down her two suitcases next to her closet, with Michael also putting down his load next to her. Smiling down to him, Ingrid took him by one hand and started walking out of her bedroom.

"Come back down to the lounge with me, Michael. There, you will tell me about your past incarnations."

"Won't you tell me about your trip to Paris, Mommy?"

"Of course I will! Which would you like to do first?"

"I want to hear about your trip first, Mommy."

"Then, that's what we will do."

Once down in the lounge, Ingrid sat on her favorite sofa and sat her son on her legs, facing her, while Nancy sat at the other end of the sofa.

"Alright, Michael. About my trip to Paris, I flew to there in a new model of aircraft I had designed for the Hiller Corporation. There, my plane had a great success and now we will be able to build and sell many more like it, so I will be continuing to work for Hiller

for many more years. Well, I won't bother you with the minute details, so it is now time to tell me about your past incarnations."

"Can I use my chalkboard for that, Mommy?"

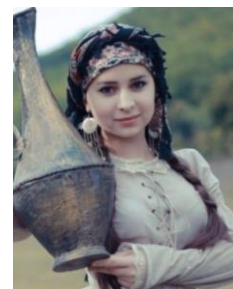
"If you wish so, yes!" replied Ingrid, wanting to see how Michael had advanced with his writing abilities. Her happy son then jumped off her legs and ran to his small chalkboard resting on a kid's size table in a corner of the lounge. There, he grabbed a piece of chalk and wrote in very distinct letters 'Michael Crawford, 1912-1941', even using major characters to start the first and last names. Ingrid swallowed hard, as her three-year-old had just demonstrated a writing ability more typical of a nine or ten-year-old, on top of proving as well that he could already count. Michael then smiled to her while speaking in his small voice.

"My most recent past incarnation was Michael Crawford, an American Army major who was a U.S. Army ordnance engineer. As you well know, he was the husband of your mother of adoption, Nancy Laplante, and he loved you very much. I also love you very much, Mommy."

"Ooh, you're so sweet, my little Michael. Come and kiss me."

Michael ran at once to her and kissed her on the cheek before running back to the chalkboard and writing a second name and set of years on it.

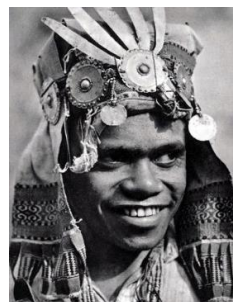
"My next past incarnation was as a woman named **Damira Bortek**. She lived from 1792 to 1855 and was an ethnic Tatar woman who lived in the village of Balaklava, in Crimea. She was a poor peasant and had six children before dying of cholera. She was a tough, hard-working woman but she led a very common life for her time."



"She is still well worth remembering, Michael. To be a king or a simple peasant is not what counts. It is rather how decent and kind a person you were."

"I know and I agree, Mommy." said soberly little Michael before writing a third name on his chalkboard.

"The next one was a man named **Wido Kalibarang**. He lived from the late 17<sup>th</sup> Century to the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century in Java and was a guard for the local king. He was married, with three children, and was killed by Dutch merchants who refused to recognize the authority of his king. My next incarnation before Wido was a Somali Muslim woman who lived during the 16<sup>th</sup> Century in Kiswayo.



Sorry about the

imprecision concerning her time of birth and death but they didn't exactly have accurate calendars in Somalia at that time. Her name was **Aminah Elmi** and she was a woman of great beauty. She married a well-to-do merchant and had four children before she was killed by bandits, along with her husband."

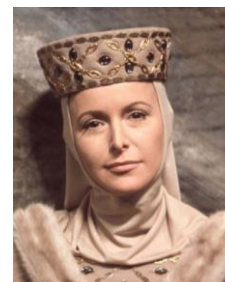


"Well, you can't possibly remember more about those past people than they did themselves. A number of my own past incarnations were also illiterate and lived in time periods when the Christian calendar, or any official calendar, did not exist yet. But go on, please."

"Thanks, Mommy!"

Her son then wrote yet another name on his chalkboard.

"My next oldest incarnation was a man from the Wendat tribe, which existed in Canada. His name was **Attikwane** and he was a chaman, healer and herbalist who lived near Lake Simcoe during the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. He was married and had two children. He was an expert in herbalist medicine and was also a great story teller. He was killed while defending his village from a band of Iroquois warriors. Next before him was a person of decidedly much higher status: Queen **Jeanne II of Burgundy**, who sat on the throne of France between 1316 and 1322. After the death of her husband, King Philip V, she remained Countess of Burgundy and ruling Countess of Artois. She had four daughters and one son before dying. If you want to learn about French royal disputes and court intrigues, then I would be happy to tell you all about them, Mommy."



"Thanks, sweetie! I have plenty of my own tales about past disputes of power, as the court of Chinese Emperor Wou-Ti was full of them. So, who's next in your past incarnations?"

"A Chinese man of very low status who lived a most miserable life and died of overwork and malnutrition. He was a simple peasant who lived during the 12<sup>th</sup> Century and whose name was **Tao Ling**. He was married and had three children but his family was dirt-poor and he had to work as a simple day laborer for the local imperial representative in order to be able to feed his family. Before him was an



African hunter-gatherer and warrior who lived in present-day South Africa during the 11<sup>th</sup> Century. Even that timing is uncertain to me, as that man didn't know or follow any known calendar system, so I have to base myself on his timing between known time periods. His name was **Matete** and he had a wife and two children. He was tall, muscular and athletic and was a first-class hunter. He was killed in a dispute with another hunter over a prey."



"And do you think that you inherited his hunting skills at the same time that you remembered his life, Michael?"

"I believe so, Mommy. I would just need to practice them a bit to regain full proficiency in them."

"The same thing that happened with me about my ancient skills. I notice that, in all of those past lives you listed to date, none appear to have practiced music or played extensively any musical instrument, contrary to your sister Nancy."

"I know, and it kind of disappointed her, Mommy." replied the boy, a malicious smile appearing on his lips. "I bet that she was hoping for me to one day join her band, but I doubt that will happen."

Glancing briefly at Nancy, Ingrid saw her sigh at these words and smiled to her.

"Well, not everybody is meant to become a musician or a singer, Nancy."

"I know! I know! One had the right to dream, no?"

"Indeed! So, Michael, who's next in your past incarnations?"

"Next is an Andean woman of the 10<sup>th</sup> Century named **Namath**. She was married to a fisherman and had two children before dying during her third labor. She lived on the coast of present-day Peru, near Chuquitanta. There is frankly little more to say about her, Mommy, as she lived a very ordinary, low status life.



Before her was a Saxon Christian monk who lived from the year 798 to 958. Since he was a monk, he was very well aware of the dates he lived in, so I had no problems with that. His name was **Alfred of York** and, as befitted a monk, he never married. He studied and lived in a monastery in the Northumbria, near the coast of the English Channel. He was well educated, could read and write in Saxon, Latin and Greek and could also count, plus of



course could quote the Bible from memory. He was killed when Vikings raided his monastery and burned it to the ground.”

“Do you remember how to write in Latin, Michael?” asked Ingrid, who wanted to see the extend of her son’s remembered skills, so that she could eventually decide where and when to start his formal education. She had encountered the same problem with Nancy when the time had come to enroll her in a primary school, which was an obligatory requirement in the United States. Nancy had ended starting school at a grade four levels higher than what her actual age would have placed her. Ingrid now strongly suspected that the same thing was going to happen with her son. While she was thinking over that, Michael quickly wrote a sentence in correct Latin on the chalkboard, then smiled proudly to her.

“Here you go, Mommy!”

Reviewing the sentence on the board, Ingrid was shocked to see that, apart from being in good Latin, it was also an exact quote from the Bible.

“Very good, Michael! Your remembered skills are truly impressive. “So, who’s next in your list of past incarnations?”

“A Japanese woman called **Neo**, who lived during the 7<sup>th</sup> Century on the island of Okinawa. Mind you, most modern Japanese would not call her a ‘Japanese’, as they often look down on the people of Okinawa as being of a different race. Neo was the wife of a fisherman and was very pretty and graceful in body. She weaved baskets and made and repaired fishing nets to help support her family. She gave birth to five children before dying of a fever. Before her was a soldier from the 6<sup>th</sup> Century Byzantine Empire named **Markus Longinus**. He was born on a farm in Thracia and enlisted in the Byzantine Army at the age of seventeen. He then served mostly in a garrison fort located along the southern shore of the Danube River and fought Avar and Bulgar barbarians for many years. He rose to the rank of decurion before being killed in combat near Durostarum. Before Markus was a Scandinavian girl and farmer’s wife who live in the South of Sweden, along the East coast of the Kattegat. Her name was **Hilda Svenstad** and she lived mostly during the first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> Century. She cared for the animals of her farm, cultivated a garden and made clay potteries. She was



illiterate. She gave birth to five children before dying from an infected wound.”

Little Michael then wrote another name on his chalkboard, along with a big question mark in place of dates.

“The incarnation before Hilda was a Siberian fisherman, hunter and trapper who lived and died along the shores of Lake Baïkal. I can’t give you any precise time period for his life, as he was illiterate and didn’t know any calendar. The best I can say is that **Borscha** must have lived during the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century. He may have been rough on the edges but he had a great heart. When he bought a Chinese slave girl named ‘Lu’ from a passing Mongol merchant, he genuinely fell in love with her and made her his wife, treating her well and with affection. He had three Children from Lu before dying while defending her from three marauders. He succeeded in killing two of the marauders and seriously wounded the third one before being mortally wounded but he did save his wife, who finished off the third marauder with the help of her eldest son. The one regret I have about Borscha is that I will never know if and how Lu and her children survived after that desperate fight. Unfortunately, no historical archives would exist about that, as that was pure wilderness in terms of area and time.”



Ingrid lowered her head, mentally contemplating the tragedy but also the love in that story.

“So many billion lives preceded us on this Earth, with most of them staying anonymous and never being mentioned by name in historical archives. Yet, without all those anonymous lives, the various kings, conquerors and emperors of times past wouldn’t have been able to accomplish anything of importance by themselves. Alright, Michael, you may continue.”

“I have only one past incarnation left to talk about, Mommy, that of a young Persian woman named **Yasmina**, who lived in the first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century. She was born in a small town on the eastern shores of the Persian Gulf. She was a beautiful girl, with blond hair, green eyes and a graceful body.



She helped her family run a small popular hot food counter, what we would call today a ‘fast food joint’, which were very common during the Antiquity and the Middle Ages. She was a good cook and baker and eventually married a local baker, giving him three

children. She sadly died during her fourth labor. Well, there you have it, Mommy. What do you think?"

"That you had mostly modest lives but also were good persons who did their best to live with decency and honesty. Those are the kind of lives which count for me, not those of power-hungry kings or blood-thirsty conquerors. You definitely already have a solid educational base thanks to those past lives, along with a wide range of useful skills, and you certainly should skip the first years of primary school, like Nancy successfully did. Do you know yet what would interest you in your present life, my son?"

Little Michael stayed silent for a moment, frozen in the kind of introspective stance that would be expected from an adult and not a toddler.

"I am not sure but I know what I don't want to do or probably won't do because of a lack of interest. I won't become a soldier, as I don't want to have to kill others. Please don't take that as a criticism of you, Mother. You fought to defend others and to stop really bad people and you did it with honor. I won't become a musician either, because of a lack of interest and of basic skills in it, contrary to Nancy. What I want is to be constructive and to contribute to our collective lives by either producing or operating things for peaceful purpose. I must say that watching you made me interested in planes in general, Mommy."

Ingrid nodded her head at that, liking how her son thought.

"To encourage peaceful use of technology is certainly a worthy goal, my son. I will however not force you to follow me into the world of aviation. You are still very young and may develop on your own new interests as you grow up, so take your time before choosing your personal path."

"Thank you for your comprehension, Mommy. Uh, could I ask a favor from you right now?"

"Shoot!" replied Ingrid, curious to see what her little Michael would ask. Her son then grinned and spoke with hope in his voice.

"Could I have a dog, Mommy? Please!"



## **CHAPTER 16 – THE SCOURGE OF TERRORISM**



The Israeli embassy in Stockholm, seen from the Strandvägen Avenue.

**07:39 (Sweden Time)**

**Wednesday, July 11, 2007 ‘C’**

**Corner of Ulrikagatan and Strandvägen Avenue**

**Ostermalm District, Stockholm, Sweden**

Greta had left her apartment to go to work a bit later than usual, thus was walking at a brisk pace along Ulrikagatan, heading towards the intersection with Strandvägen Avenue, where she would be able to turn onto the Dag Hammarskjölds Väg, the street on which the main gate of the U.S. embassy was. She was wearing her customary khaki service uniform with short-sleeve shirt and wedge cap, plus had her small backpack and her black service purse. Thanks to finally having gotten a firearm permit, or rather permits, two weeks ago from the Swedish police, she was now able to keep her firearms at her apartment and to carry her handguns with her while going to her designated authorized shooting club, which was the basement shooting range used by the embassy marine guards. Still, that carrying permit was very limited in its scope and would have raised the ire of any American gun owner from the Southern States. For one, any gun she carried had to be unloaded during transport and could not be carried directly on her, so she carried her Smith & Wesson M&P 9 mm pistol in her purse, with her magazines kept out of her pistol. She found all this quite frustrating but it was the law in Sweden, so she had to follow the local rules.

As she was getting close to the intersection with Strandvägen Avenue, she noticed a light truck parked ahead of her in a no-parking zone. She frowned a bit at that, as Swedish drivers were normally fairly respectful of road regulations. The type and aspect of the truck then made her redouble her attention towards it. It was an old **Mercedes UNIMOG** 4X4 light truck with a box van at the rear of its front cabin and its gray paint coating was quite shoddy, having been applied directly over spots of rust. Large numbers of such UNIMOG light trucks sold as military surplus circulated all around Europe, them being popular for their robustness, good off-road capabilities and high ground clearance. However, the models with box vans were much rarer and would be mostly used for making deliveries, in which case they would bear some kind of commercial logos or paint schemes. This was a plain gray paint job. As she was eyeing the parked truck, her eyes caught on the three-story yellow brick building of the Israeli embassy, visible beyond the truck and situated on the far side of Strandvägen Avenue. Now downright suspicious and with all her senses on alert, she slowed a bit her pace and snapped open the flap of her service purse but kept her pistol in it as she approached the parked light truck as quietly as she could without it becoming conspicuous. Looking at the right-side mirror of the cab, she saw that a single man was sitting inside, behind the steering wheel. Blood accelerated in her veins when she could detail that man: he appeared to be of Middle-Eastern type and wore a long beard. Her souvenirs from Afghanistan then made her kick into high alert mode. The driver of the truck then saw and noticed her in his mirror as she was some ten paces behind his vehicle. An expression of pure hatred then came on his face, something that solidified her suspicions about that man and his truck. Still, she could not yet take out her pistol, load it and point it: even when you possessed a valid firearm permit, you could not carry a weapon for personal self-defense purposes in Sweden, on pain of being arrested and having your weapon confiscated. She was thus going to have to take some extra risks here if she wanted to check that truck out. As she was about to get level with the front cab of the truck, the driver started his engine and Greta heard him as well removing the hand brake. Nearly running to the right-side door, she then banged her right fist on the right-side door while shouting in Swedish at the driver through the rolled-up window.



"HEY! WHO ARE YOU? WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?"

The man's response was to raise a revolver he was holding in his right hand and to point it at Greta's head. She barely had time to bend down while jumping back, avoiding a bullet by only a few centimeters. The gun's detonation was strong and clear, denoting some serious caliber, and the bullet shattered the right-side window. With all of her doubts now erased, Greta pulled out both her pistol and the loaded magazine she was transporting in her purse and quickly loaded her gun. By the time she was ready to point her weapon, the truck had jumped forward and was accelerating towards the entrance gate of the Israeli embassy, which was presently open to let pass a big sedan. With adrenaline flowing in her veins and guessing what were the intentions of the driver, she aimed her pistol at the rear tires of the light truck and fired six shots, hitting both of them. As the truck swerved for a couple of seconds due to its punctured tires, Greta fired two more shots, hitting and puncturing the front right-side tire. Still, the driver kept on, accelerating towards the embassy gate while wobbling on its three punctured tires. The two Israelis manning the gate, as well as the occupants of the sedan, were quick to understand what was happening and, with the sedan rushing inside the embassy grounds, the two guards quickly closed the iron grills of the gate and started taking out their own pistols. Knowing now that this was an all-or-nothing situation, Greta ran to the left side of the street she was on, in order to have a line-of-sight shot on the truck driver, and fired her last seven rounds, emptying her gun. She saw the driver slump forward on his steering wheel but, less than a second later, the truck exploded in a big fireball, with the blast wave sweeping Greta off her feet and projecting her backward by a good nine meters. Despite being severely shaken and with her ears ringing like crazy, she was able to keep her grip on her pistol. Feeling pain with each breath she was taking and with her head swimming, she concentrated on putting her pistol back in her purse and on securing its flap: with the truck disintegrated and its driver dead, she didn't need it anymore. When she tried to get up, she felt her head spin, so she simply sat back and tried to assess what had happened to the Israeli embassy and, particularly, to the two gate guards. What she saw beyond the large crater dug by the truck's explosion was the embassy's iron grills gate, blown off its hinges, and the inert bodies of the two guards lying on the pavement of the access road to the embassy. All the windows of the embassy she could see, along with all the windows of the buildings around her, were shattered, blown in by the blast of the bomb that had to have been carried by the truck. There were also a number of other people lying on the sidewalks or stumbling around, while two cars which had been caught in the bomb blast and had seen their windshields

blown in had veered off the avenue, crashing against either a lamp post or a building wall. As a number of people were starting to run towards the explosion's epicenter to help the wounded, Greta tried again to get up but fell back on her bum, still dizzy and deaf. Seeing her wedge cap lying some twenty meters from her, she forced herself to get to it by crawling on her hands and knees. She had reached it and was putting it back on her head when a civilian man came to her and tried to talk to her, obviously wanting to help her. She touched both of her ears with her hands, signaling to the man that she was temporarily deaf. The man, who wore a blue work coverall of the kind mechanics routinely used, understood her and grabbed both of her arms, helping her to get back on her feet and then steadying her while she tried to stop her wobbling. Even though she was deaf, Greta smiled to the man and spoke to him in Swedish.

"Thank you, sir."

The man then said something in return. While she could not hear him, the movements of his lips told her that he was asking her what had happened, so she answered that.

"A suicide truck bomber... He tried to ram the gates of the Israeli embassy, over there, but I was able to shoot him and he exploded his vehicle before he could get to the embassy gates."

Just saying that was painful to her. The man's eyes opened wide then and, taking a handkerchief from one pocket, wiped delicately her chin and lips before showing it to Greta: there was blood on it!

"Shit! The blast hurt my lungs. I will need to see a doctor."

The man nodded his head at that, then looked quickly around him. Seeing a police car arrive at full speed, he waved one hand high, flagging it. The driver of the police car screeched to a halt next to the man and Greta and looked at the former.

"What happened here? Is that woman hurt?"

"She is, Officer. She is temporarily deaf, is dizzy and has blood coming out of her mouth. I believe that the blast of that explosion hurt her lungs."

"A number of ambulances are on their way right now. Could you make sure that she is collected by one of those ambulances? Unfortunately, I see many other victims lying around and I will have to go check on them. Do you know what happened here, mister?"

"I didn't see it myself, but this American officer told me that a suicide bomber tried to crash through the gates of the nearby Israeli embassy but exploded before getting to it."

“SHIT! Not those damn Muslim terrorists again! This would be the second terrorist attack in Sweden in three years. Alright, I will have to go now. Stay with that woman until the arrival of the ambulances.”

“I will, Officer.”

The police patrol car then sped away for a short distance before stopping next to one of the two crashed cars, in order to check on its occupants.

Now alone with her rescuer, Greta had an idea and, searching in her purse, took out one of her embassy-produced calling cards and gave it to the man, then spoke to him.

“Please call my embassy to tell them where I am. If you don’t have a phone, you can use my own phone.”

The man shook his head, signifying that he didn’t need her phone, and took out a flip-phone from one pocket. Reading the telephone number of Greta’s calling card, he composed it and waited for an answer. It came after two rings, with a woman’s voice speaking first in English, then in Swedish.

“United States embassy: may I help you?”

“Miss, I am presently at the intersection of Ulrikagatan and of Strandvägen, where a big bomb just blew up next to the Israeli embassy. I have with me one of your officers, a Captain Greta Visby, who was caught in the blast and is wounded. I intend to stay with her until ambulances arrive.”

The tone of the embassy receptionist changed at once, becoming urgent.

“Hold the line, sir: an embassy guard will take your call. Can you speak English?”

“Sorry, I speak only Swedish and Danish, miss.”

“Alright, hold the line while I inform the guards about this.”

Less than half a minute later, the receptionist was back on the line.

“Alright, mister. First off, thank you for helping our officer. Two of our marine embassy guards will soon come to your location and will then take charge of Captain Visby. You will then be able to leave her. Again, thank you for giving assistance to our officer. May I have your name and telephone number, please. Our ambassador may want to thank you later on.”

The man agreed readily to that and gave the information asked by the receptionist, who then told him he could now close the line. Pocketing back his phone, he gave a smile of encouragement to Greta.

"Your embassy guards are on their way to help you, miss. I will stay until they are here, then I will have to continue my way to work."

"I understand. Thank you very much, mister: you are a most kind man."

"My pleasure, miss. Now, you better sit back down: you are still wobbly."

This time, she started hearing parts of his words through the ringing in her ears. That reassured her: at least her deafness was not going to be permanent. She thus obeyed him and cautiously sat down on the sidewalk and waited.

A couple of minutes later, an American embassy car stopped next to Greta and the man, with Sergeant John Steele and Private Antonio Tomassini jumping out of it and running to the duo. Both marines wore a gun belt around the waist of their dress blues Summer uniforms. Tomassini, who spoke some Swedish, patted the shoulder of the man in blue coverall.

"Thank you for helping our officer, mister. We will now take over from you."

The Swede nodded once, then shook hands with Greta.

"Good luck, miss: you are a brave woman indeed."

As the man walked away, Steele bent down to speak to Greta, concern on his face.

"How do you feel, maam?"

In response, Greta, who could now increasingly hear the noise and voices around her, wiggled her left hand to signify that she was only 'so-so'.

"I was hit hard by the blast wave of the explosion and my lungs may have been damaged. I am also still mostly deaf and feel dizzy."

"Alright, maam: we will help you get in our car, then we will drive you to a hospital."

"Then, go to the Ersta Diakonisällskap, on Stadsgardleden, in the Södermalm District: it is the closest hospital to here."

"I know it, maam. We will get you there right away."

Greta, helped by both Steele and Tomassini, got up and went to sit on the rear bench seat of the embassy car, with Tomassini then driving away as fast as he could in the now chaotic traffic of this part of the district of Ostermalm. As she was driven West, then

South across the bridge linking the Ostermalm and Södermalm Districts, Greta took out her pistol and handed it to Sergeant Steele.

“Take my pistol and secure it at the embassy, Sergeant. I fired it in order to stop that suicide bomber but I am afraid that some rule-bound idiotic Swedish cop could claim that I fired a firearm illegally and then confiscate my pistol.”

“You really think that they would be stupid enough to do that, maam?”

“As one said, never underestimate the predictability of stupidity, Sergeant.”

Steele nodded once, then put her pistol in the gloves compartment of the car, then locked it before helping Tomassini by indicating to him the way to the hospital. As they were rolling, Greta took the time to describe in detail what had happened, with Steele taking notes on that information. Some eight minutes later, and after crossing the Centralbron Bridge over the Riddarfjärden waterway, they arrived at the old, four-story brown brick **Ersta Diakonisällskap Hospital**.

Stopping first at the main entrance of the hospital, Tomassini let Greta and Sergeant Steele climb out of the car, then went to park his



diplomatic car in a visitor’s spot while Steele helped steady Greta as they walked in the reception lobby. Once inside, Steele shouted in English at one of the nurses on duty at the reception desk.

“I NEED A WHEELCHAIR FOR MY OFFICER!”

Thankfully, a female medic reacted quickly and pushed a wheelchair to next to Greta, who then cautiously sat in it. One nurse who could speak English then came to her and Steele, asking a question to the latter.

“What is the problem, sir?”

“A suicide truck bomber just blew up next to the Israeli embassy, on Strandvagen, causing many casualties. My officer was thrown by the blast wave and she is partially deaf. She is also dizzy and wobbly and she had blood come out of her mouth: her lungs may have been damaged as well.”

“You are both diplomatic personnel, sir?”

“Yes! We work at the American embassy, which is near the Israeli embassy. Can a doctor examine her right away?”

“Of course, sir! We will admit her at once. Could I see her passport, so that we could register her in?”

In response, Steele looked down at Greta and pointed at her purse.

“Could I have your passport, Captain?”

While her ears were still ringing strongly, she understood him and fished her diplomatic passport out of her purse. However, she handed both her passport and her purse to Steele.

“Keep and safeguard my purse, Sergeant: it has the keys of my office and secure cabinets in it.”

“Will do, maam!” replied the NCO before handing her passport to the nurse while shouldering the purse’s carrying strap. Taking the passport, the nurse quickly went back to the reception desk and had the passport information noted down by another nurse, then nodded to Steele while handing back to him Greta’s passport.

“Here you are, sir. Your officer will now be wheeled to our emergency department. In view of her state, we will most probably provide her with a room after she has been examined.”

“Then, I would like to be able to guard her room once she will be in it: she was the victim of a terrorist attack and may be a target. Also, expect more casualties to come soon: I saw dozens of people who were either wounded or immobile on the ground.”

The Swedish nurse’s face sobered up on hearing that.

“I will alert our chief medical doctor about this. We will advise you when your officer will be put in a room and in what room she will be.”

“Thank you, miss.”

Steele then watched as Greta was wheeled to an elevator cabin, to go up to the emergency department. The doors of that cabin were sliding closed when Private Tomassini joined up with Steele near the reception desk.

“So, what’s up, Sargeant?”

“Captain Visby is now on her way to the emergency department, where she will be examined and treated before being given a room. I was told that we will be allowed to stand guard at the door of her room. I am going to phone this information in to Colonel Merrick.”

Tomassini nodded once, then looked down at the purse Steele was now carrying from his left shoulder.

“Hey, Sarge: you really look good with a purse.”

“Fuck off, Antonio!”



**10:11 (Sweden Time)**

**Room # 203, Patients' Department**

**Ersta Diakonisällskap Hospital, Södermalm District**

When Ambassador James Scott and Lieutenant Colonel Stanley Merrick entered the private room given to Greta, they found her lying on a gurney, half covered with a blanket and wearing a blue patient's gown. She was connected to a diagnostic machine and to an intravenous syringe connected to a bag full of clear liquid. Both Scott and Merrick looked at her with concern before approaching her to speak with her, with Scott smiling to her.

"So, how do you feel, Captain Visby?"

"Shitty, Mister Ambassador: I always hated hospital beds. My ears are still ringing a bit, but much less than right after the explosion and I can hear you clearly enough. My doctor told me that I should regain full auditory acuity within a couple of days. What he is more worried about is me suffering from a possible commotion and about my lungs, which were damaged by the bomb blast. I am due to have more tests and scans done on me today, after which they will have a more definitive diagnostic of my case. Do you know how the Israelis at their embassy fared, sir? I saw the two gate guards lying on the ground after the explosion."

"Israeli Ambassador Eli Jacobsson called me just before I left the embassy to come here, to thank me for your actions, which saved many lives in his embassy. He informed me that one of his gate guards succumbed to his wounds, while the other is in critical but stable condition. His embassy staff also suffered a number of wounded from blown windows. Sergeant Steele did inform us of what you told him about the incident but I would like you to resume what you saw for me and Colonel Merrick."

"Very well, sir! I was walking to the embassy when, at about seven thirty, I saw an illegally parked used Mercedes UNIMOG shelter van light truck sitting on Ulrikavägen, just short of the intersection with Strandvägen. It looked like an old surplus army truck and was painted gray, with no commercial logo or paint scheme on it. I then noticed the Israeli Embassy just beyond that truck, sitting on the far side of the avenue. As I approached the truck, I saw a single man sitting inside at the wheel: he looked like a Middle-Eastern man and wore a long beard. That man threw me a hateful look when he saw me in his mirror. Now suspicious, I approached the truck and banged on its right-

side door, asking what he was doing there. His response was to point a revolver at me and shoot. I managed to dodge his bullet, then took my pistol and a loaded magazine out of my purse as the truck sped towards the main gate of the Israeli embassy, which was opened at the time to let in a big black sedan car. I first shot six times, aiming at and hitting the truck's rear tires, then shot two more times, puncturing the front right tire. As it wobbled while still speeding towards the Israeli embassy's main gate, I ran to the left side of Ulrikagatan Street in order to have a shot at the driver and emptied my pistol. The driver then slumped forward over his steering wheel just before his truck exploded. I was thankfully not hit by shrapnel but I was thrown back by the force of the blast and ended up sprawled on the sidewalk for a moment before a civilian man ran to help me. About that man, sir, I believe that he would deserve to be thanked and commended for his actions."

"I agree with you on that, Captain. We have his name and phone number and I firmly intend to call him later on to pass our thanks to him. Did you encounter any Swedish police officer before our two guards arrived on the scene?"

"One police patrol car did briefly stop to speak with my rescuer but the cop inside it didn't speak directly to me and left quickly to go check on the other victims of the bomb, sir. Will I be in shit for using my pistol, sir?"

"Well, that's a possibility, in view of the inflexibility of Swedish rules and regulations concerning the use of firearms in public, but you can be certain that I would strongly protest any harassing action against you by the Swedish police. As for the Israeli ambassador, I am certain that he would strenuously defend your actions if some Swedish prosecutor goes after you."

Greta sighed at that and shook his head.

"I don't know what it is about me and suicide bombers, sir. I was previously blown back by another suicide bomb truck while in Somalia, then had to fight hand-to-hand with a suicide bomber on foot to prevent him from triggering his explosive vest."

"And how did that fight go, Captain?" asked Scott, raising an eyebrow in interest.

"Since he was very close to me at the time, I rolled one hand around his right hand, to prevent him from pushing his bomb trigger with his thumb, then kned him in the groin and bit his nose hard. He then fell backward in the dirt of the Khyber Pass road, following which I managed to take out my pistol and shoot him dead. I got the Bronze Star for that, along with another nickname: The Lioness of the Khyber Pass."

"I love it! It is certainly a good way to describe you, Captain Visby. Well, I can now only hope that you will be able to fully recuperate from that morning's experience. Two of your marine guards will be stationed at your door until you can walk out of this hospital, just in case whoever sent that suicide bomber tries to seek revenge on you. I will..."

The noise of an altercation in the hallway outside of the room then interrupted Scott. Merrick then hurried to the door and opened it, to find his two guards tense and ready to act as a man wearing a tired suit and with a police badge suspended by a chain from his neck was arguing in an increasingly hot tone with a graying man closely accompanied by two big men.

"Hey, we have a patient inside who needs to rest. What the hell is happening here?" he said in a harsh tone, using English. The man in the tired suit then brandished his badge to him.

"I'm Inspector Gustav Olafsson, of the Stockholm Police Department. I came to question your officer about her actions near the Israeli embassy."

"And I am the Israeli ambassador and I came here to thank Captain Visby for saving many of my staff's lives by her action, you thick-skulled cop!" replied the graying man before facing Merrick and presenting his right hand for a shake.

"Ambassador Eli Jacobssen, at your service, Colonel. How is Captain Visby?"

"Shaken and half-deaf but very much alive, Mister Ambassador. Lieutenant Colonel Stanley Merrick, U.S. Defense Attaché in Stockholm. Thank you for coming and paying a visit to her."

"That will have to wait until I am finished interrogating her." cut in Olafsson. His use of the word 'interrogating' pricked Merrick hard and he resolutely faced the Swedish police inspector.

"In case that you have either forgotten or have decided to ignore it, Captain Visby has diplomatic status here in Sweden and has immunity from prosecution, Inspector. You may ask her questions, politely, but don't start trying to accuse her of any impropriety or you will end up with a diplomatic protest on your superintendent's desk."

"You can add my own diplomatic protest to that if you persist in treating this brave woman like a suspect, Inspector Olafsson."

"But I need to know why she shot at that truck." protested Olafsson, attracting a mean look from both Merrick and Jacobssen. Merrick too on him to reply to that.

"Why she shot at that truck? Because, after finding it suspicious and after knocking on its passenger door, she was then shot at by the driver before the latter started accelerating towards the main gate of the Israeli embassy. Thankfully, she was able to dodge that bullet and then took out and loaded the pistol she legally owns, shooting up the tires of that truck and preventing it from reaching the gate of the Israeli embassy. Now that you know those details, you can now leave and let my officer rest, Inspector Olafsson."

Seeing that he wouldn't win that dispute, Olafsson stomped away, leaving Merrick alone with Ambassador Jacobsson and his two bodyguards. Merrick shook his hand before inviting him in Greta's room.

"Ambassador Scott is presently at Captain Visby's side, Mister Ambassador. You are welcome to go in and speak with both of them."

"Thank you, Colonel."

With Merrick holding the door open for him, Jacobssen entered the room and eyed Greta on her gurney, smiling to her.

"So, this is the famous Viking Shield Maiden. I have to say that you look the part, Captain Visby. I am Eli Jacobssen, Israeli ambassador to Sweden and I came to thank you for your courageous intervention this morning."

"Me, famous, Mister Ambassador? But I am no superhero: I am simply a soldier serving the United States."

"Aah, a modest superhero: I like that." replied Jacobssen, making both Scott and Merrick chuckle. Greta rolled her eyes at that but then looked soberly at the Israeli diplomat.

"Mister Ambassador, I acted to protect other people from that religious fanatic, that's all. Talking of others, how is your wounded guard doing?"

"He is in this hospital, in critical but stable condition and he should live. However, he will unfortunately end up with lifelong medical sequels. He will be repatriated to Israel as soon as it is deemed safe for him to be transported by air. Unfortunately, a total of up to five Swedish citizens have been killed and another 26 others wounded in that terrorist attack. However, without you, it could have been a lot worse."

Greta lowered her head for a moment, saddened by the news about the casualties from the bomb truck, before looking back up at Jacobssen.

"Do we know something about that truck bomber and who could have sent him, Mister Ambassador?"

"Thankfully, our security cameras at the embassy's main gate were able to capture pictures of the registration plate of that truck bomb, Captain Visby. My security officer was then able to ascertain that this truck was reported stolen five days ago from a construction site near Stockholm, along with a sizeable quantity of dynamite stored at that site. Preliminary examinations of the bomb site showed that there were also a number of large propane cylinders inside that truck, along with the stolen dynamite. The Swedish police is presently investigating that link but it may take days before we know more about that suicide bomber and his sponsors. Swedish authorities have now posted significant numbers of police officers in order to reinforce the security of my embassy, so we should be able to breathe easier...for the moment. And what about you, Captain Visby?"

"I am not sure, Mister Ambassador. My doctor wants to run some more tests and scans on me and he also wants to keep me in this hospital for at least another two days, in order to make sure that I don't suffer from a commotion. I must say that this is no new experience for me, Mister Ambassador: I was blown back by a car bomb in Somalia after shooting dead its driver as he was speeding towards my unit's checkpoint. I also survived that attack with a mild commotion and was back on duty two days later." Jacobssen nodded his head in appreciation at those words.

"You are a tough woman, on top of being a brave one, Captain Visby. It also appears that you are an expert pistol shooter, if I can believe my security officer. Our security cameras captured you as you shot at that truck from a distance of at least forty meters, yet managed to hit three of its tires, on top of killing the driver."

"Well, I do have a pistol marksman's badge to prove that, Mister Ambassador, along with a rifle sharpshooter's badge."

Jacobssen lightly smiled as he replied to her.

"Decidedly, you could be a perfect model for our own female soldiers, Captain."

"They really want to have legs the size of tree trunks, sir?" joked Greta, making the three men in the room laugh briefly. The Israeli ambassador then grinned to her.

"Maybe they wouldn't need to be a weightlifter like you are, Captain, but them having your courage and military skills would be plenty to make our generals content."

"Stop it, Mister Ambassador! Your praise will kill me."

"Better than being killed by a bomb, I guess. Well, it was an honor to meet you, Captain Visby. I wish you a prompt recovery. Again, you have the eternal thanks of Israel for your actions of this morning."

"Thank you, Mister Ambassador."

Jacobssen approached her and shook her hand, then left the room. Now alone with Ambassador Scott and Lieutenant Colonel Merrick, she looked at her military superior.

"What's next for me, sir? I do have important work to do and I would like to return to my duties soon."

"Not before your doctor certifies you as good for the service and not before you take at least a week of rest to recuperate, Greta: commotions can be nasty and treacherous business. Also, your lungs took a hit with that blast wave and they will need time to fully heal. In fact, consider yourself on medical leave until Monday, July 23, in twelve days."

"Twelve days, sir? What am I going to do during all that time?"

"I don't know, Captain. Maybe lifting more weights...a lot more weights." quipped Merrick.

At around three o'clock in the afternoon, she got a visit from the Swedish doctor who had treated her to date. The smile he was harboring when he entered her room did a lot to reassure her about any long-term possible sequels.

"So, what do the scans say about me, Doctor Lindquist?"

"That you should be as good as new within a few weeks at the most, miss. The brain scans showed no signs of inflammation, swelling or other signs of a long-term commotion. As for your lungs, they are on their way to full healing. You can thus be reassured about your continued future in the American military."

Greta pushed a long sigh of relief on hearing that diagnostic.

"Thank God! I was really afraid about possibly being medically discharged from the Marines because of this. When do you think that I could leave this hospital, Doctor?"

"If no other problems emerge in the next few hours, I should be able to release you from this hospital by tomorrow afternoon. You however should take it easy for at least another week, in order to give a chance to your body to fully recuperate from that bomb blast."

"If it can reassure you, Doctor, I am already on official medical leave from the embassy until the 23<sup>rd</sup> of this month. Uh, would it be possible to get a copy of my

medical record and diagnostic from your hospital, Doctor? I will need to have those added to my U.S. Marine Corps medical file.”

“You will get those before you leave, miss. May I say to you that it was an honor to treat such a brave woman as you.”

“Please, Doctor: I only did my duty to protect innocents. Any other marine would have done the same.”

Lindquist nodded his head once in appreciation while eyeing her with respect.

“You are indeed a remarkable woman in many respect, Captain Visby, including your modesty and sense of duty. Uh, do you feel up to receiving a trio of visitors, miss? They are waiting outside, in the hallway.”

While intrigued, Greta nodded her head at her doctor.

“I can indeed receive visitors, Doctor: it will help break the boredom of having to stay in bed for this long.”

Lindquist nodded again before turning around and walking to the door of her room, opening it wide while speaking to someone in the hallway.

“Captain Visby is ready to receive you, Your Majesty.”

Blood rushed to Greta’s head on hearing those two last words. A graying man in his early sixties, accompanied by a woman of about the same age and by a younger woman in her late twenties or early thirties, then entered her room. While the three of them wore common civilian clothes, a top-quality suit in the case of the man, Greta had no difficulty in recognizing them: it was **King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden**, his wife, **Queen Silvia of Sweden**, and his eldest daughter, Crown Princess Victoria, Duchess of Vastergotland. She was starting to sit in bed and to swing her legs out, so that she could greet the royal trio, but King Gustaf promptly waved to her to stay in her bed.



“Please, Captain Visby, stay in your bed: no need to exert yourself on the account of our visit.”

“But, Your Majesty, it would be more respectful for me to be at least sitting instead of lying down. Besides, I need to move a bit: I have been lying in bed for far too long already.”

“Very well, Captain, but please don’t risk your health during our visit. I came to this hospital with my wife and daughter in order to lend my moral support to the victims

of this morning's bomb who are being treated here. It was only fitting that we also paid a visit to the brave woman who prevented more deaths by her heroic actions."

"I just did my duty and intervened to stop a fanatic from killing and wounding innocents. I had to deal with many such despicable, hateful men before, both in Somalia and in Afghanistan, and I am pained to see that they chose to strike here in Sweden, my country of birth."

"Captain Visby, you may now be a citizen of the United States and a member of the U.S. Marine Corps, but you wear a proud Swedish name and certainly brought honor to it during your years of military service. Know that I was made aware of your actions in Somalia, when your unit fought with Somali pirates and bandits who were holding for ransom a number of innocent people, including some Swedish citizens, one of which was an ex-member of the royal family of Sweden. You also fought with your unit to protect an international humanitarian hospital in which many Swedish citizens worked. You later distinguished yourself again in Afghanistan, where you firmed up your nickname of 'Viking Shield Maiden' in the eyes of Swedish citizens. Your name of 'Visby' certainly honors one of our oldest cities in Sweden but, name apart, what especially distinguishes you is your bravery and skills as a soldier, things that are admired by both me and by the Swedish people. Know that I intend to thank you and honor you by inviting you to a formal dinner with me and the royal family at my palace on Stadsholmen, this coming Saturday. I do hope that you will be able to attend that dinner, Captain Visby."

"Doctor Lindquist just told me that I should be able to leave this hospital by tomorrow afternoon, Your Majesty."

"Excellent! Then, I will be expecting you for five o'clock on this coming Saturday, at my royal palace."

"I will be there, Your Majesty." promised at once Greta, making King Gustaf smile and nod.

"It will be a pleasure to host you, Captain Visby. I wish you a prompt and complete recovery from your wounds and will now go visit a few more people being treated in this hospital. Have a good day, Captain Visby."

"It was an honor to meet you and your family, Your Majesty."

The King, Queen and Crown Princess then exchanged handshakes and, in the case of the Queen and Crown Princess, hugs and kisses on the cheeks, with Greta before leaving her room. A bit overwhelmed, Greta looked at Doctor Lindquist.



“Damn! I better go review the Marine Corps regulations about ceremonial uniforms once out of this hospital.”

**16:31 (Sweden Time)**

**Saturday, July 14, 2007 ‘C’**

**Main entrance to # 46 Lovisag**

**Ostermalm District, Stockholm**

Greta, waiting at the entrance of her apartment building for the arrival of the palace car she had been informed would come to bring her to the Royal Palace, was attracting quite a few stares from the passersby, as she was wearing her **U.S. Marine Corps female ceremonial evening dress uniform**, complete with miniature military medals and decorations. While she normally disliked wearing a skirt because of her huge, muscular legs, which detracted



with short and medium-length skirts, the ankle-length long skirt of her evening dress uniform did a good job of completely covering them. The palace car, a big **Volvo 960** four-door sedan, then showed up, stopping in front of her. Greta grinned with joy when none other than Captain Alexander Akerman, wearing a ceremonial uniform of the Swedish Life Guards, stepped out of the vehicle to then salute her while opening the rear right door for her.



“ALEX! They designated you as my escort to the Royal Palace?”

“Let’s say that I volunteered for the job, Greta. However, nobody knows that we have been dating, so you can rest reassured about possible gossips and rumors concerning us. By the way, you look absolutely resplendent in this uniform.”

“It is indeed a nice outfit, albeit a costly one for a junior officer like me. But I better get in this car now: I don’t want to be late for an invitation from the King.”

“You certainly don’t want to, Greta.” approved Alex, who closed the door once she was sitting inside. Then sitting back himself in the big sedan and closing his door, he looked at the driver, a civilian palace driver.

“We can return to the palace now, Olaf.”

The driver simply nodded at that and pulled out of his parking spot, to then roll at a moderate speed towards the Royal Palace, which was situated on a nearby island to the Southwest of the Ostermalm District.

As they were rolling through the streets of Downtown Stockholm, Greta had a question for Alexander.

"Alex, do you know what kind of dinner this will be at the Royal Palace? Will it be a large state dinner, with dozens of guests and media types present, or will it be a more intimate setting?"

"It will be an intimate setting, with mostly members of the Royal family attending. As far as I know, the press was not told about this dinner and was not invited to it. Do you fear the presence of the medias for that dinner, Greta?"

"Fear is a big word, Alex, but I dislike publicity about me. I am a soldier first and foremost and don't want public reporting on me that could distract me from my duties or could fuel controversies about me."

"Controversies? What could be controversial about you accepting an invitation by the King to have dinner with him?"

"For one, possible allegations of favoritism from American military or political leaders. For another, possible accusations that my loyalty to the United States has become second to that towards Sweden. Don't laugh about that second case: some at my embassy have already alluded to that."

Alex couldn't help frown on hearing that.

"Those people who made those allusions are either idiots or are men jealous about your accomplishments. Ignore them, Greta."

"I wish I could, Alex. Those 'idiots' are actually above me in the hierarchy of the American embassy and there is little I can do to shut them up."

"They're still idiots!" replied Alex, angry, before calming down and speaking in a reassuring tone to her.

"Look, Greta. Tonight you will be with people who respect and admire you, so enjoy your evening freely and forget about those assholes at your embassy."

"Thanks for your encouragements, Alex. It is truly nice to have you as a friend." Alex was tempted to shoot back with something like 'only as a friend?' but held his tongue, as they were not alone in the car.

The palace car finally arrived at the **Royal Palace** and entered its courtyard, which was enclosed within two curved buildings shaped like halves of a horseshoe. In turn, that horseshoe and courtyard connected with the big rectangular building which was the royal residence and palace proper. The big sedan rolled to the main entrance of the



palace, where it stopped to let Alex and Greta get out before rolling away. Escorted by Alex, Greta saluted back in passing the two Swedish royal guards posted at the main entrance, who were presenting arms to her. Once inside the palace, the duo found a majordomo in classic coat-tail suit waiting for them.

“Welcome to the Royal Palace, Captain Visby. I will now take over from Captain Akerman and will guide you to the royal apartments, where the King is waiting for you.”

“Thank you, sir! Please lead on.”

Before walking away from Alex, Greta discretely pressed his hand for a brief moment. While the majordomo saw that, he didn’t react to it: one of his main attributes as a palace majordomo was to be discreet about what he did get to hear or see.

Going up to the second floor of the building via a monumental staircase, Greta was soon introduced into a richly furnished lounge displaying many old paintings and art objects and where King Gustaf was waiting with his wife the Queen, his eldest daughter and a mature man wearing a top-quality suit. Having read about royal etiquette in the prior days, Greta did a curtsy to the King and Queen, attracting a benevolent smile from King Gustaf.

“I see that you read about royalty mores, Captain Visby. That is most attentionate and commendable of you.”

“And inviting me here for dinner was a great honor for me, Your Majesty.”

The King nodded his head once, then pointed at the man in a suit standing to his left.

“May I present to you Herr Gunnar Borgman, the mayor of the city of Visby? I invited him as well to attend our dinner.”

Holding in the question that immediately came to her mind, Greta took two steps forward and shook hands with the mayor while smiling to him.

"My father once told me that my family name originated in your city, Herr Borgman. Was he right?"

"He certainly was, Captain Visby." answered the man in a jovial tone. "I actually brought with me something that proves the link between your family and my city."

Borgman then made a sign to a royal valet who was holding a large, framed document in his hands. When the valet approached them, Greta was able to see that the framed document was actually an exquisitely decorated and drawn document which furiously looked to her like a genealogical tree chart. Her heart jumped in her chest when she saw the title in bold, stylized letters at the top of the document.

"The Visby Family..."

Borgman grinned as he took the framed document from the valet and then presented it to her.

"This document was compiled and produced at the request of His Majesty the King, so that it could be presented to you today. The royal archivists used all the documents available on this subject and went as far back as was possible using still existing historical records. The name 'Visby' comes from the Old Norse word 'Vi', which means 'pagan', and the word 'By', which means 'village'. The earliest history of Visby is still uncertain but it was known as a center of commerce as early as in 900 A.D. However, there are traces of occupation on its site dating from the Stone Age. By the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, the city was part of the famed Hanseatic League and, during the 1400s, the city was known under the name of 'Wisbuy', where a set of maritime laws that had broad influence in the Baltic and beyond, the 'Laws of Wisbuy', were probably promulgated. The oldest origin of the family name 'Visby' that we could trace back dates back from 1286 A.D., when the first person named 'Wisbuy' was recorded on official documents. From there, your family tree grew quite a lot. Unfortunately, many members of the Wisbuy family died or disappeared on or around 1361, when the King of Denmark invaded the island of Gotland and killed over 1,800 of the locals. Some of the survivors of your family stayed then, while others fled to mainland Sweden, where they resettled. Your branch of the Visby family is part of those who resettled on the mainland. Fortunately, there were enough still existing church archives between the 14<sup>th</sup> Century and now to allow us to complete this genealogical tree up to today. You are thus one of the descendants from a successful family of maritime merchants who prospered in Visby as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. In turn, those merchants most probably descended from the early Norse inhabitants of the city, who settled on Gotland Island in the 900s. Your

nickname of 'The Viking Shield Maiden' may thus well be grounded in historical reality, Captain Visby."

Overjoyed, Greta carefully took the framed document from the hands of the mayor and examined it for a few seconds before grinning to him and the King.

"This is the most precious gift I could have dreamed of. Thank you from the bottom of my heart, Herr Borgman, and thank you as well to you, Your Majesty, for sponsoring this incredible gift."

"You are welcome, Captain Visby." replied the King. "However, Herr Borgman still has more for you, as I do. Herr Borgman?"

The mayor of Visby made a sign to another royal valet, who then stepped forward while holding a much smaller framed document than the first one, along with two large envelopes, which Borgman took from him before smiling again to Greta.

"This is a gift from my city to you and to your father, Captain Visby. This framed certificate is declaring you as an honorary citizen of the City of Visby. Those two envelopes in turn contain smaller format certificates of honorary citizenship, one in your name and one in the name of your father. Know that you will always be most welcome in my city, Captain."

A happy Greta took the framed document and two envelopes from Borgman, then shook his hand with enthusiasm.

"This is a great honor for me, Herr Borgman. I can't wait to tell my father about all this."

King Gustaf, along with Queen Silvia and Crown Princess Victoria, smiled on at that scene before the King spoke to Greta.

"This leaves only one small matter to deal with before we go have dinner, Captain. MAJOR HANSEN!"

A senior officer of the Royal Guards who had obviously been waiting in an adjacent room to be called then entered the lounge and walked to King Gustaf, stopping in front of him and saluting him before handing him a small blue box. Greta's heart skipped a beat on recognizing that box as the kind which usually contained medals.

"Captain Visby, I know that the American military has some rigid rules about its members accepting foreign medals. I thus am giving you this medal in private, so that you could then ask your superiors for the permission to wear it with your other medals, and this without attracting public controversy in the United States. Captain Visby, apart from making the whole of Sweden proud about your military exploits as a U.S. Marine

Corps member, your heroic actions of last Wednesday probably minimized greatly the loss of lives from the despicable act of terrorism the good city of Stockholm has suffered then. For special merit earned by your actions, I thus am happy and honored to give you the **H.M. King's Medal in eight size and gold.**"

Helped by the major, King Gustaf pinned the blue ribbon and gold medal decoration on Greta's dress blues evening dress jacket. Once finished, he then took one step back and saluted her militarily, to which Greta responded with her own salute to him.



"Captain Visby, you truly brought honor to your Swedish origins, on top of saving many lives. I hope that your military superiors will allow you to wear this medal with your other medals."

"I will certainly pass that request to Lieutenant Colonel Merrick when I will return to my embassy duties, Your Majesty, so that he could forward it to the Marine Corps and the Pentagon."

"Good! Well, let's move to my private dining room, Captain. I don't know about you but I am getting quite hungry by now."

**14: 25, Thursday, July 26, 2007 'C'**

**Office of Ambassador James Scott, U.S. embassy in Stockholm**

The moment that the Regional Security Officer for the U.S. embassy, Charles Doherty, entered the office of his ambassador, he saw at once that Scott appeared angry at him.

"You wanted to see me, Mister Ambassador?"

"I certainly do, Mister Doherty. Close the door behind you."

Now bracing himself for the probable storm to come, Doherty closed the door of the office, then stepped closer to the desk of the ambassador. However, Scott didn't offer him a chair, while he stayed sitting while speaking to Doherty, a clear sign of diplomatic disapproval.

"Mister Doherty, I already warned you about treating with respect Captain Visby, a decorated combat veteran, and about dealing with her in a polite and balanced manner. This last Monday afternoon, my head of communications brought me a draft message composed by you and addressed to the headquarters of the Diplomatic

Security Service in Washington. Mister Harvey noted to me that this draft message was not approved in advance by me and, worse, appeared to try to circumvent my attention to it. In this draft message, which was never sent to Washington by the way, you listed a number of reasons, which I would qualify as petty and spurious, reasons meant to justify the revoking of the security clearance of Captain Visby, for supposed 'doubtful loyalty to the State Department and the United States', and her removal from her post as our ODC officer. Well, I have news for you about this, Mister Doherty. First off, I am the one who will decide if one of my embassy staff members is a security threat to my embassy and thus should be removed, not you. Second, the fact that you tried to short-circuit me in this manner constitutes to me a clear case of insubordination, done in order to backstab a valuable member of my staff whom I respect and admire. I may also remind you that the debacle concerning Major Jenkins basically was on you, my RSO, as you never caught on to his treacherous conduct before the Swedish counter-intelligence services unmasked him. Know that I have fired out my own message to Washington on Tuesday, addressed to the Secretary of State, signaling your conduct and insubordination. The President himself was then informed of this by Secretary Rice. Your assertions against Captain Visby were then categorically rejected by her and by President Bush as being without basis in facts. By order of Secretary Rice, I am now relieving you of your post as the embassy RSO and am sending you back to Washington, where a State Department special committee will review your conduct and performance here. A temporary RSO will also be sent from Washington to act in your place until a more permanent replacement could be named. I thus expect you to leave Stockholm for Washington no later than this Sunday. Now leave and go start packing!"

A pale, shocked Doherty did not even attempt to protest this decision, seeing the futility of such a move, and walked out of the ambassador's office like an automaton.

## **CHAPTER 17 – BORDER WAR**



**23:46 (Texas Time)**

**Tuesday, October 23, 2007 'C'**

**U.S. Customs Laredo-Juarez/Lincoln Border port of entry**

**Laredo, Texas (on the Rio Grande)**

Officer Juanita Mendoza, of the U.S. Customs and Border Protection, or CBP, frowned on seeing what vehicle would be next at her control gate of the Laredo-Juarez/Lincoln Border Station: it was a battered Ford pickup truck towing an equally battered camper trailer and bearing Mexican registration plates. That combination too often spelled 'drugs trafficking' for experienced CBP officers like her. Flagging the driver of that pickup truck to stop at the level of her gate booth, Juanita spoke in Spanish to the old, brown-skinned man with a moustache who was sitting alone in the vehicle.

"Good evening, sir. May I have your papers?"

She had to repeat herself twice, as the man seemed to have a poor sense of hearing...or was faking it. The man finally gave her his passport and driver's permit. Juanita studied those for a few seconds before looking back at the truck driver.

"Where are you going and what is the purpose of your trip, mister?"

"I am going to Laredo to bring this camper trailer to my cousin, who lives there."

Juanita gave a skeptical look at the old man before pointing to one of the vehicle inspection spots past her gate, near the main building of the border station.

"Please go to Spot Number Four, to your left. An officer will be waiting for you there. Here are your papers."

"Thank you, miss."



As the pickup truck and its trailer started rolling away, Juanita grabbed her portable radio and spoke in it.

“Bob, this is Juanita. I am sending to Spot Four an old brown pickup truck towing a camper trailer that feels suspect to me. Take a couple more guys and give it a good look-over.”

“On it, Juanita!”

Juanita then followed visually the pickup truck, to make sure that it didn't simply skip the inspection and tried to drive away. Seeing that the old Mexican man was following her instructions, she then concentrated on the next vehicle waiting at her gate, a small four-door sedan with two persons on board.

At Inspection Spot Number Four, Agent Bob Rico and two other CBP officers watched the old pickup approach and mentally agreed about Juanita having become suspicious of it: the pickup and its trailer would have plenty of space and locations to hide a cargo of illicit drugs. Also, well used vehicles like this one were often used by the drug cartels because they were basically expendable, while their drivers were often left unaware about what could be in their vehicles. Bob approached the pickup truck as soon as it stopped in the inspection spot, then spoke in Spanish to the old driver.

“Are you transporting any drugs, sums of money above ten thousand dollars, food or weapons of any kind, mister?”

“I just have a few pieces of used furniture and appliances in my trailer, plus bottled water with me in the cab, señor. I am bringing my old camper to my cousin in Laredo, so that he could travel on vacation for a while with his family.”

“Very well! Please step out of the truck and go wait behind that table behind me while we search our truck and trailer.”

“Si, señor!”

As the old man went to sit behind the inspection table, Bob opened the driver's door of the pickup truck, while one of his colleagues opened the opposite door, with the third agent going to search the trailer.

It took only a few minutes of searching before Riko found something suspicious behind the truck's radio. Pulling it out of the dashboard, he showed to Suzan Roundtree a pair of small black boxes taped together and attached to the truck's electrical system by a pair of thin wires.

"Bingo! A GPS locator connected to a radio transmitter. Those who sent this truck here probably know that we stopped this vehicle and are now searching it. An old trick indeed in their books."

"Uh, what's that third box taped to the bottom of the other two boxes, Bob? I see an antenna wire hanging from it."

"A third box?"

## **BAOOM**

The blast of the powerful bomb hidden inside the camper trailer disintegrated it and mangled the pickup truck while blowing it tens of meters away. The three CBP agents doing the search were instantly killed, along with the old driver of the pickup, while five more CBP agents and dozens of nearby motorists and pedestrian travelers were either killed or seriously wounded. Part of one wall of the border station's main building collapsed, while all the windows within 200 meters were blown in by the force of the blast. In her gate booth, a terrified Juanita was thrown to the ground when her whole booth shook madly for an instant. Now half deaf, she cautiously got back on her feet and looked with wide eyes at the large crater in the asphalt dug where Inspection Spot Number Four had been. A scream of pain then made her head turn towards the car she had been checking out at the moment of the explosion. What looked like a vehicle rear bumper had been projected with force against the car's windshield, shattering it and hitting the occupants inside. The man and woman who had been sitting at the front were now inert and covered with blood, while a hysterical young girl sitting in the back was screaming in pain, her face and T-shirt bloodied.

"Oh my God!"

Juanita then tried to call by phone the main CBP office in the station but found the line dead, probably cut by the explosion. She nearly panicked then but, seeing the poor girl scream, gathered her courage and grabbed the first aid kit she kept in her booth before stepping out and going to the mangled car next to it, resolved to come to the aid of the unfortunate child. From the wounds sustained by her parents and the fact that they were totally inert, with their eyes wide open and fixed, it was highly likely that both adults were dead. She thus didn't waste any time to check them out and went straight to the wounded child, speaking to her in a soothing voice while opening her first aid kit on top of the rear bench seat.

“Don’t worry: I am going to help you, little one.”

“MOMMY! DADDY! PLEASE WAKE UP!”

**0:37 (Washington Time)**

**Wednesday, October 24, 2007 ‘C’**

**CBP Headquarters, Ronald Reagan Building  
Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, D.C.**

CBP Commissioner James Walters was positively boiling with anger when he arrived at the headquarters of his service, situated in the **Ronald Reagan Building**, on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington.



“Those fucking drug cartel bastards! To blow up one of our border stations like this.”

As he was walking towards his office, his senior agent in charge of the night shift approached him at a near run.

“Sir, we just got a call from Administrator Tandy, who is presently at DEA<sup>19</sup> headquarters. She wants you to call her on a secure line as quickly as possible.”

“Very well! What is the latest word from our border station in Laredo, Mike?”

“Up to now, the casualty count is eight of our agents and civilian employees killed, along with 23 travelers, and twelve agents and 47 travelers wounded, many of them critically, sir. The border station itself has suffered some serious damage and the station commander has ordered the Juarez/Lincoln bridge closed until further notice.”

Those numbers infuriated Walters even more and he charged like a bull into his office, where he sat behind his work desk before grabbing the encrypted telephone line linking his headquarters with those of a number of other federal law enforcement agencies. Composing the office number for Karen Tandy, the DEA Administrator, he got her on the line after two rings.

“Administrator Tandy!”

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<sup>19</sup> DEA: Drug Enforcement Administration. The American federal agency in charge of combating illicit drug trafficking and distribution in the United States. It also has sole responsibility for coordinating and pursuing U.S. drug investigations both domestically and abroad.

"Karen, this is James, at CBP Headquarters. You wanted me to call you ASAP<sup>20</sup>?"

"I sure did, James. We at DEA received less than thirty minutes ago an anonymous phone call which pretended to be from the **Los Zetas Cartel**<sup>21</sup>. In that call, the Los Zetas took credit for the attack on your border post in Laredo. It also contained a warning for our government saying, quote, stop your stupid War on Drugs or you will soon feel what real war is like, unquote. I have already passed the content of this call to both our Department of



Homeland Security and to the White House. The ball is now in the President's court on how we will react to this outrage. How are your people in Laredo faring, James?"

"Rather badly, I'm afraid. Eight of my agents have been killed and another 23 were wounded, while twelve American and Mexican citizens were killed and another 47 wounded. The Laredo-Juarez/Lincoln border station is now closed on a temporary basis."

"And what do you think of that warning from the Los Zetas, James?" Walters sighed in discouragement at that question.

"Karen, as much as I wish that we could make those bastards pay for this outrage, the reality is that the Los Zetas Cartel, like most of the other Mexican drug cartels, counts tens of thousands of armed members, most of them hiding among the Mexican general population, and is awash with weapons. Furthermore, the authorities and police of the State of Tamaulipas, where the Los Zetas mostly operate, are notoriously corrupt and we can't thus count on them to help us apprehend the authors of this crime. You also have to take account of the fact that tens of thousands of American citizens are inside of Mexico at any one time, either as tourists, workers or business owners. Any direct action we would take against the Los Zetas could result in those American citizens becoming targets for those criminals."

Karen Tandy, apparently shocked by his negative response, objected at once.

<sup>20</sup> ASAP: As Soon As Possible. A term used very frequently in the United States.

<sup>21</sup> Los Zetas Cartel: Powerful and extremely brutal Mexican drug cartel established in the state of Tamaulipas, on the border with Texas, with its leaders mostly based in Nuevo Laredo.

"James, how could you give up this easily to these bastards?"

That question in turn made Walters nearly mad with anger and frustration.

"How? Because I keep seeing the bastards we manage to catch being released thanks to the high-flight lawyers the cartels can afford to hire for their important members. Because our justice system is too slow, too clogged and too lenient with those scum. While we play nice and legal with them, they kidnap, torture and kill with near impunity, while half of the Mexican government and police is in the pocket of the cartels. So, excuse me for being realistic here, Karen. Feel free to have me sacked, but I won't change my opinion on this. What we need to get rid of them is to wage total war against them, and I don't mean a legal war. We need someone like ex-General of the Army Dows, with powers to use the full might of our military against the cartels, in order to rid us of those blood-thirsty monsters."

Walters then cut the line, too angry to continue this conversation. At the other end of the line, Karen Tandy looked for a moment at her telephone handset, then slowly put it down. In truth, she agreed with everything Walters had said. Unfortunately, political reality would probably make Walters' wish impossible to realize.

**18:08 (Seattle Time)**

**1402 South McDonald Street, Port Angeles**

**State of Washington**

Wanting to hear the latest news about the terrorist attack against the Laredo border post, Ingrid had switched on her smaller television set sitting on her kitchen counter and was listening to it while making her son Michael eat in his booster seat, next to her own dining table chair. The newscaster had just used the first eight minutes of his six o'clock news show to recap what was known about that attack and was now announcing a national address by President Bush on that subject. Little Michael, mature well beyond his years because of his remembered past incarnations, like Nancy had been, noticed how much his mother was paying attention to the television set and stopped spooning his chicken fried rice for a moment to ask her a question.

"Mommy, how bad is this?"

"Very bad, Michael. A lot of people could die because of this. Now, let me listen to the President for a moment. Then, I will explain to you what he has said."

Ingrid then concentrated back on the television set, where President Bush was now shown sitting behind his big presidential desk in the Oval Office and speaking to the banks of cameras facing him.

“My dear fellow American citizens. Late yesterday, a cowardly bomb attack killed many of our border agents, along with even more innocent American and Mexican citizens. That attack has since then been claimed by the Mexican drug cartel known as the Los Zetas, a criminal organization known for its brutality and savagery. The Los Zetas, not content to assume publicly the responsibility for this attack, also had the affront to give us, the United States of America, an ultimatum, threatening war against the U.S.A. if we don't stop our campaign against illicit drugs. Well, here is my response to these criminals: the United States will continue to combat the trafficking of illicit drugs and will also pursue with all its available means those responsible for the attack on the Laredo border post. We will never let criminals dictate to us our policies and actions. At the same time, I enjoin the government of Mexico to enforce its own laws within its territory and to rein in the drug cartels operating in Mexico. If little or nothing is done by the Mexican authorities about that cancer eating their country from the inside, then the United States may well decide to deal directly with those drug cartels which are causing so many deaths and misery in the United State. This afternoon, I ordered our Federal Marshals Service, the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security to send strong reinforcements to our southern border, in order to fully secure it against illegal infiltrators and smugglers. On his side, Governor Perry of Texas has ordered extra Texas State troopers to patrol and secure the border with Mexico and is ready to mobilize the Texas National Guard if need be. Those criminals of the Los Zetas will soon learn that you cannot attack the United States and expect to get away with it. Thank you for your attention.”

Ingrid frowned to herself as Bush started answering the barrage of questions shouted at him by the reporters present in the Oval Office. While everything that Bush had said were legitimate and necessary measures to be taken after such a brazen attack against an American border post, she personally believed that this would be far from being enough to deter a criminal organization as powerful and savage as the Los Zetas. If anything, she now expected the Los Zetas to double down in order to discredit the efforts by Washington to control the situation. She had more than an idea of what should be done now but, having retired for good from American military service and

being presently a private citizen employed by a civilian company, she had no say about what was to follow and she couldn't help feel some frustration at that.

**07:11 (Washington Time)**

**Thursday, October 25, 2007 'C'**

**Residence of D.E.A. Administrator Karen Tandy**

**Normanstone Terrace Northwest, Woodley Park District**

**Washington, D.C.**

D.E.A. agent Robert Murray quickly stepped out of the big government SUV parked and waiting in the driveway of Administrator Tandy's residence when he saw her come out of her house, so that he could open the rear right passenger door for her. Murray could see that Tandy was speaking quite animatedly on her cell phone as she was walking towards the waiting SUV. At one point, the telephone conversation got so animated that Tandy stopped briefly and raised her voice.

"Greg, I don't care what those high-priced lawyers say about quote respecting the rights of their clients unquote: these are bastards with blood on their hands. I want..."

## **POW**

Murray's first reaction was to pivot on his heels and turn around to look at the nearby Normanstone Park, where the detonation had come from, while drawing out his service pistol. Then, he twisted his head and swore when he saw that Tandy was now sprawled on her back on the pavement of her entrance path. Swearing to himself, he ran to his Administrator, whom he was supposed to protect, and knelt beside her to check if she was still alive. However, one look at the bullet hole in her forehead and at the splattered blood and brain fragments on the pavement told him quickly enough that there was nothing he could do for her now. Hearing a male voice nearby and looking around, he saw Tandy's cell phone, lying on the grass lawn bordering the path, opened and with the line still active. Going to it and grabbing it, he then spoke urgently in the phone.

"Hello! This is Agent Robert Murray, presently in front of the home of Administrator Tandy. A sniper firing from the area of Normanstone Park just killed her with a bullet to the head. Alert the police and send reinforcements at once in order to

block all the streets around Woodley Park District before that sniper could escape... YES, DAMMIT: SHE IS DEAD! NOW, GET AGENTS HERE, FAST!”

The distraught agent then put down the phone and looked down sadly at the dead face of his boss: she had been completely dedicated to her work and had proved to be both competent and incorruptible. Getting back on his feet, Murray took off his trench coat and gently laid it over Tandy’s head and upper torso. Once that was done, he threw a black look at the trees in the park and ran back to the SUV, jumping back in the front passenger seat and nearly shouting an order to the female agent who was driving the vehicle.

“LET’S DRIVE AROUND THIS PARK! WITH LUCK, WE MAY STILL CATCH THE BASTARD WHO DID THIS.”

The young female agent, a near rookie, obeyed at once and rolled out of the house’s driveway, then drove at speed down Normanstone Terrace Northwest and towards the corner with 30<sup>th</sup> Street Northwest, which itself connected with Normanstone Drive Northwest, which ran through Normanstone Park.

### **07:12 (Washington Time)**

#### **26 Woodland Drive Northwest**

#### **Woodley Park District**

Some 250 meters away from the scene of Karen Tandy’s murder, Nancy was having her first cup of coffee of the morning in the kitchen of her band’s mansion when she heard the distinct noise of a large caliber rifle being fired once. She instantly froze and activated all her senses, both the Human ones and the Celestial ones. Just minutes ago, she had been listening to the latest news on the radio, which were talking nearly exclusively about the terrorist attack on the Laredo border station. She also knew that many high-level federal executives lived in the upper-scale neighborhood of Woodley Park, thus connected the dots quickly: this was no accidental discharge of a firearm, not with the kind of caliber of rifle she had just heard. Putting down her cup of coffee, she then rushed out through the rear portico of her mansion, which faced southwest towards the nearby Normanstone Park, less than 300 meters away. She was still wearing nothing but her panties but she didn’t care about that or gave it any thought, only preoccupied with finding out what was happening. Deciding than inquiring around on foot would be a waste of precious time, she used her power of telekinesis and flew off in



the cold October air, heading towards the general direction of the shot she had heard. As she was overflying Normanstone Terrace Northwest, she saw a big black SUV that was driving at full speed towards the corner with 30<sup>th</sup> Street Northwest. Instantly suspicious about it, she telepathically scanned its occupants to see if they were the ones who had fired a rifle. What she mentally saw made her clench her jaws in anger. Instead of pursuing the black SUV, Nancy instead increased her speed in order to get quickly to the wooden area of Normanstone Park adjacent to Normanstone Terrace Northwest and started looking for vehicles parked near or among the trees of the park. She quickly enough spotted a gray sedan parked among the first lines of trees and started flying down towards it. At about the same time, she saw a man wearing dark clothes and apparently carrying a rifle run to that car and throw his rifle inside on the back seat before jumping in the front passenger seat. The driver of the car must have had left his engine running, as he drove off as soon as the armed man closed his door.

“Oh no, you won’t!” said Nancy to herself before using her power of teleportation to jump to a point of the road in front of that gray car. Her apparition out of nowhere startled and confused for a moment the driver, who exclaimed in Spanish.

“What the fuck? Where is this chick coming from?”

His accomplice, equally startled, however reacted quickly.

“THE HELL WITH HER! DRIVE! GO OVER HER IF NEED BE!”

A kind of small but bright blue ball then appeared in the right palm of the nearly naked girl standing in the middle of the road. Before the two assassins could wonder what that ball could be, it flew at them in a flash, hitting directly the front of the vehicle and then exploding in a searing ball of blue energy which vaporized the whole engine compartment and parts of the cab. The two men died instantly, incinerated by the ball of energy. What was left of the car then careened down the road in a shower of sparks before coming to a stop a mere ten meters in front of Nancy. The latter stared for a moment at the blackened remains of the car, then started to calmly walk towards it. Just at that time, the DEA’s SUV approached at speed, having just turned onto Normanstone Drive Northwest. The rookie agent driving the SUV looked with disbelief at the nearly naked girl now walking calmly towards what was left of a gray car.

“Who the Hell is that? What just happened here?”

“Let’s worry about that later, Jenny. Stop the car near that wreck but keep a few yards away from it, in case that its fuel tank ignites. We will then both go out and investigate this.”

To her credit, the rookie agent again acted as told, screeching to a halt on the side of the road some eight meters from both the wreck and the girl. Jenny and Robert then jumped out and pointed her pistols at the girl.

“FREEZE, MISS! IDENTIFY...”

Robert Murray then had to pause as he stared in disbelief at the naked, beautiful blonde girl: both of her eyes were intense dots of light. Both DEA agents then heard a woman’s voice inside their heads, despite the lips of the girl staying closed.

“Do not fear me, as I have only good intentions. I just stopped and killed the two men who assassinated Administrator Tandy. If you make it quick, you will still have the time to retrieve the rifle they used before the gas tank ignites. Better yet, let me get it for you.”

The blond girl then pointed one arm towards the remains of the car. Murray, who was still frozen with disbelief, saw something come out of the back of the car and then float towards him. He quickly enough recognized the object as being a bolt-action, large caliber rifle equipped with a scope. As he was grabbing the rifle once it came close to him, he then heard the girl speak to him, this time in a normal way.

“No need to point your weapons at me, officers. I am on your side.”

“Who...who are you?” asked Jenny, her voice shaky.

“My name is Nancy Dows, also known as ‘The White Angel’. I live nearby and heard the rifle shot, then decided to come and investigate. Please lower your gun, miss.”

Jenny hesitantly lowered her pistol but kept it in her hands while slowly approaching the young naked woman. By now, the eyes of the blonde had become normal, showing blue eyes.

“The White Angel?”

“Yes! The people of New York called me that after I used my powers of healing to cure the sick and the wounded in the city a few years ago. I am half-Human and half-Celestial. I am also the leader of the female band ‘The D.C. Five’. You certainly must have heard about it, miss.”

“Uh, yes. I recognize you now, Miss Dows. Why did you go out like this, nearly naked?”

“I was having my first coffee of the morning when I heard that rifle shot and decided that speed was of the essence. If my nudity embarrasses you, I can go back to my house and dress quickly, to then come back here.”

Undecided about that, Jenny looked at Robert, who nodded his head and spoke to Nancy.

“You may go dress, miss. What is your home address?”

“26 Woodland Drive Northwest.” answered Nancy before looking at the cars and trucks who were now stopped some distance from the destroyed car. “I believe that we should free this road in order to let these people continue on their way. Hopefully, some police patrol cars will soon show up, so that you could be free to search the remains of that car.”

“I already called for backup, miss. The police should be here shortly.”

“Then, I better go, before I get arrested for public indecency.” replied a smiling Nancy. She then stunned Robert and Jenny by suddenly disappearing into thin air. Jenny passed a shaking hand on her sweating forehead after seeing that.

“Dear God! This young woman is just incredible.”

“That’s because she is, Jenny. I now remember the stories about her. She IS an authentic angel, with lots of supernatural powers. Alright, let’s direct the traffic around that car wreck. I will call this in at the same time.”

Less than eight minutes later, as eight freshly-arrived Washington Police Department officers were now directing traffic around the burned-up car wreck, Nancy reappeared close to one of the policemen, startling him and making him draw his pistol and pointing it at her. However, that pistol then acted as if it had a life of its own, rising and pointing up towards the sky despite the two-handed grip on it used by the policeman. Nancy then gave that cop a dubious look.

“Careful where you point your gun, Officer. I am part of the good guys.”

Seeing this, Robert Murray hurriedly spoke up, addressing the police officers who were now drawing their guns out.

“DON’T DRAW ON HER! SHE’S WITH US!”

Murray then walked to Nancy, who now wore an informal outfit of jeans, T-shirt, windbreaker coat and running shoes.

“Thank you for coming back, Miss Dows. As you can see, we now have control of the scene here. We are now waiting for a forensic team to arrive and pick up these two dead men from the remains of their car. Once it will be here, we will return to Administrator Tandy’s house, where two of our agents are now watching over her body.”

“Could I accompany you then, mister? I would like to present my respects to her.”

“You may, miss. Again, thank you for your intervention in stopping her assassins from fleeing.”

“It was the least I could do, mister. However, I am afraid that she won’t be the last innocent victim of the Los Zetas in this war.”

“A war?” said Jenny Manning, making Nancy nod once to her.

“Yes, a war. The Los Zetas sent an ultimatum to the United States yesterday and President Bush rightfully rejected it. Now, the Los Zetas will feel free to use maximum violence against us in order to intimidate and deter us. The question now is: will the United States respond in full to this challenge or will it only pussyfoot around?”

**08:52 (Central Time, Mexico)**  
**United States Consulate General,**  
**Calle Paseo Colón**  
**Nuevo Laredo, State of Tamaulipas**  
**Mexico**



The American Consul General in Nuevo Laredo, Stephanie Bright, was getting increasingly stressed and frustrated as she was trying to explain her situation with the head of the Latin America Section of the State Department in Washington.

“Try to understand the level of risk my consulate and all Americans presently in and around Nuevo Laredo are facing, Mister Untzinger. The local cops are too corrupt to be relied on to defend my consulate or our citizens and I have no marine guards detachment here in Nuevo Laredo, while this is the stronghold of the Los Zetas. We must evacuate and close the consulate at once before something bad happens... No! We can’t wait for the State Department to ‘discuss’ this situation before taking concrete measures. I know that you already refused to Ambassador Garcia permission to evacuate her embassy in Ciudad Mexico: she told me so this morning. If you continue to refuse to act now, then I will take it on me to evacuate my personnel today and damn the personal consequences for me...”

The department head in Washington was again telling her that she was overreacting when a loud concert of automatic fire echoed just outside of the consulate building, making Stephanie Bright jump in her chair. One of the windows of her office then

shattered, hit by multiple bullets, making Bright hurriedly dive under her desk while still holding her telephone receiver.

“CAN'T YOU HEAR THIS NOW? MY CONSULATE IS UNDER ATTACK, YOU PAPER-SHUFFLING IDIOT!”

A second window shattered as another burst of automatic fire hit her office, making Stephanie squeal in terror. When she tried to speak again in her telephone receiver, she heard no tonality. Raising her head for a moment, she then saw that her telephone had been shattered by a bullet. Now fearing the worst, she thought frantically about her options. Unfortunately they were few, since only a few Mexican policemen and two security men of the State Department were providing security for her consulate. Those Mexican policemen were most probably already gone, paid for by the Los Zetas, or were dead by now. She then remembered the small revolver she kept in a drawer of her desk, a gift from her ex-husband who had become worried for her when she had told him that she was being posted to Nuevo Laredo. Opening the drawer containing her handgun while staying crouched behind her desk, she fished the small, five-shot .38 Special revolver and quickly checked that it was fully loaded, as more shots could be heard, now from the inside of the consulate. While she was no fan of firearms, her ex-husband did make her practice a bit with it before she took her post in Mexico. Next, she thought about what she should do. It would make little sense for her to leave her office now, as it was about the most secure room in the consulate, save for the communications section, which had a steel door. That fact coming back to her mind then decided her to move and go take refuge in that section. However, she barely had the time to get back on her feet before someone kicked in the door of her office. A thuggish-looking man in a muscle shirt and black cargo pants and armed with an automatic rifle then burst in and started to point his rifle at Stephanie. Survival instinct then overcame her fear and she pointed her small revolver at the man, holding her handgun with both hands, and emptied it as quickly as she could. Despite her generally poor and hasty aim, two of her five bullets managed to hit the gunman from a distance of seven meters. Mortally wounded, the gunman still had time to fire a long burst before dropping face down on the carpet. Five of his bullets hit Stephanie: one in the right hip, two in the chest, one in the throat and the last one in the head. The American Consul General in Nuevo Laredo was dead before her body hit the floor.

**14:39 (Washington Time)**  
**Situation Room, The White House**  
**Washington, D.C., U.S.A.**

The participants to this urgently assembled meeting of the National Security Council could see that President Bush was getting increasingly angry as he watched the latest pictures available on the attacks by the Los Zetas against the three American general consulates located in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas. As the briefer from the State Department was still speaking, an image appeared on the screen, showing the bodies of the American diplomats killed in Nuevo Laredo, who had then been hung from the trees around the consulate building, including that of Consul General Stephanie Bright. President Bush exploded in frustration and rage and banged his fist on the long conference table.

“ENOUGH WITH THOSE BARBARIANS! IT IS TIME FOR US TO ACT, DECISIVELY!”

Bush then looked at his Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice.

“Have our embassy and other consulates in Mexico been evacuated yet, Condoleezza?”

“The order to evacuate was given this noon, Mister President. Unfortunately, my head of the Latin America section was slow to react to the urgent requests from Ambassador Garcia and from Consul General Bright to close their posts and even denied their demands initially. I have since fired him. I also got a promise from the Mexican ambassador that the Mexican Army will deploy and protect our diplomatic buildings while we evacuate our personnel. The Mexican police is simply too corrupt and too inefficient to be relied upon, as the sudden vanishing of the police guards in Nuevo Laredo has proved.”

George W. Bush shook his head angrily.

“Too little, too late! We need to do better than this, people. For one, we need to stop reacting and to instead start acting. Also, we must take the gloves off and stop applying our customary law practices and legal rights to these sadistic animals.”

“But, Mister President,” argued Stephen Hadley, Bush’s National Security Advisor, “we can’t send our military into Mexico: that would be considered an act of war by the Mexican government.”

That objection only seemed to make the President angrier.

“President Calderon talked a big game when he declared his ‘War on Drugs’, but in reality, he has achieved little except to cause the murder rate in Mexico to jump up dramatically. It was his job to control and eliminate those drug cartels and he failed at that, miserably. It is now up to us to deal with those cartels. However, the safety of our personnel and citizens in Mexico must be considered first as our top priority. I am thus going to publicly order the following measures. First, I am declaring our border with Mexico to be hermetically closed as of today. Americans presently in Mexican territory will be allowed in but no Mexican national will enter the United States, even if they are hauling goods ordered and paid for by American companies or individuals. The Mexican nationals presently in the United States on a temporary basis will be allowed to leave the United States but will not be allowed to reenter our country afterwards. The same will go for air travelers: nobody but Americans will be allowed to fly in, while a travel ban to Mexico will take effect as of today. Dito for sea travel and cruise ships. Mexico failed to rein in those damn cartels and it will now learn how costly their failure will become for them.”

“But, Mister President,” objected the Commerce Secretary, Carlos Gutierrez, “our own companies will suffer greatly from such a complete closure of trade and travel with Mexico.”

“So? What is more important? Save and preserve American lives or protect the profits of our companies? My duties call for me to protect the United States and its citizens and that’s what we will do. As of now, I am ordering the National Guard of the states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California federalized. Those guardsmen will then deploy along the border with Mexico and hermetically seal it to prevent illegal entry into the United States from Mexico, with orders to shoot if people are seen trying to cross. It is high time that we take back effective control of our border, lady and gentlemen. Our CBP agents have been doing their best but they are simply not enough to effectively seal our border with Mexico.”

General Chadwick, the commander of the U.S. Army, spoke up on hearing that.

“Mister President, while our national guardsmen would effectively help a lot our border agents to better control our southern border, they still won’t be enough to fully secure such a long stretch of land.”

“Then, let’s use our federal troops to assist them, General. I know that there will be many who will protest and call that a violation of the ‘Posse Comitatus Act’<sup>22</sup> but this will simply mean using our soldiers to defend our borders against an external threat, not for them to operate within American territory against American citizens. Irrespective of what it will take, I want our border with Mexico hermetically sealed as quickly as possible. I intend to announce this to the nation by this evening, in a special presidential address on television.”

“What about the elements of the drug cartels and of their affiliated gangs inside the United States, Mister President?” asked Attorney General Michael Mukasey. “As the murder of Administrator Tandy this morning showed us, there must be thousands of Mexican drug cartel members presently inside of the United States, coordinating and directing the distribution and sale of illicit drugs in our country. Finding, arresting and prosecuting them will take an immense effort on our part.”

In response, Bush gave him a jaundiced look.

“You know what? I am truly tired of seeing our justice system play footsy with those bastards and letting them use the services of high-flight lawyers to avoid jail. What the Los Zetas did in Laredo, then in Washington and against our consulates in Mexico, constitute no less than acts of terrorism against the United States. We will thus treat those bastards like the terrorists they are and will proclaim them as such and as official enemies of the United States. From now on, all the members of the Los Zetas and those of the gangs affiliated with them and supporting their illegal activities in the United States will be subject to immediate arrest without warrant as declared terrorists and will then be locked up and treated under the rules of martial law, with no rights to legal representation. We have a special detention facility in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, which we built as part of our War on Terror and which now sits nearly empty. Well, let’s fill it with those Los Zetas bastards, out of reach of all those pricey lawyers who had been making millions defending them in our courts. The Los Zetas essentially declared war to the United States today and we will respond in kind, lady and gentlemen. If our closing of our southern border causes the other Mexican drug cartels to intervene against the Los Zetas, then the better.”

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<sup>22</sup> Posse Comitatus Act: U.S. federal law passed in 1878, limiting the powers of the federal government in the use of federal military personnel to enforce domestic policies within the United States.



**15:24 (Seattle Time)**

**Main personnel cafeteria of the Hiller aircraft design and production plant  
William R. Fairchild International Airport, Port Angeles  
State of Washington**

Having heard of the incoming presidential televised address concerning the dramatic events in Mexico, Ingrid had called for an early end to work today for the personnel of her aircraft design and production plant and had all of her employees assemble in the main personnel cafeteria, where there was a large flat screen television set. Ingrid herself was sitting closest to that television set, a notepad and pen in hand, ready to note down the main points of President Bush's speech. The horrific news from Mexico and the assassination in Washington of DEA Administrator Tandy had understandably both shaken and angered the Hiller employees and most of them were nodding in approval in response to the executive orders their president was now announcing. Ingrid herself mostly agreed with those orders. If anything, she would have extended those orders and measures to all the Mexican drug cartels and not only to the Los Zetas. The CNN coverage had then switched to getting the reactions from various members of the Congress to the presidential address. While most of those members were approving and supporting those measures, a few 'progressive' Democrats had complained about what they called 'executive abuse of power' and about 'infringements of individual rights'. Those Democrats' opinions had been greeted by a chorus of boos and catcalls from Ingrid's employees. Ingrid herself shook her head at that: those Democrats had just shot themselves in the foot big time, just as the season for primaries to the presidential elections of November 2008 had started. If anything, this could only help the Republicans to eventually win the Presidency in 2008 and possibly win as well control of the Congress.

**01:50 (Texas Time)**

**Saturday, October 27, 2007 'C'**

**Texas National Guard fixed observation post along the Rio Grande  
Twenty kilometers northwest of Presidio, Texas**

Five soldiers of the Texas National Guard were manning the observation post hiding behind a cluster of trees along the American side of the Rio Grande. Being bored by their up to now uneventful duty, they were conversing in low voices while keeping their eyes on the river, which constituted the border between Mexico and the United States. The youngest soldier, who worked as a civilian store clerk in the city of Presidio, looked at the senior soldier present, Corporal Miguel Cervantes.

"You live in Presidio as well, Corporal, right?"

"Yeah! What about it?"

"Then you must have heard about the chaotic mess at the international bridge, then?"

"I not only heard about it, Roberto: I went to watch it last afternoon. I wouldn't want to be the poor CBP agents manning the bridge and having to turn away all those poor Mexicans trying to enter the country. It must be a heart-breaking job, on top of having to deal with hot-tempered travelers and desperate would-be immigrants."

"Are they still letting in some of those would-be immigrants or refugees?"

"Nobody but American citizens are let through into the United States, Roberto. As for the Mexicans still in the country, they can only go one way: out to Mexico. Even the trucks bringing fresh fruits from Mexico can't come in."

"Tell me about that, Corporal: my grocery store I work in is already starting to run low on fresh fruits and vegetables, on top of seeing their normal flow of Mexican customers completely cut out. The people around town are already feeling the pinch of this present crisis."

"So? You would prefer for us to ignore the atrocities committed by those Mexican drug cartels in order to continue business as usual, Roberto?" said another soldier, annoyed by Roberto's complaint.

"Of course not! What I say is that it is the little people that is paying for this, as usual. I..."

"Quiet, guys!" suddenly ordered Cervantes, who was observing the Rio Grande with the help of a night vision scope. "I see over half a dozen people who just stepped into the river, on the Mexican side. They are wearing backpacks. Get ready to challenge them when they will approach our side of the river. Roberto, prepare a **para-flare** for launch. In the meantime, I am going to call this in to our company command post."



"On it, Corporal!"

Taking the time first to call his unit by radio to pass on his observation, Cervantes then waited until the group of eight Mexicans, seven of which carried big backpacks, reached the middle of the river and thus started to wade through American waters before giving a curt order to Roberto.

"Launch your para-flare now, Roberto! The rest, be ready to fire but wait for my express order to do so."

Holding the tube containing his para-flare at about sixty degrees of upward angle, Roberto then pulled on the string linked to the rocket's percussion cap inside the tube. The para-flare rocket's powder charge then ignited in a muffled 'woosh', sending the rocket high in the night sky over the river. A bright spot of white light then appeared in the sky and started floating down under its parachute, brightly illuminating the group of men now plainly visible in the middle of the river. The Mexicans, taken by surprise, let out a few swear words and exclamations, then did the worst thing they could now do: they started running through the hip-high water towards the American side of the river. Cervantes, seeing that, yelled at them in Spanish with the loudest voice he could muster.

"TURN AROUND AND RETURN TO THE MEXICAN SIDE NOW, OR WE WILL SHOOT!"

Seeing that the Mexicans continued to approach the American shore, Cervantes repeated his warning, but to no avail. He then spoke to his four national guardsmen.

"I am going to fire a warning shot. Hold your fire for the moment."

Cervantes then fired one shot into the air, then repeated again his warning. To his dismay, the Mexicans kept coming.

"Alright, guys: they were warned. Open fire at will."

As his four men started firing short bursts of automatic fire at the group in the river, he himself took careful aim at the sole Mexican who was not wearing a backpack: that man was probably a so-called 'coyote', a drug cartel member who guided 'mules' across the border. If anybody deserved a bullet in that group, it was that coyote. Squeezing progressively his rifle trigger, he had the satisfaction of seeing the man collapse on the sand of the American shore just as he was about to step out of the water. Of the seven other Mexicans, six of them also fell, either dead or seriously wounded. The lone remaining mule who was still on his feet then decided that this wasn't worth his life and quickly took off his backpack and threw it away on the nearby shore before turning

around and running back into the water towards the Mexican side. Seeing that, Cervantes immediately shouted an order.

“CEASE FIRE! CEASE FIRE! LET THAT GUY GO! ROBERTO, MIGUEL: GO RETRIEVE THOSE BACKPACKS. PEDRO, CARLOS, GET THOSE BODIES AND PULL THEM OUT OF THE WATER, SO THAT WE COULD SEARCH THEM.”

As his four soldiers got up and ran down the slope of the shoreline, Cervantes took a minute to call again his unit by radio to inform it of his actions, then ran down the slope to join his men. First helping his men to retrieve the bodies and backpacks from the river, he then went to search the presumed ‘coyote’. He found a holstered pistol on him, some cash money but no identity papers, something that didn’t surprise him. He however found a small notepad with some info and numbers written in it, plus a detailed map of this area of the border. He nodded with satisfaction as he went through the names, codewords and telephone numbers written in the notepad: CBP agents were certainly going to be interested by that pad. Next, he went to Roberto, who was opening one of the big backpacks taken from the dead Mexicans.

“So, what do we have here, Roberto?”

“I am not sure yet what this is exactly, Corporal, but those backpacks are filled with tightly wrapped packages which must be packs of drugs. They are too compact to be filled with cannabis, so my bet would be either heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine or opioids.”

“Good! We thus stopped a sizeable quantity of hard drugs from entering the United States tonight. Good job, guys! Let’s bring the packs and the bodies up the slope and to our observation post, where we will wait for federal agents to take custody of them. Hopefully, those damn drug traffickers will understand the lesson and will stop trying to pass drugs into our country.”

**14:46 (Mexico Time)**

**Wednesday, October 31, 2007 ‘C’**

**Safe house of the Sinaloa Cartel, Culiacan**

**State of Sinaloa, Mexico**

Joaquin Guzmàn, also known as ‘El Chapo’, was in a truly sour mood, for good reasons, as he composed a number on his cell phone. None of his drug smugglers and drug-carrying vehicles had been able to enter the United States during the last five days,

for the simple reason that nobody from Mexico was allowed into the country, thanks to President Bush's executive orders and to the posting of over 80,000 U.S. Army and National Guard soldiers along the border. As Guzmàn had often said, he was a businessman running a business for profit but, right now, there was no business going on, just a freeze on all movements across the U.S.-Mexico border. Even more serious, the blocking of even legitimate trade was having catastrophic economic consequences within Mexico, with farmers unable to sell their produces in the United States and Mexican industries, notably car parts producers, unable to access the American market. Many Mexicans were now heading towards bankruptcy or were out of a job. There were as well serious economic repercussions in the United States because of this border blockade, but nothing as severe as the present situation in Mexico. All this meant for Guzmàn and his Sinaloa Cartel a severe drop in revenues, a situation that other cartel leaders were also pestering about. And all this because the madness and blood-thirstiness of one cartel, which had caused this border war with the United States.

El Chapo finally got someone to answer his call after four rings, with the male voice who answered nearly dripping with contempt, something that infuriated even more the boss of the Sinaloa Cartel.

"Yeah, what do you want, Guzmàn?"

"What I want? What I want is for you to stop your stupid war with the United States and to stop your attacks on Americans. You are ruining everybody else's business in Mexico with your mad bombings and assassinations and I suspect that you are also finding your own business suffering from that."

Heriberto Lazcano, the head of the Los Zetas, also known as 'Z-3', didn't sound repentant one bit when he replied to Guzmàn.

"I simply sent a message to the Americans to stop their so-called 'War on Drugs'. They may have reacted more forcibly than I have expected at first but they won't be able to keep the border shut for much longer: their own economy is hurting because of that blockade and their politicians in Congress will soon cave in and force President Bush to back down and recall his troops along the border. We just need to be patient and wait for the Americans' resolve to melt down by itself. We will prevail in the end...if you and the other cartel leaders show some backbone for a change and tough it out."

"Tough it out? Are you mad or just delusional, Lazcano? The whole country is heading down into economic chaos and you want us to wait for the Americans to cave in

first? Just your attack on three American consulates has ensured that the American public is firmly behind their president in this.”

“They won’t follow him much longer, Guzmàn, that I am sure of.”

“Are you listening to the same news bulletins than I do? The last American senator who openly criticized Bush’s border policies in the Congress was booed down and called a pro-narco sellout.”

“He may have been booed down then but the Americans may be changing their tune in the coming days.”

El Chapo was instantly on his guards then: the past had unfortunately proven that the Los Zetas leadership was capable of the most insane and sadistic acts of violence one could think of.

“What do you mean by that? What kind of insane thing are you planning to do, Lazcano?”

“It will be for the Americans and weak-kneed cartel leaders like you to find out.” replied the Los Zetas leader before hanging up on Guzmàn. El Chapo looked at his cell phone for a few seconds while doing his best to contain his rage. Exhaling deeply, he then pocketed his telephone and walked to the patio of the house he was in, so that he could calm down and think about what to do next. He firmly believed that Lazcano was reading the situation in the wrong way and that American outrage was not about to cool down, contrary to the expectations of the Los Zetas leaders. Besides, he could not afford to simply wait while his business and that of many others in Mexico went down the drain. Worse, the allusion by Lazcano about more violent action against the Americans was deeply preoccupying for Guzmàn. Something had to be done to stop this madness, but what? In terms of sheer firepower and para-military training, the Los Zetas had proved repeatedly in the past that they could outgun and outfight the other cartels and even the Mexican authorities while defending their territory in the State of Tamaulipas. Thus, any direct attack by his cartel against the Los Zetas would most probably end in bloody failure. Even if he enlisted the help of other cartels, that would be unlikely to change the outcome. Only the U.S. military had the kind of firepower and reach to physically take out the Los Zetas...if they knew where to strike. Right now, despite all the efforts of the Mexican government and of the American DEA, most of the locations from which the Los Zetas operated or lived in were still unknown to the Mexican and American authorities. Guzmàn himself only knew of some but not all of them. Faced with this apparently insoluble problem, El Chapo contemplated for a long moment the

scenery from his patio while thinking about what to do. An idea then came to his mind, making Guzmàn smile to himself.

### **21:39 (Seattle Time)**

**Ingrid's living room, 1402 South McDonald Street**

**Port Angeles, State of Washington, U.S.A.**

Ingrid was watching a Spanish language news channel from Mexico, trying to get the Mexican side of the present border crisis, when her lounge's telephone rang. She frowned when she saw that her caller's number was a Mexican one but she picked up her receiver nonetheless and answered in Spanish, a language she had gradually learned along the years.

"Hello!"

Her caller, a man, did answer to her in Spanish while keeping his tone of voice polite.

"Am I speaking to ex-General Ingrid Dows?"

"That's me! What can I do for you, mister?"

"General Dows, please do not hang up on me when I will state my name: I am calling to pass on to you some very important information for your government. My name is Joaquin Guzmàn, also known as 'El Chapo', and I am the boss of the Sinaloa Cartel."

Ingrid became instantly on alert on hearing that name but she kept her tone neutral.

"I am listening, Mister Guzmàn."

"Basically, I, other cartel leaders and my country can't afford to let those crazies of the Los Zetas continue this border war against the United States. You may genuinely ask why I would care about others than me but the truth is that the present crisis has the potential to drag everybody in Mexico down to a complete economic disaster and into social chaos. I may be a criminal in your eyes but I think of myself as a businessman, on top of being a proud Mexican. If I could stop the Los Zetas from continuing this border war I would do it. Unfortunately, in terms of sheer firepower, my cartel can't outfight the Los Zetas, even with the help of other cartels. The Los Zetas are simply too brutal, too savage and too powerful to be defeated by anyone in Mexico, including my government and its army, both of which are riddled with corruption anyway. So, I am hoping that the U.S.A., with its huge military power, will be able to rid Mexico of those barbarians."

“Why call me, instead of calling directly my government, Mister Guzmàn? If you have important information concerning the Los Zetas, you could have called the DEA, the CBP or the DHS.”

“Well, that would indeed have been the logical thing to do, General Dows, if not for the fact that the Los Zetas would learn about my call within hours at the most. Like in the case of my cartel, the Los Zetas have paid moles and informants all over various American government law enforcement agencies. I called you because I know that, as a trusted presidential advisor to President Bush and to his predecessors, you can have quick access to him and pass information to him in confidence, in a way that the Los Zetas could not learn about.”

Ingrid was silent for a few seconds as she digested those words. Guzmàn actually made a lot of sense in this matter.

“Very well: what is that information you want to pass to us?”

“I have the locations and addresses of many safe houses, drug labs and residences presently used by the Los Zetas, including the home and telephone number of Heriberto Lazcano, their leader. I also know that they are preparing another major attack within the United States, against your government. That list of information is however too long to recite on the telephone. Do you have an email address to where I could send you that information, General?”

Ingrid took only a second to take a decision.

“Send it to the following email address: [ladyhawk@gmail.com](mailto:ladyhawk@gmail.com).”

The drug lord laughed briefly on hearing her email address.

“I should have known. You should get my info within ten minutes. Don’t bother trying to retrace its origin: it will be sent from an untraceable link.”

“Very well. You spoke about another imminent attack that the Los Zetas are preparing. Do you have details about that threat in your list of information?”

“No! Lazcano only bragged about it to me, without giving me any details.”

“Then, I will be waiting for your email, Mister Guzmàn. As soon as I have it, I will call the White House to get an appointment with President Bush. I would normally not say this to you but thank you for calling me.”

Ingrid then put down her receiver and blew air out: this had been one unexpected call indeed.



Her next move was to go to her private study on the upper floor of her house and to open her laptop computer. An email with a Mexican suffix did appear in her 'in' box in less than six minutes. Reading quickly its content, Ingrid sat back in her chair, her expression somber: the info in that email could actually make a huge difference in the current crisis. She made a print of that email, plus saved it on a USB thumb drive. Her next move was to make a phone call to Washington, using a private number very few people in the United States or the World knew. As the telephone rang, Ingrid looked at her watch and grimaced: it was now close to one o'clock in the morning in Washington. Thankfully, President Bush did pick up and answered in a clear voice that told Ingrid that he had been still up and active.

"Yes, Ingrid?"

"Mister President, I just got an unexpected phone call from Mexico...from Joaquin Guzmàn, the boss of the Sinaloa Cartel. He gave me a list of locations and addresses presently used by the Los Zetas and also warned me that the Los Zetas were preparing another major attack in the United States."

George Bush was understandably stunned by that and took a couple of seconds to verbally react.

"Did he say why he gave you that information, Ingrid?"

"He did, Mister President. Basically, he told me that the crazy actions by the Los Zetas were threatening the economy and social order of everybody in Mexico, including himself. He also told me that, since his cartel was not militarily powerful enough to fight the Los Zetas and win, he was hoping that we would do the job ourselves, using his information. When I asked why he didn't contact directly our law enforcement agencies, he said that the Los Zetas, like the Sinaloa Cartel, had paid moles and informants inside our agencies. He thus asked me to pass to you that information in complete confidence, so that the Los Zetas would not learn about his call. If I may, Mister President, this point he raised about possible sources of leaks inside our agencies is very credible, in my opinion. Thus, we will have to use his information in a very compartmentalized way and involve only our top players in its distribution."

Bush took the time to think for a few seconds before speaking after that.

"Since you were able to read that email from Guzmàn, do you have any suggestions on how to use it against the Los Zetas?"

"I certainly have, Mister President, but I am not ready to discuss that on the phone. Could I come and see you at the White House early in the morning, this Thursday?"

"You certainly can, Ingrid. I will advise my security detail to expect your arrival. How are you planning to come to Washington? By commercial air? And what about your little boy? How are you going to find a babysitter for him this quickly?"

"I will take my personal Hiller SUPER AIRCAR, Mister President: it has enough range to easily cross the United States without the need for refueling. As for finding a babysitter for my little Michael, would your wife mind watching over him while I am in Washington?"

Bush briefly chuckled at that, clearly amused.

"I am sure that Laura will be most happy to babysit your son, Ingrid."

"Excellent! Then, you can expect me at around eight in the morning, Washington D.C. time. For our meeting, I would like for the heads of the DHS, DEA, CBP and FBI, plus General Fletcher and Secretary Rice, to be present."

"They will be there, Ingrid." promised the President. "Anything else?"

"Just one thing, Mister President: am I still listed as a part-time presidential advisor?"

"Of course you are, Ingrid! The only reason why you are not one of my full-time advisors is because you refused to become one."

"Then, see you in the morning, Mister President...and don't forget to warn your security men not to shoot down my AIRCAR when I will arrive over the White House."

"Don't worry about that, Ingrid. I will now hang up, so that I could warn a few people about our morning meeting."

"Thank you again for listening to me, Mister President."

Ingrid then hung up at the same time Bush did. Staying in her chair for a moment, she mentally made a list of what she would need to pack for her visit in Washington. Thankfully, little Michael was already diaper-free and fully potty-trained.

**07:41 (Washington Time)**

**Thursday, November 01, 2007 'C'**

**Ingrid's Hiller SUPER AIRCAR, on approach to the White House**

**Washington, D.C.**

“Will we arrive soon, Mommy?”

“We should land in a few minutes at the most, sweetie. If you look ahead, you will be able to see the White House, where we are headed.”

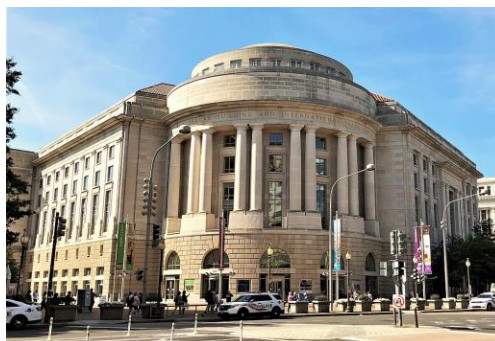
Ingrid then keyed her radio microphone to call the White House security center.

“White House Control, this is Lady hawk, on approach from the Northwest. I am now six nautical miles from you and on descent. Request permission to land on the White House South Lawn.”

“Permission granted, Lady hawk. Please land along the western border of the lawn, so that the presidential helicopter can land on it if need be.”

“Will do! Lady hawk out!”

In order to facilitate her landing at the spot requested by the White House control center, Ingrid overflew the White House at an altitude of 300 meters while slowing down, then made a tight U-turn to come back towards the White House at a speed of only fifty kilometers per hour while continuing to lose altitude. She was overflying Pennsylvania Avenue and the Waldorf Astoria Hotel when a large part of the **Ronald Reagan Building**, some 200 meters ahead, suddenly seemed to jump in the air, then collapsed on itself in a cloud of concrete dust. A strong shock wave



accompanied by a terrifying rumble followed, hitting and shaking hard Ingrid’s SUPER AIRCAR. She had to fight with her controls for a few seconds before regaining full control of her craft. Ingrid had seen enough wars from the air to understand at once what had just happened. Keying her radio microphone, she spoke urgently while starting a wide and slow turn to return over the site of the explosion.

“White House Control, this is Lady hawk! A large bomb just detonated under the Ronald Reagan Building and collapsed over half of it. My best guess is that this bomb exploded inside the underground garage of the building. I will now complete my approach to the White House South Lawn. Please advise your security team to not be too trigger-happy right now.”

The voice of the controller who replied to her sounded understandably shaken when he spoke a few seconds afterwards.

“Uh, message passed, Lady hawk. Continue your approach and landing.”

As she piloted her craft towards the presidential lawn, she looked down at the huge cloud of dust now slowly expanding over what had been the Ronald Reagan Building.

"Shit! The headquarters of the Customs and Border Protection agency were in that building. This can't be a coincidence. The casualties from this will be horrific."

"What happened to that building, Mommy?" asked Michael, strapped in his booster seat attached to the front passenger seat while holding Sniffles, the young white Labrador dog Ingrid had bought for him four months ago.

"Bad men just detonated a bomb and killed many people. I was coming to Washington with the hope of being able to prevent a thing like this but I was obviously too late for that. We are about to land. Make sure to hold Sniffles' leash, so that he doesn't run out when I will open your door."

"Yes, Mommy! Uh, Mommy, will there be people in need of help where that building blew up?"

"There certainly will be, Michael. Too many, in fact."

"Then, I want to help them, Mommy."

Ingrid, busy flying her aircar towards the designated landing zone next to the White House, gave a quick look to her son, who wasn't four years-old yet.

"I know that you already possess a number of superpowers, sweetie, but that disaster area will be a dangerous one, strewn with debris and subject to cave-ins. I would need to go with you if we wish to help the unfortunate victims of that bomb but I have to attend an important meeting with the President of our country."

The mouthy expression little Michael made then told Ingrid what he thought about that.

"More people may die if we wait before helping them, Mommy. The President can wait."

Just after saying that, little Michael vanished from his seat in the aircar, along with his dog, which had been in his lap. A stunned Ingrid could do nothing about that at the time, so concentrated on landing her aircar on the White House lawn. Once immobilized on the ground, she shut down her engine and opened her door as a pair of Secret Service agents in suits ran towards her, coming from the West Wing. One of the agents addressed her in an urgent tone as she stepped out of her vehicle.

"GENERAL DOWS, WE HAVE TO GET YOU INSIDE QUICKLY: THERE MAY BE A SNIPER THREAT AS WELL."

"I know; however, I must now go to the site of the Ronald Reagan Building: my toddler son decided on his own to go help there."

"And you let him go?" said the confused agent, making Ingrid smirk.

"Have you ever tried to control a young half-angel, mister? I can tell you that it can be quite complicated at times, as he can be quite hard-headed when he wants to. Tell the President that I will be going to the site of the Ronald Reagan Building, both to help the victims there and to check out on my son."

The poor Secret Service agent didn't have time to reply to that before Ingrid flew silently off the lawn and started flying towards the huge dust cloud marking the site where the Ronald Reagan Building had stood. That agent then threw a befuddled look at the other agent who had run with him to the parked aircar.

"What the hell is this magic, Rick?"

At the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and of 13<sup>th</sup> Street Northwest, which was now all but blocked by debris, the first four policemen from the Washington D.C. Police Department to arrive on the site were doing their best to help and put order in the chaos reigning around the now collapsed Ronald Reagan Building, helping lightly wounded people and providing first aid. Thankfully, the sirens of at least two ambulances or fire department trucks were heard approaching, promising help soon. Officer Laura Sanders, a six-year veteran of the department, was applying a bandage on the bleeding head of a mature, deeply shaken woman, when her partner, Tony Costanza, let out a half-strangled exclamation.

"My God! What...what the hell is that?"

Fearing some kind of attacker to be approaching, Laura swiftly turned around while going for her holstered pistol. She however never pulled her gun out, as she froze in stupor at the sight of **a little toddler boy approaching, carrying a small white dog in his arms**. The problem was that this little boy was flying, not walking. Laura and



Tony were still frozen with disbelief, like the wounded woman Laura was treating, when the little boy and his dog, a white Labrador, landed next to them on the debris-strewn street. The boy then nearly ran to the wounded woman and looked sadly at her head wound, which was bleeding.

"Poor madam! Let me heal you."

"You, heal me, boy? What are you talk..."

The woman nearly recoiled with fear when the boy's left hand, which he had approached to her forehead, started glowing. However, the boy looked at her with a hypnotic stare while speaking softly to her.

"I am a half-angel, madam. Please don't move."

His stare nearly instantly calmed down the shocked woman, while Laura Sanders withdrew her right hand from her gun handle. Laura was now remembering stories she had read in newspapers about another person who was supposedly a half-angel and who had miraculously healed thousands of people around New York during the past few years. To the amazement of the two police officers, they saw the wound on the mature woman's head stop bleeding and close up in seconds, as if by magic. Once the wound had completely closed, the little boy caressed with one hand the cheeks of the woman, making her shed tears.

"Here you go, madam. You will only need now to clean the dust on your head."

"Ooh, you are indeed a little angel...a beautiful little angel, my boy."

The woman then kissed Michael a number of times on his cheeks while crying with joy. Michael smiled at that but also gently pushed her away.

"I must go help others now, madam. Have a good day."

Little Michael, followed closely by Sniffles, then ran to a man in a dust-covered business suit who was bleeding from multiple scratches and superficial wounds. Laura Sanders watched him run away before looking up at her partner while getting up from her crouching position.

"Stay here and direct the incoming ambulances, Tony. I will accompany this boy around and make sure that no one reacts badly to him. With all those people in a state of shock, someone is liable to react negatively to him."

"You may be right about that, Laura. I... Oh shit! Another flying one!"

"Uh?!"

Looking up, Laura nearly fell on her bum when she saw a young and very beautiful woman dressed in a female suit approaching while flying silently through the air at a good speed. Many onlookers who had taken out their cell phones to film the small flying boy then pointed them at the flying woman, who soon landed next to Laura. The woman however didn't stay near her, instead walking quickly towards the boy after giving Laura a nod. It took only one look around for Ingrid to assess the gravity of the situation here: it was no less than a major disaster, with dozens of wounded people visible and with a couple of dead bodies already in evidence. She started running towards a pile of debris

from which a moving hand was protruding, some forty meters away, shouting instructions to her son as she passed by him.

“Stay here and continue healing wounded people, Michael: you are doing great. I am going to try to pull out someone from under the debris over there.”

“Thanks, Mommy! Sniffles, go help Mommy!”

The young Labrador understood Michael at once and started running to catch up with Ingrid. The latter, as she approached where the hand stuck out from under a pile of small stones, could now hear a man who was weakly crying in pain.

“H...help, someone... Please, help!”

“I am here, mister. Don't worry: I will get you out in an instant.”

Bending down and grabbing a piece of stone masonry which had been part of the façade of the Ronald Reagan Building, she lifted the eighty-kilo stone and threw it away, then grabbed another stone, repeating the process. She was removing her fifth stone when two men joined her to help free the man trapped under the debris. Their faces however became red under the effort when they tried to each pick up a stone. The two men then threw disbelieving looks at Ingrid as she threw away yet another stone as if it was a mere brick.

“How can you be this strong, miss?” asked one of the men, prompting a disarming smile from Ingrid.

“I eat my corn flakes every morning. You better join efforts on a single stone if you don't want to sprain your backs. By the way, thank you for helping.”

With the two men soon joined by more helpers, Ingrid was soon able to fully reach the trapped victim. However, she didn't try to move him yet, speaking to him instead.

“Mister, can you move by yourself? Do you feel that any of your bones are broken?”

“My...my legs...my hips: they hurt when I move.”

Those words made one of the men helping Ingrid grimace.

“Damn! If we try to move him without first applying braces, we could seriously aggravate his wounds. What are we going to do now?”

“I may have a solution. Please, everybody take a step back.”

While the men around her didn't understand why she asked that, they did obey her. Bending down on her knees, Ingrid then spoke softly to the trapped, injured man.

“Don't panic if you see a sort of glow around you: I am going to heal you: I have the power of touch healing.”

Before the man could ask what she meant, Ingrid applied both of her hands on him, one hand on his back, the other on his left leg, then concentrated. The men around her recoiled in alarm when she started glowing, with the halo of white light enveloping as well the wounded man. While concentrating on her healing and with her eyes closed, Ingrid didn't see that many people nearby were now filming her with their cell phones or with cameras. She wouldn't have been bothered about that anyway: she had been performing healings for decades now and was rather blasé about the effects that it did on bystanders. Sensing the gravity of the man's wounds, she glowed for a good forty seconds before taking a deep breath and opening her eyes, then spoke to the trapped man.

"Try to move your legs now, mister. Do you still feel pain?"

"Uh, no! How is this possible? This is a miracle!"

"Then, get up with my help, mister."

With another man helping Ingrid, the victim was soon able to stand on his legs, covered with dust and with his suit ripped in numerous places but being otherwise alright. He gave an awed look at Ingrid while pressing her hand with emotion.

"You...you must be an angel, miss."

"No, I am not an angel, mister: I am a Chosen. Do you feel able to walk by yourself?"

"Y...yes!"

Ingrid then looked at the two first men who had come to her aid.

"Could you please accompany this man to one of the ambulances that have arrived, so that medics could check him out?"

"With pleasure, miss. May I have your name, miss?" said the first man who had joined her.

"You may! I am Ingrid Dows, retired General Ingrid Dows. If you will now excuse me, I am expected at the White House."

Looking around her in order to locate her son, she saw that little Michael was kneeling next to the body of an inert young woman, with a small girl crying loudly while shaking the body of what had to be her mother.

"Mommy...Mommy, please don't die!"

A paramedic who was kneeling next to the woman and to Michael sadly shook his head at that.



"I am sorry, little girl: your mother is dead. Her skull was caved in by a flying stone."

Ingrid was starting to run towards that group when she saw Michael do something she herself couldn't have done: with his hands opened wide, he shot an intense ray of white light which enveloped the woman's body, while a strong whistling noise accompanied the white ray. The woman's body, along with that of Michael, became so bright that Ingrid, like the medic and the other people nearby, had to avert their eyes from the light. The whistling noise grew in intensity for a few seconds before waning, with the white light also fading away. As Ingrid resumed her run towards Michael, she saw her son, who now appeared wobbly, fall back on his bum.

"MICHAEL! ARE YOU OKAY?"

Michael didn't respond at first, clearly looking disoriented, so Ingrid hurried to his side and knelt next to him to hug him.

"Michael? Michael, how are you?"

Her son looked up at her with his large gray eyes, his face pale.

"Mommy... Father visited me, inside."

To anyone else, those words would have made no sense. However, Ingrid understood at once that Michael's father, Archangel Michael, had just acted through his son, channeling his powers through the body and mind of the toddler boy. A shout from the medic near her then made her twist her head towards the woman lying among the dust and debris.

"SHE'S ALIVE! GET A GURNEY HERE, QUICKLY!"

Then, to the overwhelming joy of the little girl who had been crying over her mother, the woman moved slightly while speaking in a weak voice.

"Wha...what happened? Why are you crying, Lynda?"

The little girl immediately threw herself on top of her mother, hugging her.

"Mommy, you were dead. Then, the little boy shone brightly and you came back."

The woman looked with shock at Michael, then at her daughter.

"Me, dead?"

"That's right, miss." said the overwhelmed medic in a subdued voice. A piece of flying rock struck the back of your head and caved in your skull. I had time to verify that you had no pulse and didn't breathe before this incredible little boy shot an intense ray of

white light which enveloped your body. Then, you came back. I...I just can't explain what happened here."

Ingrid, who had taken Michael in her arms and had gotten back on her feet, spoke in turn in a sober voice.

"My son possesses a number of supernatural powers, mister. I would have liked to tell you more but I am expected at the White House for an important meeting with the President."

"Wait, Mommy!" urgently said Michael. "I need to do one thing before we go. Hold me tight: I will need to join your powers with my powers for a moment."

"You want to perform a healing burst?"

"Yes!" answered her son before closing his arms around her neck and resting his head on her left shoulder. The dozens of people present around the site, a mix of police officers, medics, firefighters and passersby, many of them filming with either cell phones or cameras, the saw both Ingrid and Michael gradually become luminous from the inside. After a few seconds, a burst of intense white light exploded silently from the duo, enveloping the whole block of buildings around them. When it faded after some fifteen seconds, exclamations went around as those who had been wounded by the bomb blast and thrown debris now saw that their wounds had disappeared as by magic. Ingrid bent down to pick up Sniffles in her right arm, then straightened up and smiled to the resurrected woman and her daughter.

"I have to go now, miss. May you and your daughter have long and happy lives." She then concentrated on her telekinesis power and silently flew off, taking some altitude before heading towards the White House, only a few hundred meters away. The little girl hugging her mother watched them go, then kissed her mother on the cheek.

"A little angel boy saved you, Mommy."

"A miracle! This was nothing less than a miracle." Could only say the overwhelmed paramedic.

Three Secret Service agents greeted Ingrid when she landed with Michael and Sniffles on the South Lawn of the White House, near the West Wing. The senior agent looked them up, disbelief in his eyes, before speaking to Ingrid in a concerned tone.

"Are you alright, General? You are covered with dust."

"I know! I had to dig out one of the victims of that bomb. Is the President in the Oval Office?"

“Yes, along with a number of his cabinet members. Please follow me, General.” As they were walking towards the door giving access to the Oval Office, Ingrid did her best to wipe off the concrete dust covering her but still had plenty left on her by the time she was introduced into the Oval Office, where President Bush and six other persons were waiting for her. With Michael and Sniffles still in her arms, Ingrid saluted George Bush with a nod of the head.

“Mister President! Sorry for having made you wait like this but there were lives to be saved.”

Bush nodded his head in turn while pointing to a television set, on which views of the bombing site were being shown, along with dozens of agitated people.

“I know, General. A news crew arrived at the Ronald Reagan Building mere minutes after the bomb exploded. You performed miracles there literally, you and your son.”

Bush then approached Ingrid and smiled to little Michael, who was still in her arms with Sniffles.

“And what is your name, my little angel?”

Ingrid hurried to whisper to her son before he could answer.

“You call him ‘Mister President’.”

“My name is ‘Michael’, Mister President.”

“Well, Michael, the nation owes you today and I will be most honored to shake your hand.”

Ingrid grinned with pride as her son and the President exchanged a handshake. Once that was done, she put down both her son and Sniffles and handed the dog’s leash to Michael.

“Here, Michael, you keep control of Sniffles while I speak with the President. Mister President, is your wife handy to host my son while we talk?”

“She is and she will be most happy to care for your little angel. An agent will lead your son to my wife Laura.”

“You can follow that mister, Michael. The President’s wife will take care of you while I speak with the President.”

“Okay, Mommy.” said the boy in his little voice before trotting out of the Oval Office with Sniffles and one Secret Service agent. Once they were out, Bush gave Ingrid a most sober look.

"I knew that you had powers but what I just saw on television blew my mind. As for your young son, I can't find the proper words to describe what he did. They will talk about this for a long time in the medias."

"I know, Mister President. Too often, celebrity is proving to be more of a curse than an asset. But enough about me and my son, Mister President. We have some very grave things to discuss about. First, I don't see Commissioner Walters, of the CBP. Is he on his way to here?"

"He is not answering his phone, Ingrid. I am afraid that he was killed in that bombing."

Ingrid lowered her head in sadness on hearing that, then looked back resolutely at Bush.

"Mister President, it is high times that the United States take off the gloves with those damn Mexican drug cartels and with the Los Zetas in particular. What they just did was nothing short of a declaration of war by a terrorist group to the United States. We should forget all diplomatic and legal niceties and strike back with all that we have and the hell with any protestations the Mexican government could make about it. They have proved incapable of cleaning up their own house and should be treated like the quasi-failed state they are."

"I fully agree with you, Ingrid. After what just happened this morning, I doubt very much that any bleeding-heart politician in the Congress will protest publicly if and when we will hammer those Los Zetas barbarians. But let's sit down around some nice coffee before discussing this."

"I certainly won't refuse a cup of strong coffee after this, Mister President."

Following Bush and the seven cabinet members to the corner where a number of sofas and easy chairs surrounded a low coffee table, Ingrid sat next to State Secretary Condoleezza Rice on one of the sofas and waited until a presidential steward served cups of coffee to the group. Once the steward had left the Oval Office, Ingrid took out from an internal pocket of her suit's jacket an envelope and a USB thumb drive and gave them to Bush.

"This is the information I received by email from El Chapo on the Los Zetas, both in print and in electronic data format, Mister President. While it lists only about twenty locations and telephone numbers of importance about the Los Zetas, I believe that this should help us greatly in striking back hard at those bastards. However, I would urge that we act quickly and decisively: that information will quickly become useless if we start

playing the kind of legal and diplomatic pussyfooting which the cartels have used against us to evade our law enforcement agencies. Nor do we have the time to do some elaborate military planning before we strike.”

“And what exactly do you propose we do, General Dows?”

“Precision airstrikes against those Los Zetas locations, done today, preferably no later than noon.”

“Before noon? But organizing such a series of airstrikes takes many hours at the least, General Dows.” objected the commander of the U.S. combat forces, General of the Army Richard Warner. Ingrid repressed with difficulty a sigh of frustration at that protest. It seemed that the American military system had a lot of difficulty in producing leaders who were competent in the use of inter-service forces, could show flexible tactical, operational and strategic flexibility and could also show true innovation in military thinking. Except for one recent holder of the post which Ingrid had held for many years, an officer from the Space Corps which she had formed, the American forces simply proved incapable to form leaders who could think outside of the proverbial box. She was thus going to have to show by example how to do things...again.

“General Warner, with all due respect, I wholly disagree with you on that.”

She then looked at President Bush and spoke in a firm tone.

“Mister President, I want one F-95 fighter-bomber from Langley Air Base to be prepared at once and loaded with eighteen two-thousand-pound GPS-guided gliding bombs. I will also need a flight suit and full piloting gear for me. I will use my own SUPER AIRCAR to get quickly to Langley.”

“But,” started to say Warner, “you certainly aren’t still qualified on the F-95 after all those years as a civilian pilot, General Dows.”

That earned him a severe look from President Bush, who aggressively pointed an index at Fletcher.

“General Warner, do as General Dows say and get that fighter-bomber prepared and armed at once. Go now!”

As the flustered general got up from his sofa, Ingrid also got up and faced Bush.

“With your permission, I will now fly out to Langley in my SUPER AIRCAR, Mister President. Those Los Zetas locations should be dust and flames in less than two hours.”

“Permission granted, Ingrid. Go get them, tiger!”

“Thank you, Mister President.” said Ingrid before walking out at a quick pace towards her parked aircar outside. As she went out, Condoleezza Rice couldn’t help smile in admiration at Ingrid’s quickness and initiative.

“What a woman! Could you imagine someone like her ever becoming the President, Mister President?”

That made Bush briefly chuckle.

“The Congress would hate that, truly.”

### **10:17 (Washington Time)**

#### **Fighter alert hangar, Langley Air Force Base**

#### **Virgin**

“CLEAR THE AIRCRAFT!” shouted Ingrid as she finished strapping herself in the Lockheed F-95 EAGLE II supersonic heavy fighter-bomber parked inside one of the protected aircraft hangars in Langley Air Force Base, situated some 220 kilometers to the South-southeast of Washington. With the Air Force technicians soon out of the way of the air inlets and jet exhausts of the combat aircraft, she started in turn its two powerful combined turbofan-ramjet engines, something allowed by both ends of the protected hangar being opened to allow scramble takeoffs. Normally, the F-95 had a crew of two or three, depending on the variant, but today she didn’t have time to find a weapons/radar officer: time was crucial today. Besides, with the weak capabilities of the Mexican Air Force, who didn’t have supersonic fighter aircraft or even long-range military air surveillance radars, she wouldn’t need another crew member for this mission. With her two engines starting up without a hitch, she then released her brakes and made her aircraft roll out of the alert hangar. With the alert hangar being positioned near the extremity of the base’s main runway, she had her fighter-bomber lined up with the centerline of the runway less than a minute later. She then briefly stopped her plane while calling the control tower by radio.

“Lady hawk to Langley Control: request permission to take off.”

“Permission to take off granted, Lady hawk. Good luck and good mission.”

“Thank you, Langley Control.” replied Ingrid before pushing forward her engine throttles. The F-95, with its high thrust-to-weight ratio, took off in less than 800 meters despite its heavy bomb load. As she flew off in the direction of the nearby Atlantic Ocean, Ingrid kept her engine afterburners on, then veered south as soon as she was

clear of the coastal area and continued accelerating past the speed of sound, soon attaining Mach 3.5, close to the maximum speed of Mach 4.2 of the F-95. Doing this was going to burn a lot of fuel, fast, but she had plenty of internal fuel for her mission and she really wanted to be over her objectives in Mexico as quickly as possible, before the Los Zetas could vacate their present locations. Her next move was to switch off her radar transponder, which made her aircraft disappear from the screens of civilian air traffic control radars. With the Mexican Air Force not having its own long-range radars, she was now going to be able to penetrate Mexican airspace without being detected. While continuing to fly over water to avoid disturbing the coastal inhabitants with loud sonic booms, she quickly reviewed her list of targets, all situated in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas, next to the Mexico-United States border formed by the Rio Grande. Each of her GPS-guided 910-kilo bombs were already programmed with the exact coordinates of her intended targets, so she was able to concentrate on her flying, using her nose radar to avoid the numerous civilian airliners flying around, which were unaware about her aircraft due to her switching off her radar transponder.

Once past the southern tip of Florida, Ingrid veered west and flew towards the Mexican coast, some 1,800 kilometers away, while being careful of staying out of range of the military surveillance radars the Cubans possessed. As for American military surveillance radars, which were quite numerous in this area, the commander of Langley AFB had promised her that he would alert them via encrypted lines about her secretive mission, with a firm order not to call her or signal her presence on the radio. With the high supersonic speed she was flying at, Ingrid came within sight of the Mexican coast on the Gulf of Mexico after just one hour of flying. It would now be around nine thirty in the morning in Mexico: this was going to be quite a brutal morning call on the Los Zetas.

### **09:31 (Mexico Time)**

#### **Fortified mansion complex on the outskirts of Nuevo Laredo State of Tamaulipas, Mexico**

“SI! We got that CBP commissioner bastard!”

As Heriberto Lazcano rejoiced at the news of the confirmed death of Commissioner Walters in the bombing of the Ronald Reagan Building in Washington, Lazcano’s mistress, who was also watching the Mexican television news channel, showed a clearly

less enthusiastic response than her lover, prompting a dubious glance from the leader of the Los Zetas.

“What? Why do you look unhappy about this, Maria?”

“That woman and her son who performed miracles in Washington after the bomb exploded: what are they? Angels or witches?”

Lazcano then lost some of his own enthusiasm at that question from his mistress. The said Ingrid Dows already had a formidable reputation as a strategic and tactical genius and as a military leader, built along decades of service to the United States. Her known supernatural powers were also enough to make anybody pause. Now, her little toddler son was proving to be even more powerful than her?

“Listen, Maria. This Ingrid Dows retired from American military service many years ago. She may have performed miracles in Washington this morning, along with her son, but this doesn’t negate the fact that our car bomb did its work and got me rid of a troublesome adversary. As for her and her son being either angels or witches, I don’t care. They may have healed some of the people wounded by our bomb but they won’t be a threat to me, so don’t worry about what they are.”

Lazcano barely had time to finish his sentence before the first of four one-ton bombs targeting his mansion complex penetrated the roof of the mansion’s main building. It actually crashed through the ceiling and floor of the living room in which Lazcano and his mistress were, taking the television set on its way down to the reinforced basement, where it exploded. Lazcano and his mistress didn’t have time to react before the powerful blast propelled the floor of the living room up against the ceiling, which was then propelled up as well through the roof of the mansion. The whole building was either blown away or collapsed on itself, its three levels pancaking into a big pile of rubble by the bomb. Another GPS-guided bomb hit the annex housing Lazcano’s bodyguard force, while the two remaining bombs respectively hit the drug production lab situated inside the mansion’s fortified compound and the vast garage which contained the cars and pickup trucks used by Lazcano and his men and which also served in modifying designated vehicles to be used to carry drugs across the nearby border. The powerful blast waves from the four bombs also killed or severely injured the dozen armed men posted at the main gate and along the walls of the property.

In a small house situated some 250 meters from Lazcano’s mansion, a secret member of the Sinaloa Cartel paid by ‘El Chapo’ Guzmàn to watch the mansion and to



signal any significant activity there, was discretely watching the mansion with a pair of binoculars when a dark object flew down in a flash and hit the mansion. The huge explosion that then destroyed the mansion made the observer recoil in surprise and shock just before three more explosions basically razed the whole of Lazcano's complex. A rain of debris, from pieces of wood to broken concrete blocks and metal bars and car carcasses, then rained down on the whole area, forcing the Sinaloa man to retreat from his window and hurriedly taking refuge under the dining table of his small living room. That reflex probably saved his life, as a concrete block crashed through his roof and finished its trajectory on top of the dining table, which collapsed under the scared man. However, he was not seriously wounded and was quickly able to extricate himself from under what was left of the table. He was however suffering from a mild nervous shock and took seconds to recover his wits before he approached his damaged window. Using his binoculars, the Sinaloa man examined what remained of the mansion complex now covered by a cloud of dust: basically, next to nothing.

"Madre de Dios! What just happened there?"

He then decided that warning his boss about this was more important and urgent than speculating about what had happened. Taking out his cell phone and composing a number, he spoke in it as soon as a man answered him.

"Hello! This is Carlos, in Nuevo Laredo. The big one here just got blown up from the air, along with his men... I will!"

Unknown to him as he pocketed back his phone, more bombs were now raining down on specific buildings in Matamoros, Monterrey, Reynosa and on five isolated locations containing drug production labs. It didn't take long before the news about those airstrikes reached 'El Chapo' in his Sinaloa secret residence. The jubilant Guzmán was grinning like an idiot when he returned to watching the latest news on his television set.

"Coño! Getting the help of this Ingrid Dows was probably the best move I ever made in this business. I should go pray and make an offering to **Santa Muerte**<sup>23</sup> after this."




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<sup>23</sup> Santa Muerte: a Mexican cult image, female deity and folk saint in folk Catholicism and Mexican Neopaganism. A personification of death, she is associated with healing, protection and safe delivery to the afterlife by her devotees.

## **CHAPTER 18 – CRUSHING THE CARTELS**



**14:45 (Washington Time)**

**Thursday, November 01, 2007 'C'**

**The Oval Office, The White House**

**Washington, D.C., U.S.A.**

When Ingrid was admitted inside the Oval Office, she found her son Michael waiting there with the President and his wife. Little Michael ran at once to her while shouting in joy on seeing her.

"MOMMY!"

Crouching to catch her son in her arms, Ingrid then straightened up while holding him and covering him with kisses.

"My little angel! It always is a joy to hold you."

As Michael clung tightly to her, Ingrid smiled to Laura Bush, who was sitting in the coffee corner of the Oval Office.

"I hope that my son was not too troublesome during my absence, Madam Bush."

"Not at all, Ingrid: he was a true angel. And please call me simply Laura."

Ingrid then looked at Sniffles, who was playing with two Scottish Terriers at the feet of the First Lady.

"My dog seems to be getting along well with your two dogs, Laura."

"Oh, the three of them spent most of the time playing with your son. Your little Michael appears to love dogs and they obviously felt that."

Ingrid nodded at that, then looked at President Bush, who was sitting next to his wife.

"I am ready to brief you on my mission over Mexico, Mister President. Have you heard of any official reaction yet by the Mexican government to my strikes on the Los Zetas?"

George Bush made a face at that before answering her.

"I did get a telephone call from President Calderon about half an hour ago. He accused us of committing an act of war against Mexico but I told him where he could put his accusations. While we can expect lots of criticism on our actions, both domestic and foreign, my feeling is that the American people will overwhelmingly support your strike mission. By the way, I gave firm orders to keep your role in this secret. Officially, a number of our Air Force planes conducted that bombing raid on Mexico."

While Ingrid nodded her head at that, she was not too convinced that her role in this would stay confidential for very long: there were simply too many possible sources of leaks through the U.S. government. Even the Air Force technicians and armorers who had armed and prepared her F-95 could tell friends or family relatives about seeing her in Langley. Once that started slipping out, then the medias would quickly enough blab about it.

"Mister President, while my airstrikes will have undoubtedly hurt seriously the Los Zetas, this is by no means the end of this border war. We now have to finish the job by eradicating both the trafficking of drugs across the border and their distribution inside the United States. I have a few ideas about that and I would like to discuss them with you now...in private."

Bush nodded once soberly, then looked at his wife.

"Laura, could you take little Michael with you, along with the dogs, while I speak with General Dows."

"With pleasure, George."

As the First Lady got up from her sofa, Ingrid smiled to her son and kissed him another time on his cheek.

"Sweetie, I now need to speak in private with the President. Be a good boy and follow Laura out. I should be able to see you again in less than an hour."

"Will we go back home after that, Mommy?"

"I don't know yet about that, Michael. It will depend on what will be decided during our discussion. In the meantime, you can continue playing with Sniffles and its two companions."

She kissed her again, then handed him over to Laura Bush, who then left the Oval Office with Michael and the three dogs. Now alone with the President, Ingrid gave him a somber look.

"Mister President, if you were planning to name me again as Commander of the American Combined Combat Commands, then I must refuse in advance. I already came back twice out of retirement by request from the White House and now have a civilian job I love. I have also grown quite tired of war in general. However, our nation is now facing a grave danger and I can't possibly refuse to help it in its time of need. If you want to use me as your special presidential advisor, then I would be ready to accept such a position...for a while."

Bush gave her a benign smile in response.

"Don't worry, Ingrid: I had no plans to ask you to put your uniform back on. However, I definitely could use your services in a civilian capacity. The heads of our two most prominent counter-drugs agencies, Administrator Tandy of the DEA and Commissioner Walters of the CBP, are now dead, killed by the Los Zetas. With the destruction of its headquarters in Washington, the CBP in particular is in a bad shape and headless. While I intend to name temporary replacements for Tandy and Walters, I would like you to act as my anonymous counter-drugs Czar, with authority to decide both our international and domestic moves about our war on the cartels. Would you be ready to accept to take such a post, Ingrid? I realize that I am asking you again to put your private civilian life on hold but I really need your advice and services right now.

"If I accept such a post, Mister President, then I would do it under certain conditions."

"Such as?" asked Bush, raising an eyebrow.

"Such as the ability and authority to decide our anti-drug moves by myself, subject only to your personal approval. The time of committee decisions on this is way past any usefulness if we truly want to win this war. Also, I believe that our justice system will have to change its rules about how to deal with those drug cartels. Let's treat this for what it really is: an open war by the United States against criminal organizations engaged in acts of terrorism on American soil. The sad, infuriating truth, is that this problem with the cartels only exists because our own citizens, by their own

personal irresponsibility and selfishness, are fueling this drug trafficking by buying and using illicit drugs on such a large scale. Don't take me wrong, though, Mister President. I am not advocating the mass arrest of Americans who simply use illicit drugs. Our prisons and justice system would quickly be overwhelmed if we tried that. What we need to do is to force our citizens to stop using drugs by cutting off their circulation around the country: no drug importation and distribution, no or greatly diminished use of them in the U.S.A. While militarily striking outside our borders at the drug labs and cartel centers, we will need at the same time to crack down hard on the various street gangs affiliated with the cartels. Those street gangs are actually the ones who distribute and sell illicit drugs on our streets. Some may object that this would violate the individual and group constitutional rights of those street thugs and gangs but what we could do would be to declare them as accomplices to foreign terrorist organizations. Then, we could prosecute them under martial law rules, like what we did with Axis prisoners of war during World War Two. That way, all those high-paid lawyers will be cut out of the legal processing of those gang members. As for finding those street gang members, it will be much easier than many would say, especially if they are treated as domestic enemies and suspected accomplices of foreign terrorists. Many of those gang members pride themselves in displaying extensive tattoos marking them as part of specific street gangs. **MS-13 members** are a good example of such tattooed street thugs. Since those street gangs are heavily armed, you may have to use our various state national guards to back up our law enforcement officers. I know that all this will make many left-wing advocates and politicians scream 'Fascism' out loud but all this will be needed to be done if we want to win this war."



President Bush was silent for a moment while staring at Ingrid, then finally nodded his head while smiling to her.

"Ingrid, I must say that I am in total communion with you on that. Let's sit down and write down together the measures we will take to bring down those drug cartel bastards."

**18:30 (New York Time)**

**CBS Evening News studios**

**New York City**

“Good evening, dear viewers, and welcome to the CBS Evening News. I am Katie Couric, your host, and we have lots to cover tonight, starting with the bombing and destruction of the Ronald Reagan Building in Washington this morning, the incredible scenes of supernatural healings which followed there, then the reported American airstrikes against the Los Zetas drug cartel inside Mexico and the official declaration of war by President Bush against the Los Zetas. On that latter item, which was broadcasted live on our breaking news at six o’clock, it will be rebroadcasted at seven and at nine tonight, for the viewers who could not watch it at six. President Bush announced in his address that the United States is now officially at war with the Los Zetas Mexican drug cartel and will use all its military might to bring down and destroy what the President described as ‘a criminal organization and a foreign terrorist group which conducted attacks and bombings inside the United States’. President Bush declared in his address that the American armed forces will pursue and destroy the Los Zetas wherever they are, including in Mexico, as was done today when American jet aircraft bombed multiple locations belonging to the Los Zetas inside the Mexican state of Tamaulipas. President Bush also addressed the American domestic threat aspect of the Los Zetas and their illicit drugs distribution and sale in our country by declaring the street gangs affiliated with the Los Zetas or colluding with them to sell drugs on our streets to be quote ‘accomplices of a foreign terrorist organization’ unquote. Those said street gangs, notably the MS-13, the Latin Kings, the Texas Mexican Mafia, the Sureno-13, the Aryan Brotherhood of Texas and many others, will now be treated as suspected accomplices to terrorist acts on American territory and will thus be treated as ‘irregular enemy combatants’ and will not be protected by our usual Bill of Constitutional Rights, like the way Muslim terrorists taken by our forces in Afghanistan were treated under martial law instead of under our normal judicial system. Finally, President Bush firmly urged the Americans who use illicit drugs to quit using them and for the Americans who do not use drugs to stay away from them, emphasizing the fact that the buying and use of illicit drugs by American citizens was the direct cause of the crimes and violence plaguing our streets due to drugs. CBS expects that many human rights organizations and rights advocacy groups, like the ACLU and the ADL, will protest those new anti-drug policies as being in violation of the American Constitution and as abuse of power by President Bush. We will thus closely cover the political developments on this matter. Now, to cover the tragic events of this morning in Washington, we will now be joined on

line by our Washington correspondent, Chip Reid. Chip, what are the latest news about the bombing of the Ronald Reagan Building?”

The square-jawed reporter nodded once before answering Couric.

“Katie, the news about that terrorist attack are unfortunately not good. As of now, a confirmed total of 193 people are dead, killed in that bomb blast. While many of those victims were federal employees of either the CBP, the AID and of the Department of Commerce, at least half of the victims were private citizens working for various commercial outlets, shops and offices situated inside the Ronald Reagan Building. Many may ask why there are no wounded mentioned, especially in view of the high number of fatalities. Well, there would have been dozens, if not hundreds of wounded caused by that bombing, if not for the miraculous intervention of two persons who performed healings by using their supernatural powers. Those two persons are the famous retired General of the Army, Ingrid Dows, and her toddler son, whose name is Michael Dows. I will now play online three short videos taken by onlookers, showing mother and son performing miraculous acts before flying away towards the White House.”

Katie Couric stayed mostly silent as those videos played on the channel, letting Chip Reid comment on them. She did speak up at the end of the last video, which showed Ingrid Dows, her son and their dog, levitating away from the bombing site.

“Chip, seeing such a young child perform such extraordinary feats is bound to make a lot of people pause and ask questions about where and how he got such powers of healing.”

Reid’s expression became most sober as he answered the TV news hostess.

“Katie, that is actually known and General Dows herself has been quite open for many years already about the origins of those powers. Basically, she calls herself a ‘Chosen of The One’, this ‘One’ being described by her as an invisible but extremely powerful spiritual entity which has been following the evolution of the Human race for millions of years. According to Ingrid Dows, tiny parts of that ‘One’ inhabit each of us during our lives and then return to The One at death for a period of spiritual cleansing before going to a new Human fetus in a process called ‘reincarnation’ by Dows. She also emphasized many times that this ‘One’ is not the God of the Bible, nor is it any of the other gods venerated today or in the past around Earth. It does not want to be worshipped, nor does it want to be preached about. According to General Dows, it only wants Humanity to improve by itself over time, without its active help save from

occasional and limited interventions by its Chosen. As such a Chosen, General Dows has repeatedly demonstrated in the past decades and most lately today that she possesses a number of impressive supernatural powers, including the power of touch healing and the ability to fly by herself. As for her son Michael, his case is even more fantastic than that of her mother. While he was born naturally from Ingrid Dows, his father is said to actually be a powerful sub-entity of The One called 'Archangel Michael'. Thus, young Michael, who is now three and a half years-old, is officially listed in his birth certificate as a half-Human, half-Celestial being, and has just proved this morning that he holds powers commensurate with his fantastic nature. Our viewers should be reminded that General Dows has another child, a daughter named Nancy, now a grown adult, who is also a half-Human, half-Celestial being and whose father is also Archangel Michael. She proved her nature in the past by performing a number of miraculous healings in and around New York City, something that earned her the nickname of 'The White Angel'. Right now, Nancy Dows is mostly known as the star singer and band leader of the hugely successful all-female band 'The D.C. Five'. All in all, a most incredible and powerful little family."

"I'd say!" said Katie Couric, duly impressed. "Chip, Ingrid Dows is known to presently reside on the West Coast, near Seattle. Do you know why she was in Washington today?"

"Katie, I can only speculate on that, but the fact that she was seen very close to the White House suggests that maybe she came to Washington to advise President Bush on this crisis with the Los Zetas. Remember that General Dows has been acting as an occasional presidential advisor for nearly all past presidents since the 1950s, be they Democrats or Republicans, and was very much appreciated in that role. If she indeed came to Washington to advise President Bush on the problem of the Los Zetas, then it could only be a good thing for the country, as she is known to be a true strategic military genius and an expert in World geopolitics."

"I see! And what about the Mexican government? How is it reacting to all this, Chip?"

"In a few words: very little. Apart from placing an official diplomatic protest about the airstrikes on its territory, we have seen no Mexican concrete action to try controlling the Los Zetas. If you would remember, when the Los Zetas attacked our three consulates in the state of Tamaulipas and massacred our diplomats, the local policemen who were supposed to protect our consulates melted away as soon as the Los Zetas



started their attacks, leaving our people defenseless. The Mexican Army did cover the evacuation of our embassy and other consulates but didn't even try to enter the State of Tamaulipas, where the local governor is widely accused of being in the pocket of the Los Zetas, like too many Mexican officials."

"But, with the continuing complete closure of the American-Mexican border, this crisis is bound to create economic and social chaos in Mexico, which was one of our biggest trading partners."

Chip Reid's face turned somber then before he replied to Katie.

"That is unfortunately too true, Katie. While Texas and our other southern states are also suffering to a point from that border closure, things must be starting to be downright awful in Mexico, with tens of thousands of Mexicans now unable to go work in the United States and with Mexican farmers unable to sell their products in our country. All this is very sad and tragic, but the utter failure of the Mexican government to rein in the Los Zetas and the other drug cartels operating from its territory is clearly to blame in this crisis, which is exposing Mexico as a quasi-failed state."

"How sad and tragic indeed. Hopefully, things will get better soon."

"I wouldn't hold my breath on that, Katie." then replied a glum Reid.

**22:42 (Washington Time)**

**26 Woodland Drive Northwest**

**Woodley Park District, Washington, D.C.**

Ingrid, who was watching the televised news with Nancy and her band members in their big lounge, sighed with discouragement as the exchange between Katie Couric and Chip Reid was finished replaying on the CBS channel.

"Unfortunately, Reid is correct about his assessment of the situation. The cancer of the drug cartels, and not only the Los Zetas, is at a malignancy state in the United States and it will take more than a few airstrikes to effectively deal with that problem. I expect in particular to see a lot more violence and crimes in the streets of our country in the coming days and weeks, as desperate drug addicts cut off from their regular supplies and street gangs unable to sell drugs start resorting to petty street crimes."

"And what could our government do to prevent that, Ingrid?" asked Erika Lang, the band's drummer.

"I already counseled President Bush about how to deal with that aspect of the problem, notably by cracking down hard and quick on the street gangs affiliated with the drug cartels and by boosting the medical assistance to our citizens who are addicted to illicit drugs but are not habitual criminals, so that they would not be pushed by desperation into petty crime. Please keep this to yourselves, girls, but President Bush accepted my proposal to issue a presidential pardon and to free those in prison on simple possession of cannabis. He will announce this pardon tomorrow morning. This move will free a lot of prison space for the tens of thousands of street gang members who will soon be arrested, thanks to the new powers given to our law enforcement agencies in order to deal with the Los Zetas and its affiliates in the United States. As for the members of the Los Zetas we will eventually capture in the United States, they will soon be able to enjoy some lengthy vacations in Cuba, at the Guantanamo Bay Resort. The Los Zetas may have thought that they could push us around, as usual, but this time things will be very different, I assure you."

"And you, Mother?" asked Nancy after a short pause. "Are you going to stay long in Washington with little Michael?"

"I don't know yet about that, Nancy. It will depend on how this situation will evolve. I already talked on the phone with Jeff Hiller, to make arrangements about my job in Port Angeles while I will be here, counseling President Bush. Thankfully, Jeff proved to be very comprehending and promised me to keep my chair in Port Angeles warm while I am in Washington. There is only one thing left for me to arrange now. Who would be ready to babysit little Michael while I work at the White House?"

Five enthusiastic hands immediately shot up in the air at that question.

**07:11 (Sweden Time) / 01:11 (Washington Time)**

**Friday, November 02, 2007 'C'**

**Apartment Number 11, # 46 Lovisag, Stockholm**

**Sweden**

Greta Visby was finishing her breakfast in her apartment while watching the latest news about the Mexico-United States crisis on a Swedish television channel, and was feeling pure frustration. Marine Corps units were certainly going to get involved in this and possibly go fight inside Mexico to help eliminate those drug cartel bastards.

She wanted badly to go join her regiment there and participate in the fight but she still had eight months to serve here in Stockholm, pushing paper from behind a desk.

“God, I hate paperwork! If they post me to another fucking desk job after this, then I will quit the Corps.” she growled before finishing her cup of coffee and heading to her door to leave her apartment and walk to the embassy.

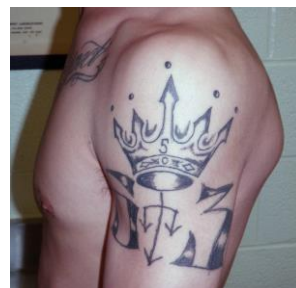
**02:26 (Texas Time)**

**Friday, November 02, 2007 ‘C’**

**Residence and safehouse on Water Street, El Cuatro District**

**Laredo, Texas**

Emilio Hernandez had been in a bad mood all day, on top of being quite nervous about what could happen in the next few days. His local chapter of the **Latin Kings street gang** in the city of Laredo had not received for many days now any of the shipments of illicit drugs it had been expecting, for the good reason that the border with Mexico, where those drugs came from, was still hermetically sealed by thousands of federal agents, Texas National Guardsmen and even regular U.S. Army units. His gang was now in its last reserves of drugs stashes and would soon be unable to sell any drugs on the streets of Laredo, thus putting an abrupt end to a major source of revenues for Emilio’s gang. From what he could hear from other local street gangs who were also depending on trafficking and selling drugs, he was not alone in being in this difficult financial situation. Emilio had thus drunk quite a lot more than usual in order to forget about his problems and was in a deep slumber when the noise of his front entrance door being kicked in abruptly woke him up. Just the fact of quickly sitting up in bed brought him a wave of pain inside his brain that made him grimace and take hold of his head. Then, he heard the loud shouts coming from the ground level floor.



“POLICE! NOBODY MOVES! WE HAVE A SEARCH WARRANT!”

“FUCKING PIGS!” heard Emilio, who recognized the voice of one of the two gang members acting as security for him and his safehouse.

“DROP THE GUN!”

**POW! POW! POW!**

Emilio didn't take the time to ask himself if the shots he had just heard had been fired by his gang member or by the police: he grabbed at once the revolver he always kept under his pillow, then jumped out of bed. As he was putting on his trousers in a mighty hurry, so that he could escape by the window of his bedroom, his door was kicked in and a federal agent wearing a bullet-proof vest marked 'POLICE' jumped in, a compact submachine gun pointed at the ready. A furious Emilio, his head still fogged by alcohol, pointed his revolver at the policeman, resolved to defend himself. He however lost that gun duel, with a short burst of five bullets hitting him before he could fire his first shot. He did shoot once while falling backward, but his bullet went up into the ceiling of his bedroom. That only earned him a second submachine gun burst which killed him. The agent who had killed him quickly scanned the room visually to see if there was anybody else in it, while two other agents entered it to secure and search it. Going to Emilio's body, who now lay in an expanding pool of blood, the agent with the submachine gun used his left foot to push away the revolver on the floor, then cautiously checked Emilio for a pulse. Finding none, he straightened up and looked at his two partners in the room.

"This guy is wearing a clear 'Latin Kings' tattoo on his left arm and left me no choice but to shoot him. Let's check the place for drugs and weapons. I will call this in, so that our crime scene team can come in and gather both evidence and bodies."

To the DEA senior agent's relief, none of his agents involved in this raid was hurt, while a total of three gang members were now dead, having tried to resist the raid. A search of the old converted garage then revealed a substantial cache of illicit drugs, plus a half-dozen weapons and plenty of ammunition for them. This was thus a fruitful raid in the mind of the DEA senior agent. He learned a short time later that the seven other raids which had been conducted simultaneously in this part of Laredo had also been successful and had resulted in the seizure of drugs with a total value of more than a half million dollars, plus that of a small arsenal of weapons and explosives, on top of resulting in the capture or death of nineteen other members of the Latin Kings. The only sour note was the fact that one DEA agent had been wounded during one of the raids. Thankfully, that agent's life had been saved by his bullet-proof vest and he was now being treated in a local hospital. The senior DEA agent mentally thanked the new, tough anti-drugs and anti-gangs' edicts promulgated by President Bush, which had given legal cover for tonight's raids. Without them, most of those raids would not have been

authorized by magistrates, for lack of prior evidence that would have allowed the delivery of search warrants.

The DEA raids in the Southwest districts of Laredo were far from being the only ones that night around the country, with a mixed army of DEA agents, U.S. Marshals, F.B.I. agents and city police S.W.A.T. teams cooperating in launching hundreds of raids around the southern states of the United States, concentrating on known street gangs hideouts and meeting places and seizing tons of illicit drugs and thousands of illegal weapons and also resulting in the arrest or death of over 3,400 street gang members affiliated with Mexican drug cartels. This was however only the first phase of a comprehensive anti-drugs operation covering the whole of the United States. During the day that followed those initial night raids, anyone seen with tattoos marking them as members of street gangs known to sell drugs on American streets was accosted, searched for drugs and weapons and had their residences searched as well. If nothing illicit was found on specific gang members accosted and searched, then that gang member was released after being fingerprinted and photographed. Those who were found with drugs or weapons, or a combination of both, were then arrested and carted to jail for expedited legal processing under martial law rules, which now applied to suspected accomplices of foreign terrorists. While the lower ranking street gang members arrested that day were quickly sent to various military stockades across the country, the gang leaders earned themselves a quick air trip to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, out of reach of the high-flight lawyers who normally defended them in American courts of law. Then, the third phase of Operation VACUUM CLEANER kicked in on the night of Friday to Saturday.

**01:15 (Mexico Time)**

**Saturday, November 03, 2007 'C'**

**Guards hut, Los Zetas drugs processing laboratory**

**Farm sixteen kilometers west of the port of Veracruz, Mexico**

Having difficulty to stay awake on this long night watch shift, Pedro Jimenez got up from the chair placed next to a telephone set and a portable radio and went to a small gas stove, intent on boiling water for a cup of strong coffee. He however moved quietly, in order not to wake up the eight guards from the day shift sleeping in the small hut

connected to the coca processing laboratory building of the farm. His job and that of his comrades was to provide security for that laboratory, where coca leaves from Colombia were processed to produce pure cocaine powder. That pure cocaine would then be transported to other drug labs nearer to the American border, where it would be cut and diluted with a variety of other products before being packed for shipping to the United States. However, things appeared to be seriously souring up lately for the Los Zetas cartel, for which Pedro was working. The Americans appeared to have become much more aggressive and ruthless in their efforts to stop the drugs trafficking across their borders, going to the length of completely closing their border with Mexico and defending it with soldiers. One direct result of all this was that the latest batch of pure cocaine produced in this farm was still stored here, in a locked room of the guards' hut. Nobody had come to collect it and transport it away, while no new orders or directives had been received from above for two days now. As he started filling an old pot with water, Pedro wondered if coca processing at this farm would continue, and for how long. As he was about to put the pot of water on the stove, he suddenly heard a faint noise outside that sounded like what a compressed air pellet gun would make. Freezing for a moment and listening carefully, he then heard a similar weak 'PLOP' a few seconds later. Now worried and on alert, he forgot his pot of water and went back to the table supporting the telephone set and the portable radio, grabbing the latter and keying its microphone.

"Diego, this is Pedro. How are things outside?"

Not getting an answer despite waiting a good six seconds, Pedro then called another guard on duty along the perimeter of the farm.

"Carlos, this is Pedro. Come in!"

Again he got no answer on his radio. Now fully on alert, Pedro grabbed his Heckler & Koch G3 7.62 mm automatic rifle lying next to the telephone and chambered a round in its chamber before walking to the front door of the hut. Opening that door and stepping outside, he took two steps, then stopped, watching and listening while his eyes got accustomed to the darkness, a process that took long seconds. He however never had the chance to see the man crouched to one side of the door and wearing an elaborate camouflage suit called a '**Ghillie Suit**' typically worn by military snipers. That man, who was now to one side and slightly behind Pedro, pointed a pistol fitted with a long



silencer and shot once, hitting Pedro in the back of his head and killing him instantly. Pedro's body had not even fallen down on the ground before two other camouflaged men also crouched on each side of the door quickly pulled out the safety pins of the grenades they were holding, then threw them inside. The noise of the two grenades hitting the floor and rolling did wake up one of the sleeping men but he didn't have time to fully wake up and react before those grenades exploded, sending a rain of deadly shrapnel around the small room. All of the cartel men sleeping inside were instantly killed or gravely wounded. Those wounded men didn't survive for long however, as the camouflaged men rushed inside just after the explosions and finished off the guards with single shots from their silenced weapons. One of the attackers looked around the inside of the room, then went to the door of an adjacent room, which was locked by a padlock. One 9 mm bullet made quick work of that padlock and the attacker entered a small storage room full of large jute bags with plastic linings. Taking out a combat knife and then making a small cut in one bag revealed the content as being a fine white powder. Taking a small plastic drug testing kit from one pocket, the attacker put a small amount of the white powder in the test kit, then pressed on it, breaking in succession the small glass pills inside the kit. The liquid from those pills soon turned to pink and blue colors, making the attacker smile with satisfaction.

"Pure cocaine... Our intelligence about this farm was correct." the man said to himself in English. "Well, it won't be sold on American streets now. Time to blow this shit up."

Walking out of the storage room, he spoke on the microphone of his radio headset.

"Nemesis Six to Nemesis callsigns: the target is confirmed as a legitimate one. Search all the buildings and kill those you will find inside, then put fire to them. We will burn everything down, then retreat to our extraction point. Nemesis Six out!"

The leader of the platoon of Green Berets, having seen a jeep parked next to the hut, went to it and, finding a reserve of jerrycans full of gasoline next to it, grabbed two of the jerrycans and carried them inside the guards hut. Giving one jerrycan to one of his soldiers, he then carried the second one to the storage room, where he opened its cap and started pouring gasoline over the jute bags piled inside. Leaving some gasoline inside his jerrycan, he walked out of the storage room while pouring a line of gasoline on the wooden floor of the hut. The soldier with the other jerrycan had basically done the same, pouring gasoline all over the room, including on the walls. With the platoon leader

and his two men retreating outside, they were about to light the trail of gasoline they had made when the leader's radio came to life.

"Nemesis Two to Nemesis Six, come in, over!"

"This is Nemesis Six: speak!"

"From Nemesis Two: we found in the main farmhouse what appeared to be five lab technicians, which we then killed. However, we found in bedrooms on the upper floor what appear to be a family of two adults and three children. The man in the couple, when asked who he was, said that he owned the farm but that cartel thugs basically seized his farm from him in order to establish their drug lab, while letting that farmer exploit his maize fields. What do we do with that family, over?"

The Green Berets officer thought for a moment before answering on the radio.

"Nemesis Two, do not hurt that family and do not burn their house down. Just cut the telephone wires, dump the bodies of the lab technicians in the jungle, then withdraw towards our extraction point, over and out."

Returning his attention to the guards' hut, the platoon leader took a lighter from one pocket and his notepad. Tearing up one page from his notepad, he then lit it up before throwing it down on the trail of gasoline leading inside the hut. The gasoline lit up at once, quickly turning the guards hut and its stash of nearly 800 kilos of pure cocaine powder into a raging inferno. Grinning with satisfaction, the Green Berets officer then ordered his men to retreat through the nearby jungle and return to their Hiller PELICAN VTOL troop transport waiting for them in a clearing some two kilometers away.

### **16:38 (Washington Time)**

**Sunday, November 04, 2007 'C'**

**The Oval Office, The White House**

**Washington, D.C.**

When Ingrid entered the Oval Office, along with General of the Army Richard Warner and the head of the Department of Homeland Security, she found President Bush in discussion with his National Security Advisor, Stephen Hadley, and with his Attorney General, Michael Mukasey. Bush then nodded his head in salute to Ingrid and his two other new visitors.

"Aah, just the ones I wanted to hear from. Please, come and sit down with us in the discussion corner."



"Thank you, Mister President." said Ingrid in reply before going to take place in one of the sofas and chairs surrounding the low coffee table. Bush waited until his three new visitors were seated before speaking to them as a group.

"So, what are the results of our efforts to date, lady and gentlemen?"

"Militarily, our strikes and raids inside Mexico were successful in destroying their objectives to date, Mister President." answered General Warner. "Thankfully, we suffered only three wounded men in those raids, while over 49 cartel members were killed and an estimated total of eleven tons of processed drugs were destroyed. This is definitely bound to hurt the Los Zetas badly."

Chertoff was next to speak while consulting notes he had just extracted from his attaché case.

"Unfortunately, while also successful, our campaign of raids, searches and arrests of street gang members with ties to the Los Zetas did cost us a number of our agents and police officers, Mister President. Those street gangs proved to be as heavily armed as we had expected them to be and a number of these thugs elected to fight arrest rather than giving up at once. In fact, some of our raids turned quickly into full fledged gun battles, as you probably saw on the day's television news."

"Yeah!" replied Bush in a sober tone. "Some of those television reports were rather critical of us, something I was expecting from the more 'progressive' networks. However, I intend to ignore those bleeding-heart apologists insisting on the primacy of individual rights over that of the security of the nation. So, how closer are we to crushing those damn Los Zetas and their affiliated street gangs?"

"The Los Zetas are now quite shaken and much weaker by now, Mister President." answered Ingrid. "Their surviving leaders have all gone into hiding and their minions are now confused and disorganized. I believe that we have by now done as much damage by military strikes inside Mexico as we could have hoped and should now concentrate on keeping our southern border secured, while continuing to sweep through the street gangs who were selling drugs on our streets. This last part will however require a sustained effort on our part to finish the job. If I may, I believe that another kind of problem is about to emerge inside our country, Mister President. I am speaking about the rise in street crimes, muggings and thefts I expect to be committed by the millions of American drug addicts who are now unable to get their daily fixes and who are growing increasingly desperate to find drugs. The various pharmacies around our

country can thus expect to become prime targets for those drug addicts. We should thus provide them with extra protection, both stealthy and overt.”

“What do you mean by stealthy protection, Ingrid?”

“I mean having undercover officers in street clothes masquerading as customers inside the more vulnerable urban pharmacies, especially the ones in the poorer districts where drug consumption was high. I know that this would necessitate mobilizing tens of thousands of undercover officers for that purpose but I believe that our law agencies should temporarily drop their regular tasks and concentrate on our pharmacies and other places where addicts could find drugs. Finally, I believe that an extra effort should be made to rehabilitate and wean out the drug addicts, rather than simply jailing them.”

“That sounds like a hell of a huge task, Ingrid.” said Attorney General Muckasey. “I don’t know if we have enough officers and medical specialists to do that properly.”

“I realize that but, if we don’t do that, then we will end up creating more insecurity and crimes on our streets than before our anti-drugs operation. Yes, it will be an ‘all hands on deck’ effort but it has to be done if we want to get long-term benefits from all this. Our various local police precincts should be our best source of info on which pharmacies would be most susceptible to attacks and thefts. Also, posting a few highly visible patrol cars next to vulnerable pharmacies should help a lot in deterring thefts. Mister President, I would have a suggestion about how to deal with addicts who will be suffering from drug withdrawal due to the lack of street drugs.”

“Go on, Ingrid.” said Bush, clearly interested.

“I believe that we should start right away a nationwide publicity campaign targeted at those drug addicts suffering from withdrawal and who could be tempted to go try to rob pharmacies. That campaign should enjoin those addicts to go to our various medical clinics and hospitals, where medical teams backed up by a well-known local social activist and by a couple of undercover police officers acting as protection could receive these addicts, treat them and counsel them. Most importantly, this publicity campaign should emphasize the fact that the drug addicts who would voluntarily seek help at those clinics and hospitals will not be subject to arrest or legal prosecution. I especially would insist on that last point, if we don’t want to see American drug addicts stay away.”

The men present around her, including President Bush, gave her skeptical looks on hearing that.

"But, Ingrid, illegal drug use is a crime, according to our laws." objected Muckasey. "And you would want us to simply let go all those addicts?"

"And what else would you want to do with them, Mister Muckasey? Mass jail hundreds of thousands of drug addicts suffering withdrawal? We would fill all our jails and prisons within a couple of days if we do that, and for what long-term good?"

Ingrid then seemed to think for a moment before speaking again.

"If I may, Mister President, an idea just came to my mind. It may sound rather fantastic, but I believe that it could help us tremendously to solve at least partly our problems."

"Go ahead, Ingrid..."

**20:06 (New York Time)**

**Monday, November 05, 2007 'C'**

**Dewitt Clinton Park, Hell's Kitchen District**

**Manhattan, New York City**

The pair of CNN employees, one reporter and one cameraman, who showed up at the Dewitt Clinton Park after nightfall were quite nervous and on their guard, as this part of Manhattan already had a rather bad reputation for crime, a reputation reinforced by the very notable boost in criminality and violence which had surged up in the last couple of days due to the present drugs crisis. They were thus a bit surprised at seeing no visible police presence around the park, which was now filling quickly with a rather eclectic crowd of often shabbily dressed men, women and teenagers. Visible in the middle of the park, standing on an improvised stand made of a large wooden crate, was a young and very beautiful woman dressed in a simple, ample white robe. The CNN reporter was able to recognize at once who that young woman was and signed herself.

"The White Angel! Get ready to start recording, Jim: this could be spectacular."

"No shit!" crudely replied Angela's cameraman, who had also recognized the famous Nancy Dows, the so-called 'White Angel of New York' and lead singer of the famous band 'The D.C. Five'. He thus shouldered his camera and pointed it at the girl and the growing crowd around her. At first, nothing happened as more people, some in obvious mental and physical distress, joined the crowd, which soon numbered well over 4,000 people tightly pressed against each other. In order to have a better view of the scene, Angela and Jim stepped on the back of a parked pickup truck. Just as they had

done that, they heard a strong female voice in their heads, even though the girl who was the center of attention of the crowd didn't open her mouth.

"THANK YOU FOR COMING TO THIS ANNOUNCED GATHERING TONIGHT, MY FRIENDS. I KNOW AND CAN FEEL YOUR PAIN AND DISTRESS AND I AM HERE TO PUT AN END TO THEM. I WILL ASK YOU ONLY ONE THING IN EXCHANGE FOR HEALING YOU OF YOUR DRUGS DEPENDENCY: TO NEVER AGAIN SUCCUMB TO THE ATTRACTION OF DRUG USE. IF YOU REALLY NEED HELP AND ASSISTANCE IN THE FUTURE, THEN SEARCH FOR THE HELP OF YOUR FRIENDS, RELATIVES AND LOCAL COMMUNITY WORKERS, BUT DON'T LISTEN TO THOSE WHO CREATED YOUR MISERY BY SELLING DRUGS TO YOU: THE ONLY THING THEY WANT IS TO MAKE MONEY AT YOUR EXPENSE. NOW, PROMISE ME THAT YOU WILL HEED MY ADVICE BY SAYING 'I DO'."

"**I DO!**" shouted in unison the crowd, many with emotional voices. Nancy then nodded once her head before closing her eyes and raising high both of her arms. Filmed by the CNN crew, Nancy then gradually started to shine from the inside with a pure white glow, which quickly grew in intensity before exploding into a blinding but silent burst of light which expanded at supersonic speed all around her. Unknown to Angela and Jim at the time, that burst of light actually expanded well beyond Manhattan Island, reaching in seconds the far borders of New York State and beyond and extending to a radius of 1,000 kilometers before starting to fade in intensity and finally disappearing. When the light dissipated in the Dewitt Clinton Park, the crowd saw that Nancy Dows had disappeared. The reaction of the thousands of now healed people to this apparent miracle was either to kneel and pray or to simply walk slowly away, often while crying with joy. When the CNN crew, still stunned by what they had seen, went back to their New York studio, they learned that a similar giant healing burst of white light had been created at the same time in the city of New Orleans by none other than Ingrid Dows, the mother of Nancy Dows. Some thirty minutes later, another wide healing burst occurred, centered on Colorado Springs, in the Midwest, with Nancy Dows being the reported source of the burst. The fourth and last healing burst of that night finished covering the remaining parts of the United States and was centered on San Francisco, in California, but the source of that burst definitely came as a total surprise and shock to the American public and government when it was announced on breaking television news: a little blond toddler boy who managed to produce an even stronger and wider healing burst than the previous ones, a burst which dissipated only after covering a radius of over

1,500 kilometers. That healing burst actually reached and went beyond the western borders with Canada and Mexico, healing in the process millions of Canadians and Mexicans from all their ailments, and not only from drug dependency.

Apart from healing hundreds of millions of people around North America, those healing bursts also mostly prevented the wave of crimes and violence which had been anticipated from drug addicts suffering withdrawal because of the crackdown on drugs sales. The street gangs which had been selling those drugs and which were being hammered by extensive and ruthless police raids and arrests then found themselves with mostly no customers or demand for what little drugs they still had. With their biggest source of revenues having evaporated, the street thugs who had not already been arrested or killed in police raids either went into hiding or switched to other kinds of criminal activities, like break-ins, thefts and store robberies, activities in which they didn't enjoy anymore the support of the Mexican drug cartels.

In Mexico, Joaquin 'El Chapo' Guzmàn, who had seen and had been touched personally by the healing burst from San Francisco, watched all this happen with growing dismay. While his Sinaloa Cartel had not been targeted by the American military raids and aerial bombings on Mexican territory, the continuing closure of the American-Mexican border and the recent disappearance of the American customers for his drugs had meant a catastrophic tumble in revenues for his organization. The healing bursts, one of which had been generated by the woman to whom he had given information on the Los Zetas, had also seriously shaken El Chapo. While not truly religious, he had like most Mexicans been raised in a strongly Catholic culture mixed in with a dose of witchcraft and paganism. As he reflected mentally on all this, Guzmàn looked outside the window of his private study and spoke to himself.

"Maybe it's time for me to retire to a quiet little island in the Caribbeans. This drug business isn't worth shit anymore."

**11:03 (Washington Time)**

**Thursday, November 08, 2007 'C'**

**The Oval Office, The White House**

**Washington, D.C., U.S.A.**

When Ingrid was admitted in the Oval Office, President Bush got up from behind his presidential desk and walked to her, meeting her in the middle of his office and shaking hands with her. After the huge healing burst she had generated in New Orleans three days ago, George Bush simply could not consider her simply like another member of his staff. He now in fact felt something near humbleness when in her presence, as the extent of her powers and of those of her two children were simply mind-boggling.

“You wanted to speak with me, Ingrid?”

“Yes, I did, Mister President. With the way things are going now in respect to the war against the drug cartels and to drug-related crimes in the United States, I believe that you don’t need me anymore to direct the fight against the Los Zetas. I would thus like your permission for me to return to my civilian work in Port Angeles, Mister President.”

“You have it, Ingrid. You have done a magnificent job here and the nation owes you and your two children its eternal gratitude.”

“Thank you, Mister President. I will thus leave with my son for Port Angeles after lunch.”

Bush nodded once at that, then paused while looking into her eyes.

“Ingrid, to be frank, I don’t know any more how to consider you and your children. I have known for years that you possessed supernatural powers but your healing burst of Monday night was of a power scale beyond my comprehension. I, like many Americans, have many questions about ‘The One’, the spiritual entity you serve. You keep saying that The One doesn’t wish to be worshipped or prayed to but then what does he wants from us? Why doesn’t he appear to us and speak to us directly?”

“Mister President, his only wish is to see Humanity progress and improve with time, by itself. He has been watching us and hoping for millions of years already while keeping his interventions and influence to a strict minimum. However, the advent of nuclear weapons, which can destroy Humanity and this planet in an instant, drastically changed his outlook about how he interacts with Humanity. Know that, in Humanity’s original timeline, which I call Timeline ‘A’, such a nuclear war very nearly resulted in the extinction of the Human race in the year 2053 ‘A’. That event deeply traumatized The One when billions of desperate souls returned to him after dying in the first hours of that nuclear war. That event then pushed him into using my adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante, who had been involuntarily transported back in time from the year 2012 to the year 1940 by scientists from the 34<sup>th</sup> Century. He gave Nancy powers and an indirect

connection with him, hoping that she could change the course of history and thus avoid the calamity of another nuclear war. In that, Nancy fulfilled his expectations and hopes, preventing a nuclear war in what I call Timeline 'B'. We in turn live in yet another parallel timeline, Timeline 'C', which appeared when one Nancy Laplante was killed by an enemy from the future. I, as a Chosen of The One, have already succeeded three times in preventing a full-scale nuclear exchange: first in 1973, when China struck Taiwan with two nuclear-tipped missiles; then in 1975, when the North Koreans destroyed Honolulu with a bomb hidden inside a cargo ship and forced the permanent evacuation of Hawaii. In both cases, we kept our response measured, thus avoiding mass slaughter. Finally, as commander of all American combat forces in 1996, I was able to thwart an attempt by Russian leaders to launch a surprise mass nuclear attack on the United States, with them using submarines posted close to our shores. I must say that we barely avoided complete destruction as a nation then, thanks mostly to the vigilance of one of our intelligence analysts, who detected the mass absence of Russian nuclear submarines from their ports and then warned me about this, giving me time to react and destroy those submarines before they could launch their missiles. Those close calls, on top of scaring all of us, also alarmed The One, who desperately wants to avoid a repeat of the 2053 'A' nuclear holocaust. While The One still won't appear directly to us, he will use more readily his envoys on Earth, namely me and my two children, in order to help cut the suffering on our planet."

"And what does he ask in exchange, Ingrid?"

"Nothing, Mister President! He only wishes for Humanity to improve and become less violent and more caring about each other. Since each of us harbor a soul that is a tiny part of The One, he can feel our emotions, joy and suffering as we live our lives. That is why The One cares about what happens to us and uses Chosen like me, while himself staying invisible."

"What about what we call 'God'? Is your One the God of the Bible?"

"No!" answered Ingrid at once, her tone firm. "I am sorry if what I am going to say will hurt you but the God of the Bible, along with the Allah of the Koran and with the other deities venerated around Earth, do not exist, never did. They were invented by men, who then used the beliefs and worships of these gods to gain influence, control and money from their believers. Any competent and impartial scientist will tell you that the Bible we teach in the United States and in other Christian countries is a bunch of nonsense contradicted by scientific facts, like the supposed creation of Man and the

Universe in seven days, some 6,000 years ago. Yet, plenty of Americans still insist that we should believe everything said in the Bible, the same way millions of Muslims are told to kill those who do not believe in the Koran. That is not what The One is or stands for, Mister President. The One did not create the Universe or even our Solar System, nor did he create Man. It appeared along with the Universe and is just another form of life, a spiritual one rather than a physical one. The best way to thank him is for us to become better, more caring persons, Mister President.”

George Bush was again silent for a moment before looking back at Ingrid.

“Well, don’t be surprised if you and your two children attract from now on a crowd of would-be worshippers, Ingrid.”

Ingrid had a chuckle at that then.

“Been there, done that, Mister President. My daughter Nancy once had cultists dancing in the street in front of her apartment in New York, after she healed a bunch of AIDS victims in Manhattan.”

Bush seemed amused by that and gently patted her shoulder.

“Well, you and your two children have my eternal gratitude for what you did, Ingrid. Have a good trip back home.”

“Thank you, Mister President.”

Ingrid then exchanged a last handshake with Bush before turning around and walking out of the Oval Office, watched by the President.

“What a woman! Too bad that she can’t ever become President of the United States because she is foreign-born.”

A mental message then hit his mind.

*‘I can’t, Mister President, but my children can.’*



## **CHAPTER 19 – A BRIGHT KID**

**21:14 (Seattle Time)**

**Saturday, November 10, 2007 ‘C’**

**1402 South McDonald Street**

**Port Angeles, Clallam County**

**State of Washington, U.S.A.**



“Bunch of misguided idiots!” grumbled Ingrid, seriously irritated, while watching a television talk show on a regional channel. The talk show this evening was centered on the subject of the anti-drug cartels border war, which was now progressively dying down. The two guests of the talk show, who described themselves as ‘progressive liberals’, were basically criticizing the heavy-handed measures used by the Bush Administration to counter the Los Zetas and its affiliated American street gangs and lamenting the ‘egregious violations of human rights and constitutional rights’ resulting from those measures. For Ingrid, their arguments were simply pure hypocrisy tainted with crass political opportunism. Taking a decision, Ingrid grabbed the telephone on her nearby low coffee table and composed the number shown in the lower part of the television screen, which was to be used by viewers who would want to give their opinion on the subject of the evening discussion. A receptionist at the television station answered her quickly enough.

“KNBC Seattle! May I help you?”

“You may, miss. Please connect me to the studio desk of your presenter who is presently on air and discussing the subject of our anti-drug cartels campaign. I am ex-General of the Army Ingrid Dows, calling from Port Angeles, and I have a few choice words for his two guests.”

The receptionist was obviously impressed by both her identity and by her polite but firm tone she had used.

“Uh, one moment, please. I am connecting you right now, General.”

In the talk show studio’s stage, the presenter suddenly heard a message from his producer via his ear microphone.

"Gregg, you better take this call: none other than ex-General of the Army Ingrid Dows is calling from Port Angeles in order to give you her opinion on the subject of your show. I am now switching her with your desk. I will get a background picture of her up as quickly as I can."

The TV presenter straightened at once in his chair, something noticed by his two guests, before smiling to the cameras facing him and speaking in their direction.

"Dear viewers, we now have a call about our evening discussion from none other than the famous retired General of the Army Ingrid Dows. General Dows, you are now online."

"Thank you!" said Ingrid, her voice resonating from unseen speakers inside the studio, as a giant picture of her appeared on the background screen of the studio. "I have been listening to your show tonight since it started and I just couldn't let pass the pile of steaming manure dumped by your two guests without calling in order to adjust the clocks back to reality."

The two studio guests, one a female rights activist from the ACLU<sup>24</sup> and the other a Democratic representative from the Washington State legislature, stiffened, obviously outraged by her choice of words, as the presenter replied to Ingrid.

"And could you explain to our viewers what are your objections to what Misses Brown and Representative Reeding said tonight, General?"

"With pleasure, Gregg. First off, I would like to remind your two guests that we were at war against a foreign criminal organization which had committed acts of terrorism on American soil, acts which cost the lives of over 258 innocent American citizens and wounded over 340 other innocent persons. Furthermore, a total of at least 36 of our law enforcement officers were killed and another 72 wounded while they were taking down the street gangs affiliated to the Los Zetas and who were distributing and selling drugs on our streets, drugs which have been causing untold misery, pain and deaths among our population. Yet, Misses Brown and Representative Reeding have up to now only complained about how supposedly illegal and unconstitutional the measures taken by the Bush Administration were while defending us from those terrorist attacks and from the gangs selling drugs on our streets. May I remind them that the nearly 600 persons killed by Los Zetas bombs and the 36 law officers killed by street gangs also

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<sup>24</sup> ACLU: American Civil Liberties Union. Private association dedicated to the defense and promotion of individual and group rights in the United States.

had rights, including the right to life. Yet, they haven't mentioned all those lost innocent lives once since the start of your show, leaving you alone in stating those facts."

"Now, wait one second, General Dows!" protested the ACLU activist. "While our government does have the task of defending our country and our citizens, that doesn't mean that it can grossly disregard basic human rights and violate the constitutional rights of our citizens by conducting brutal night raids and shipping numerous American citizens to Guantanamo Bay Prison, where they are denied access to our judicial system."

"Misses Brown, by affiliating themselves with the Los Zetas, those gang members we arrested and sent to Guantanamo Bay made themselves accomplices to a foreign terrorist organization. I have only one name for such American citizens: traitors! As for our military raids inside Mexico, they were legitimate acts of war made against a group to which the government of the United States has officially declared to be at war against."

"And what tells us that those bombings and raids in Mexico didn't kill innocent Mexicans, General?" fired back in an incensed tone the state representative.

"I will tell you why I can say that those air bombings and commando raids inside Mexico only hit legitimate targets, meaning drug cartel members and their installations: I personally dropped the first bombs to fall on Mexico, bombs with GPS guidance systems set to the precise coordinates of known Los Zetas installations, drug labs and safehouses. I also made and coordinated the rest of our target list in Mexico. I care about the lives and safety of our citizens, but not about those of our enemies. They committed acts of war against the United States and they paid the price for it. Get your priorities right, Representative Reeding!"

In a sports bar in downtown Port Angeles, the patrons watching the large wall TV screens around the bar lounge while drinking beer and eating snacks cheered at the words from Ingrid.

"OOOH! THAT'S GOTTA HURT, YOU BLEEDING HEART DUMMY!"

"MAYBE WE SHOULD NOMINATE GENERAL DOWS AS OUR NEXT COUNTY REPRESENTATIVE."

That last proposal was greeted by a concert of approvals and raised mugs of beer, with very few of the patrons present protesting it.

In her home on the shores of the Juan de Fuca Strait, Ingrid felt a bit better as she concluded her call to the television station, much of her anger vented out in her remonstrance to the two guests of the talk show. Taking a moment to finish calming herself down, she then decided to go upstairs and go check on her son Michael, whom she had tucked into bed half an hour ago. Climbing the stairs to the upper floor, Ingrid froze for a moment as she was about to step on the upper floor: there was light filtering from the bottom of her son's bedroom's door. Wondering what Michael could be doing instead of sleeping, Ingrid silently approached his door, then glued one ear against it to listen. Hearing nothing, she lightly knocked on the door, then slowly opened it and stuck her head inside. What she saw was her son sitting in bed and reading a book, a pillow sandwiched between his back and the head board of his bed. His faithful dog Sniffles was also lying on the bed, next to his master.

"You're reading at this hour, Michael? You should..."

That was when Ingrid realized that the book in her son's hands was no illustrated kids' book: it was one of her scientific books dealing with theoretical aerodynamics. Completely flabbergasted by that, Ingrid fully opened the door and entered the room, then went to the bed and sat on its ledge, next to little Michael.

"Michael, how could you be interested in such a technically advanced book? It is full of complicated mathematical formulas."

"So? Michael Crawford was a qualified engineer and I love things about aircraft and aviation."

"You...you fully remember the technical expertise of that past incarnation?"

"I do, Mommy. I remember and understand fully everything my past incarnations knew."

"And those aerodynamic flow charts as well?"

Little three-and-a-half-year-old Michael, acting more like an adult than a toddler, lowered his book while looking straight into Ingrid's eyes with his big gray eyes.

"Mommy, I am a half-Celestial, remember? My I.Q. is way superior to that of an average Human child and I am not saying that to brag. Also, remembering my past incarnations helped me mature much faster than normal. You should know that yourself, Mommy."

Ingrid was silent for a moment while mentally digesting this.

"Yes, I know that, sweetie. I also had that experience with your sister Nancy. She should have started school at kindergarten level but instead started at fourth year-level after passing scholarly level tests."

"And when will I be able to start school, and at what level, Mommy?"

"I don't know yet, Michael. You would first need a special permission from the local education department to enlist in a higher class level and they would also probably ask you to pass a battery of aptitudes and knowledge tests before taking a decision concerning you."

"When could we ask them, Mommy? I really would like to be able to play and study with other kids."

"I know and perfectly understand that, Michael. Nancy also wanted to play with other kids when she was still little. In fact, she loved her time in school, making friends and playing with them. That's how she first met Leonardo, your adoptive brother I took in after his parents were assassinated by the Irish Mafia. Give me a few days, while I arrange something about your future education. Now, you really should go to sleep: you wouldn't want to be tired and sleepy tomorrow, as Sniffles would want to play with you outside, right?"

"No, I wouldn't, Mommy." replied Michael, who put aside his book and then caressed his dog. "We will have fun together tomorrow, Sniffles. I promise you that." Ingrid moved Michael's pillow to a flat position, then kissed her son on the forehead as he lay down to sleep.

"Sweet dreams, my little angel."

"Thanks, Mommy."

Getting up from the bed, Ingrid then walked to the open door and switched the bedroom's lights off before gently closing the door. As she climbed down the stairs to return to her lounge, her mind was already on the problem of how to set up Michael's education in a way appropriate to his present level of intellect.

**08:10 (Seattle Time)**

**Thursday, November 15, 2007 'C'**

**Main entrance of the Hamilton Elementary School**

**1822 West 7<sup>th</sup> Street, Port Angeles**



"Is this the school where I will study, Mommy?"

"Probably not, sweetie: it is a primary school and serves kids only up to the Sixth Grade. In my opinion, you are already way past that level of knowledge and skills. I booked a meeting with the school's development coordinator, who will make you pass various tests and exams in order to establish at what grade you should start school."

"Are you going to tell that coordinator about my nature and powers, Mommy?" asked Michael as Ingrid opened the glass door of the main entrance of the Hamilton Elementary School. Ingrid smiled down to her son at that question.

"You were filmed on national television channels while healing people and flying around in Washington, then when you produced that giant healing burst in San Francisco a mere ten days ago. Believe me: she will know about your powers and about your nature as a half-Celestial, so we will have no need to hide anything about you."

"Oh, okay!"

Once inside, Ingrid led Michael in the office of the school's receptionist, set on one side of the entrance lobby. Knocking first on the frame of the opened door, Ingrid then smiled to the middle-aged woman sitting behind a desk by the large window of the office.

"Good morning, miss. My name is Ingrid Dows and I have an appointment for 08:15 with your development coordinator, Miss Rondstad."

"Ah, yes, she is waiting for you and your son in her office, three doors down the main hallway, on the right side." replied the receptionist, who then eyed Michael with interest. "So, this is your little angel. He is a truly beautiful boy."

"Thank you, miss."

"You're welcomed, Misses Dows. You may go to Misses Rondstad's office now."

"Thank you again, miss."

As Ingrid and Michael walked down the main hallway, they crossed path with a young girl who was coming out of a washroom and was running back to her class. Michael smiled to her while waving his right hand, to which the little girl replied briefly before turning into a side corridor. Ingrid grinned at that as they were about to get to the door of the coordinator's office.

"Already trying to make girlfriends, Michael?"

"Why not, Mommy? She was cute."

"Right! You definitely inherited from Mike Crawford: he was one incorrigible skirt chaser."

Ingrid then knocked on the closed door of the development coordinator, whose name and position was engraved on a brass plaque fixed to the door.

"Come in!"

Ingrid opened the door and entered a medium-sized office in which a woman in her late forties sat behind a desk half-covered with various files and papers.

"Hello, Misses Rondstad! I am Ingrid Dows and this is my son Michael."

Sylvia Rondstad nodded her head once and pointed to two chairs set in front of her desk while getting up from her chair to shake hands with Ingrid and with Michael.

"Please, have a seat! So, this is your little angel?"

"Half-angel." corrected Michael, making the development coordinator grin in amusement.

"I stand corrected."

All three sat down before Rondstad spoke to Ingrid.

"So, you wish to enroll your son into school for next fall, but want to find what would be the appropriate level of schooling would best fit him."

"Correct, Misses Rondstad. Know that I already went through a similar dilemma before, when my daughter Nancy, who is another half-angel, was ready to start school. She was then five years-old but ended up starting in Sixth Grade in a school for the gifted near Washington. I suspect that my son will be at least as premature as my daughter: I caught him the other day reading a book in bed. That book happened to be a very technical one on aircraft aerodynamics and, when I asked him about it the next morning, Michael proved to have fully understood it. Know that his most recent past incarnation was that of a man who was a fully qualified engineer."

Rondstad couldn't help throw an awed look at Michael.

"And how old is he now, Misses Dows?"

"Nearly three years and eight months."

"Three years and eight months... My! This is going to be a most interesting case for me. I will make him pass a number of tests first, starting with an I.Q. test, but I agree with you that he will probably end up starting school at mid or high school level, if not higher. First off, I will ask you to fill the top section of this form with the information concerning your son. Then, I will go with him in a test room, so that he could pass his I.Q. exam in peace and quiet."

Ingrid took a minute to fill the required lines on the form handed to her by Rondstad, then got up and kissed her son on his forehead.

"Misses Rondstad will now go with you to a test room. Be relaxed and concentrate on that test while I wait for you in the school's reception lounge."

"I will try not to bust the upper limits of that I.Q. test, Mommy." replied Michael, grinning with confidence and making Rondstad chuckle in amusement.

"Confident, are we? I like that. Come with me, sweetie."

Letting the coordinator go with her son, Ingrid went to the visitors' lounge near the entrance lobby and served herself a cup of coffee from a dispenser machine, then sat down on one of the chairs of the lounge. Sifting through a pile of used magazines stacked on a low table, she found only the usual, insipid collection of old fashion and celebrity magazines one normally found at various professional offices. She finally grabbed a copy of the latest local daily newspaper, the Peninsula Daily News. It actually proved to be an interesting read, as it covered the latest news about the anti-drug campaign led by the federal government against the Mexican drug cartels. That article briefly recalled the role Ingrid had played in that campaign and the way she and her two children had performed huge healing bursts which had basically healed of every sickness and wounds all the American citizens, along with millions of Canadian and Mexican citizens. One page further, she found an article resuming her telephone response to the two guests of that television talk show dealing with the anti-cartel campaign. That article also quoted the opinions of varied citizens of Port Angeles about that television exchange. Ingrid smiled to herself while reading those opinions, which were in the vast majority positive to her. One opinion, which said that she should run for Congress to represent Clallam County, made her chuckle.

"Me, becoming a politician? No way that will ever happen!"

She had time to fully read that newspaper and copies of the Seattle Times and of the New York Times before Sylvia Rondstad came to her while holding Michael by one hand. Rondstad seemed a bit shaken up as she stopped in front of Ingrid's chair.

"I have the results of your son's I.Q. test, Misses Dows. I have to say that, even after being forewarned by you about your son's intellectual level, the results of his test blew me away. I gave him an I.Q. test reserved for older kids and young adults and he still completed it in record time, while registering a score of 193. Your son is a certified genius, Misses Dows."



Beaming with joy and pride, Ingrid pulled her son to her and hugged him, kissing him on both cheeks.

“My sweet Michael! I am so proud of you!”

“Er, in view of his I.Q. test results, I also asked your son to write down a short essay, in order to evaluate his level of writing and communication skills.” said Rondstad. “He again performed extremely well and I evaluate that his writing and communication skills are those of a late high school student...at a minimum. I would thus counsel you to register your son with a pre-college level institution for next fall. For that, I am ready to support any registration request you will make with the results of the tests I had your son pass this morning. However, I would be more cautious about your son’s socializing development level. While he clearly acts like a mature young adult, he still needs to interact with other children to some degree before going to study with physically more mature and grown-up young adults. Despite his powers and nature as a half-angel, or rather because of them, pre-college level teenagers may show some negative reactions to having a young toddler attend classes with them, especially if, as I would suspect, your son would academically crush them. Jealousy may become a real problem here.” Ingrid nodded her head soberly at those words.

“You may be right about that, Misses Rondstad. My older daughter Nancy encountered some of that kind of jealousy and envy at first when she started school. She however eventually dealt with that in a manner that surprised me. Using her superpowers, she morphed her body to look like she was five years older than what she was. I must say that her solution actually worked.”

“And your son could actually do that as well?” asked the disbelieving coordinator.

“Yes, I can!” answered Michael before Ingrid could speak. “I could transform at will, up to that of a grown man, if I wished so.”

That made Ingrid throw him a cautious look.

“Please, don’t go overboard with this, Michael. You may take the appearance of a young adult but, in legal terms, you are still a young child. Getting you to be officially accepted in high school or pre-college institution may prove complicated and require tons of paperwork.”

“Paperwork...always paperwork! I hate paperwork!” shot back Michael with a snicker that made both Ingrid and the coordinator smile in amusement. Ingrid then looked up at Sylvia Rondstad.

"Is there a specific school and grade level which you would recommend for my son, Misses Rondstad?"

Rondstad thought over that for a moment before nodding her head.

"I would counsel you to go to the Lincoln High School, here in Port Angeles, and to ask to enroll your son in Grade Nine. Lincoln High School serves the grades from nine to twelve, has an excellent reputation and a high academic score, plus has a small student population, so your son may find it easier to integrate in it than in a larger school. They will of course want to test your son in order to make their own evaluation but I personally know the development coordinator there and can recommend your son to her."

"That would be most helpful, Misses Rondstad." said Ingrid, both happy and relieved. "I will contact that school this afternoon, after you communicate with their development coordinator."

"They in fact may call you first, after I talk with them, Misses Dows. Your son's case is obviously most unique and the Lincoln High School will probably be most eager to take him as a pupil. I must say that your reputation and that of your children are quite widespread across the whole country and I can't see how anyone would refuse to enroll your cute son."

"YES!" nearly shouted Michael, jumping up and down with excitement. "I'M GOING TO GO TO SCHOOL NEXT YEAR!"

## **CHAPTER 20 – BACK IN CAMP LEJEUNE**

**08:02 (Eastern Standard Time)**

**Monday, June 30, 2008 ‘C’**

**Office of the Commandant, 6<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment  
Camp Lejeune, South Carolina, U.S.A.**



Greta came to a halt at attention in front of the desk of Colonel Chris Walters, the commandant of the 6<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment, and saluted him.

“CAPTAIN GRETA VISBY, REPORTING BACK FOR FIELD DUTY, SIR!”

Walters, getting up from his chair and saluting her back, had a chuckle about the last words she had used.

“Welcome back in Camp Lejeune, Captain Visby. You don’t seem to have enjoyed much that desk job in Stockholm, even though you were back in your country of birth.”

“I hate desk jobs, sir! I fervently hope that you will not stick me behind another desk, here in Camp Lejeune. What I want is to go back to field duties and to command marines, sir.”

“And I will happily grant you your wish, Captain. First off, let me congratulate you on the great job you did in Sweden. You again made the Corps proud by your actions and valor.”

“Thank you, sir! So, where am I going to now, sir?”

“You will take command of Alpha Company of the First Battalion. You will have two months to acquaint yourself with it, then will embark on the nuclear cruiser U.S.S. MONTANA as the afloat marine company aboard that ship for a six months at-sea tour around the Indian Ocean.”

Greta grinned with contentment on hearing that: she liked serving on combat ships and the U.S.S. MONTANA had an impressive reputation as a fighting ship, which often made it the ship of choice when the balloon burst somewhere in that part of the World.

“That is great news, sir. I will be most happy to get back at sea, where a true marine belongs.”

"I thought so, Captain. Go to your company and prepare your marines for that shipboard tour. The way things are around the Indian Ocean right now, there is plenty of potential for possible action, be it in Africa, the Persian Gulf, in South Asia or Southeast Asia. I know that you will be able to handle about any kind of situation over there. You are dismissed, Captain. Good luck with your new command."

"Thank you, sir!" replied Greta, saluting Walters again before pivoting on her heels and marching out of his office.

**14:25 (Eastern Standard Time)**

**Saturday, August 30, 2008 'C'**

**Lead bus of convoy carrying Alpha Company/1<sup>st</sup> Battalion**

**Rolling on the docks of Norfolk Navy Base, Virginia**



"PIER SEVEN! HERE WE ARE, GUYS: THE U.S.S. MONTANA IS WAITING FOR US."

The 38 other marines traveling with Greta in the lead bus of the small convoy which had carried her rifle company from Camp Lejeune to the Norfolk Navy Base gawked in unison through their windows, eyeing the formidable-looking cruiser docked at Pier Seven.

"Wow!" said Corporal Arturo Somoza, the messenger/driver assigned to Greta's company command element. "That thing is huge! It also has a lot of guns."

“And I was told that these guns sank a Russian destroyer in mere minutes during a battle in the Mediterranean in 1996, twelve years ago.” replied Greta while admiring the long, sleek cruiser, with its hull walls sloped inwards in order to deflect radar waves away, making it what was called a ‘stealth ship’. Apart from its four twin gun main turrets, another prominent feature of the MONTANA was its long helicopter hangar and flight deck, which occupied nearly the whole aft portion of the ship. Sitting on the flight deck were four Hiller PELICAN VTOL assault transport aircraft she could recognize despite of the protective canvas tarps covering them. She smiled with satisfaction on seeing those aircraft: together, they would have enough troop capacity to transport her whole rifle company in one shot, landing her marines anywhere at the vertical and allowing her to assault any objective as needed. The design of the Hiller PELICAN was already a good fifteen years-old but it still was the workhorse of both the U.S. Navy, Marine Corps and U.S. Army, being used in a number of variants, including troop transport, anti-submarine warfare and pure cargo aircraft, all capable of takeoff and landing at the vertical. That thought made Greta wonder what kind of aircraft would eventually replace it in American service, around ten to fifteen years from now. Whatever did so would have in her opinion to have the same vertical takeoff and landing capabilities of the PELICAN, as that feature had amply proved to be a crucial one in modern combat. The civilian, unarmed variant of the PELICAN was also in widespread use around the World, as its ability to land anywhere while carrying cargo, passengers and supplies had made it the favorite of small airlines deserving remote regions and isolated islands. Greta had seen many of them while in Alaska and had even taken a ride as a paying passenger in one of them between Nome and Fairbanks. The only small criticism Greta had about the Hiller PELICAN was the limited free height of its cargo cabin, which did not allow for the carrying of full-sized pickup trucks or other vehicles higher than small all-terrain vehicles and compact cars. Still, in the role of assault transport, the PELICAN was still king.

The six buses and two cargo trucks carrying her rifle company and its equipment soon stopped on the quay of Pier Seven, next to the dominating mass of the nuclear cruiser. Grabbing her own military backpack, Greta shouted a short directive at the other marines in her bus before climbing down to the surface of the quay.

“ALRIGHT, MARINES: GRAB YOUR GEAR AND LINE UP ON THE QUAY.”

The marines of her company command and support section promptly obeyed her and got out of the bus, to then grab their backpacks and kit bags stored in the cargo compartments situated under the floor of their bus. While she had kept her own backpack and rifle with her in the bus, Greta did retrieve one item from the cargo compartments that made her marines smile in amusement, with Arturo Somoza making a remark as Greta pulled out what looked like a large, well-padded doll made of thick red leather.

“There is her sex doll!”

The company’s property NCO, Sergeant Tony Rossini, gave him a cautious look at that remark.

“You know that our company commander uses it as a prop for our unarmed combat practices and teaching demonstrations, Arturo...unless you volunteer to take its place as a punching bag and soak up kicks to the nuts.”

“Er, no thank you, Sergeant.”

With the 208 marines of her rifle company following her in single file, Greta soon climbed the gangway linking the quay with the starboard access point of the cruiser, where three U.S. Navy officers were waiting for her. Once up inside the starboard access point, Greta came to attention and saluted the senior-most officer, who wore the rank insignias of a navy captain.

“Captain Greta Visby, Commander of Alpha Company, First Battalion, Sixth Marine Regiment, requesting permission to come aboard with my company, sir!”

The navy captain, a lean man in his late forties, saluted her back before speaking.

“Permission granted, Captain Visby. Welcome aboard the U.S.S. MONTANA. I am Captain Richard Eldrige, in command of this cruiser. The two junior officers with me will guide you and your marines to your quarters. Once installed, you are invited to come to the ship’s conference room, where I will brief you and your officers about our incoming at-sea tour.”

“If I may, sir, I would need some help from your crew to unload and carry aboard the ammunition and field equipment we brought in our two cargo trucks, sir.”

“And we will be happy to help in that, Captain Visby. Know that there is some trouble brewing presently around the Middle East and Persian Gulf areas, so your company of marines could well prove most useful on this cruise.”

"We are here to bring order to troublemakers, sir." replied a smiling Greta, making Eldrige also smile.

"With your reputation, I do not doubt that one second, Captain Visby. Lieutenants Benson and Goodman will now guide you and your marines to your quarters. Are there other female marines in your unit, Captain, so that we could assign proper cabins to them?"

"I have only one other woman in my company, sir: Private Penny Stone."

"Good! Know that the MONTANA personnel quarters were built in accordance with the revised 1992 Navy at-sea quarters standards promulgated by General of the Army Dows. Each of you will thus occupy an individual cabin."

"Excellent, sir!" said Greta, most happy to hear that. "We are ready to follow your two officers."

"Then, I will leave you in the good hands of my two junior officers. Again, welcome aboard the MONTANA."

"Thank you, sir!"

Both of them then exchanged salutes again before Eldrige left the access point, leaving his two lieutenants, one male and one female, facing Greta. The male one, whose rank equaled that of Greta, stepped forward to shake hands with her.

"I am Navy Lieutenant Charles Benson, the ship's intelligence officer. My colleague is Lieutenant Janet Goodman, our aviation detachment commander. I will let her lead your marines to their quarters while I will get a work party from our quartermaster section, so that your ammunition and field gear can be unloaded from your trucks and be brought aboard. We do have quite extensive facilities meant to accommodate up to a reinforced marine company, including large warehouse spaces. They are now all yours, Janet."

The female Navy aviator, a pretty woman in her late twenties who was a good half head shorter than Greta, shook hands with her while smiling to her.

"I am pleased to greet aboard the famous 'Viking Shield Maiden'. You have gained quite a reputation in the fleet with your exploits in Somalia, Afghanistan and now Sweden, Captain. I will now lead you to the marines' quarters section, which is situated in the aft section of the Main Deck. If you will please follow me."

Followed in single file by her marines loaded down with their big backpacks and weapons, Greta walked behind Janet Goodman along the passageways of the cruiser, heading towards the aft end of the big ship.

"In my mission briefing papers, your ship was designated as 'CBGN-1. Isn't the suffix for a nuclear cruiser 'CN'?"

"Yes, but the MONTANA is part of a special breed of warships in history: it is a battlecruiser, which were historically designated with the suffix 'CB'. Being as well a nuclear-propelled ship armed with missiles, it thus makes our ship a CBGN, the first to enter U.S. Navy service in 1995. Three more nuclear battlecruisers, the USS WYOMING, the USS SOUTH DAKOTA and the USS NEW YORK, have since entered service. The main mission of our nuclear battlecruisers is to patrol the high seas while staying close to known trouble spots, ready to react to potential crisis around the World. For that reason, our ship was built with facilities for a reinforced marine rifle company, along with an extensive aviation capability and a very heavy long-range missile armament to supplement its gun battery. Are you and your marines familiar with the Hiller PELICAN assault VTOL transport, Captain?"

"We all are, Lieutenant. I myself flew in combat on PELICANs during war operations in the Caucasus, in Somalia and in Afghanistan. It is an excellent warhorse and my marines like it a lot."

"Good! It has been in service for over fifteen years already but I believe that it has many years of good service left in it."

"I hope that, when it will be replaced, it will be by something with the same kind of capabilities as the PELICAN has. Its VTOL capabilities in particular are extremely useful to us marines in assault missions and its top speed and range are way superior to those of any helicopter."

"Agreed! While I believe that it is only talk around the Pentagon right now, I have heard that a program to get a successor to the Hiller PELICAN family is already being discussed in Washington. However, it is all at the very early stage of discussion."

"I hope that they will consider the Hiller Company for such a future aircraft: Hiller makes some incredible VTOL aircraft. I saw their SKYTRUCK at work in Afghanistan four years ago and it was one impressive beast indeed. It was even piloted at that time by its conceptor and designer, ex-General Ingrid Dows. I was able to meet her then: she is one hell of a fighting woman."



"You can say that again, Captain Visby. She richly earned her title as 'best fighter pilot in the World'. Personally, I am quite jealous of her continued youth. As for her supernatural powers, I can hardly describe how fantastic they are."

"Yeah! What she and her daughter and young son did when they performed those mass healings last November was downright stupendous."

As they progressed along the ship's passageways, Goodman pointed at the various sections they went by, so that Greta could start learning her way around the cruiser. After a few minutes, the female aviator stopped in front of the entrance to a large passageway intersection marked by a prominent sign.

"The marine quarters section, also known to our sailors as 'Marine Country': it is arranged in four platoon areas, one support sub-unit area and one command area, in which your cabin is. As was said before, every marine in your unit will have his own cabin, along with platoon washing facilities and a company assembly area. If you will call up your first rifle platoon, I will show them their designated platoon area."

"No problem!" replied Greta before turning around and shouting out loud. "FIRST PLATOON, COME FORWARD!"

That made Goodman giggle briefly.

"I see that lung power is still an important asset in the U.S. Marine Corps."

"You bet it is, Lieutenant." replied Greta with a smile.

At Greta's shout, Lieutenant Carlos Gonzales stepped forward, followed by the 42 marines of his platoon, and saluted both Greta and Janet Goodman.

"First Rifle Platoon, ready as requested, maam."

"Lieutenant Gonzales, Lieutenant Goodman will now show you the quarters for your platoon. Take the time to unpack and settle in: I will soon come and collect you so that we could go attend a command briefing with Captain Eldridge, the skipper of this cruiser."

Greta actually followed closely Gonzales and Goodman, wanting to check by herself the quality of the marine quarters on this ship. What she saw more than satisfied her. Every junior marine had a small but well-designed individual cabin measuring three meters by two meters and furnished with a bunk bed mounted above a desk and a large locker, while a storage bench seat faced a small flat-screen television hooked on a partition. There was also a small sink unit in a far corner, plus a strong-looking steel

locker for individual weapons which could be locked, something particularly useful for Greta's marines. The more senior marines of the rank of sergeant and above had even larger cabins measuring three meters by four meters, which added a bathroom section to the cabin's facilities. When time came to show its quarters to her second rifle platoon, Janet Goodman looked with curiosity mixed with interest at Private Penny Stone as the female marine marched past her. Stone was tall for a woman, measuring close to six feet, was sturdily built and appeared quite muscular. She also had a pale skin, fiery red hair and green eyes. Janet nodded her head and looked at Greta after Stone had passed by her, speaking to Greta in a near whisper.

"Your female marine certainly looks like a tough character, Captain."

"She definitely is, Lieutenant. Before joining the Marine Corps, she was a professional wrestler and had been trained by her father, himself a wrestler. Add to that a fiery character typical of an Irish girl and some intensive musculation practice and you have a young woman who could beat the shit out of many of your sailors."

Goodman smiled at that, then looked at Greta's muscular arms, exposed by her rolled-up combat shirt sleeves.

"Talking of musculation, you are quite well endowed yourself, Captain. Know that we have a small but well-equipped musculation room, on top of an aerobic fitness room with exercise bikes and rowing machines. They are on the Lower Deck, two decks down from this section, and are adjacent to the ship's gymnasium, which doubles as an assembly area for the embarked marine unit."

"Great! I will certainly use these rooms during our cruise. I fully intend to keep my marines in top shape while at sea. Would Captain Eldridge have something against having a bunch of marines running daily up and down ladders inside his ship?"

"As long as they don't obstruct the crew's movements around the ship, I don't think that he will object to that, Captain."

"Then I will seek his approval for that after our command meeting."

When Greta was finally shown her own cabin by Janet Goodman, she saw that it measured a good four meters by four meters, had a fully equipped private bathroom and had also a proper work desk facing a pair of sofas and a television screen. She shook her head in amusement as she thought about the old-style accommodations her marines would have found a mere fifteen years ago on older ships: basically, three-tiered bunk beds with tiny lockers and no privacy at all. Another huge improvement compared to the

old times was the revised Navy policy about alcohol consumption on American warships. Thanks again to General of the Army Dows, who had strong-armed the Navy into paying more attention to the needs of lowly sailors and marines at sea, the U.S. Navy was no longer a 'dry' navy, and this since 1995. Taking a page out of the navies of allied NATO member nations, limited and controlled alcohol consumption was now allowed in ships' messes, with a tight drinks accounting system kept in order to avoid incidences of drunkenness on warships while at sea. That new policy had at first being bitterly resisted by the more conservative leaders of the Navy but the positive results and the vast improvement in morale that both the new habitability standards and the 'wet' policy had brought, along with the greatly boosted reenlistment rates, had finally silenced the critics. Taking off her backpack, helmet and armored vest, she first secured her rifle and pistol in the weapons locker of her cabin, then quickly unpacked her things, distributing them around the large locker, the under-bed drawers and the bench seat's storage. Once that was done, she went around the platoon areas allotted to her company, collecting her platoon leaders, her second-in-command, First Lieutenant Jiro Watanabe, and her company senior NCO, Master Sergeant Vincent 'Mafioso' Gambino. With her five officers and Gambino following her, Greta then went in search of the ship's command conference room, asking a ship's petty officer for directions on the way. That petty officer proved most helpful, as he took the time to personally lead Greta and her command group to the entrance of the ship's conference room, situated under the waterline of the cruiser's centerline hull, just above the cruiser's Combat Information Center, or C.I.C., which was the heart and brain of the ship's combat capability. Thanking that petty officer, Greta then entered the conference room, which had a long table big enough to sit twenty persons. Inside, she found Lieutenants Benson and Goodman already sitting around the table, along with two other Navy officers. All four of those got up at her entrance, with the most senior one, a female lieutenant commander, coming to her to shake hands with Greta.

"Pleased to meet you, Captain Visby. I am Lieutenant Commander Sharon Phillips, the operations officer of the MONTANA. Also present here are Lieutenants Benson and Goodman, which you already met, and Lieutenant Kate MacDonald, our navigator."

"And I am happy to be aboard with my marines for this operational cruise, Commander Phillips. At what time will this meeting begin?"

"In about ten minutes, Captain Visby, time for the Skipper to take care of a few details."

"Good! May I present in turn to you Lieutenants Jiro Watanabe, Carlos Gonzales, Sydney Vaughn, Thomas Green and Peter Weathers, plus Master Sergeant Vincent Gambino?"

A round of handshakes followed before they all sat around the table. Looking first at a large World map displayed on one wall, Greta then looked at Phillips.

"I suppose that we will be crossing into the Pacific via the Panama Canal and then head towards the Indian Ocean, Commander?"

"Actually, no! Our ship is a trimaran hull design and is too wide to fit in the locks of the Panama Canal. Thus, instead of doing the grand tour around the southern tip of South America to sail into the Pacific, we will head East, towards the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal. That route to the Indian Ocean is actually shorter than even the one West via the Panama Canal. However, we may end up staying for a while inside the Mediterranean once in it."

"Oh? I thought that this patrol was going to concentrate on the area of the Indian Ocean, Commander."

"We though so as well...until new instructions from the Pentagon arrived two days ago. I can't give you all the details about those new instructions, as they are based on highly classified intelligence sources, but I can tell you that some potential and very serious trouble is brewing up around the Middle East. Captain Eldridge will brief us about those new instructions once he will be with us."

Greta exchanged looks with her officers and with Master Sergeant Gambino, then looked back at Phillips.

"I knew that things had been heating up a bit around the Middle East but the medias have barely covered that area lately, treating it as 'situation normal, all fucked up'."

Sharon Phillips smiled in amusement at Greta's use of that most popular expression in the American armed forces, an expression commonly called in short 'SNAFU'.

"The Middle East is certainly a fucked-up region, always has been, but indications are that things there could soon sour pretty quickly. But I will let Captain Eldridge tell you about that."

The group then fell mostly silent, except for some small talk about the ship's facilities, until Captain Eldridge entered the room with a navy commander and three other officers, prompting Sharon Phillips to rise from her seat and shout.

"ROOM!"

Greta, like the others present around the table, also rose to her feet as Phillips saluted Eldridge.

"All present for this meeting, sir."

"Thank you, Commander. Please sit down, all of you."

All the persons in the room, including Eldridge, sat down at the table, with the skipper of the MONTANA then speaking to them in a sober tone.

"Welcome, all of you, to this command meeting. I will start first by saying that what you will hear is classified 'Top Secret' and is based on intelligence materiel of even higher classification that only me and two other officers on this ship are cleared to read. I will however do my best to convey to you the general sense of what that materiel means to us while staying within the 'Top Secret', non-Special Access limits of that information."

Eldridge then nodded once to Charles Benson, who was his intelligence officer. "You may start explaining the new situation to our group, Lieutenant Benson."

"Yes sir!" said Benson before punching a few buttons on the computer keyboard set at his position, making a detailed map of the Eastern Mediterranean and of the Middle East appear on a giant wall display screen. Greta immediately focused on that map, which showed a number of symbols, as Benson spoke up.

"Good afternoon to all. Two days ago, we received from the Pentagon some fresh intelligence and new mission orders concerning the situation in the Middle East. While things there have not flared up yet, signs are that the situation may be about to turn for the worse...the much worse. Basically, religious extremism is again raising its ugly head there, this time mixed in with the threat of nuclear weapons."

Those last words made Greta tense up, along with her officers, as Benson continued.

"As you well known, much of the Pakistani nuclear arsenal was eliminated by us four years ago during our operation in Afghanistan, along with the Pakistani's ability to produce more nuclear weapons. Our operations in Afghanistan also decimated and pushed out of the country both the ruling Taliban and their Al Qaeda protégés. Unfortunately, it now seems that some Pakistani nuclear weapons did survive our airstrikes and were then moved to new, secret storage locations. Additionally, what was

left of the Pakistani military leadership also helped the surviving Taliban and Al Qaeda leaders by transporting them to new, secure locations inside some Middle Eastern countries which support their extreme ideologies. Two of those countries are Saudi Arabia and Syria, while Lebanon, with its quasi-failed state government still incapable of controlling its own territory, is now the unwilling guest of some of those extremists. As for Israel, you may remember that its own nuclear arsenal, along with its Dimona nuclear complex, was destroyed in 1976 by what appeared then to be a supernatural intervention from the entity which General Dows calls 'The One'. Well, the Israeli government has since rebuilt its nuclear arsenal, on top of building a new nuclear reactor and weapons production complex in the Negev Desert. Now, here is the truly sensitive part of this briefing, ladies and gentlemen. Without going into the 'Special Material' details of our new intelligence, we have recent intelligence that says that at least two and maybe three ex-Pakistani nuclear warheads may have been moved to Saudi Arabia and Lebanon and could possibly be controlled by Taliban and Al Qaida extremists bent on destroying Israel. To make matters worse, the Israelis, who possess a very effective intelligence service, may have caught a glimpse of that possible new threat to their country and may decide to strike first. All this means that, on top of the usual tense situation around the Middle East, things could even go nuclear over there, and this with little to no warning."

Greta and her subalterns collectively stiffened and held their breaths on hearing that awful assessment. That was when Captain Eldridge spoke up.

"Now, as bad as this sounds, we unfortunately don't have enough solid intelligence to confirm this scenario or to pinpoint firm locations about those Pakistani nukes. All this is still soft, unproven information. However, we must be ready to react quickly if this new threat is confirmed or materializes. Washington is thus sending us to the Eastern Mediterranean at top speed, where we will stand by to react to any new developments. Exceptionally, and in view of how fast things could possibly degenerate, the Pentagon has given me a wide latitude on how we will be allowed to react to any crisis or new intelligence, so that we could react quickly to any new situation. This basically means that, if the Pentagon directly gives me the green light and if speed of reaction is essential, then we on this ship will be free to act as best we judge, without waiting for Navy headquarters or regional command to sort out a plan of action. This is quite unprecedented, but so is the possible disaster we would face if any nuclear weapon is detonated within the Middle East. I intend for us to sail from Norfolk by

nightfall, once all our supplies are finished being replenished. I also will want you to study in detail what we know about the present situation in the Middle East and to start devising contingency plans so that we could quickly react to any possible scenario. Lieutenant-Commander Phillips will direct that contingency planning with Lieutenant Benson and Captain Visby. Once inside the Mediterranean, I will review your contingency plans and will vet them or, if need be, will ask you to work further on them. That is all for the moment, ladies and gentlemen. I will keep you informed of any new intelligence we may receive from Washington during the coming days. You are now dismissed.”

As the ones present rose from their chairs and started filing out, Greta went to Charles Benson, a question on her lips.

“Lieutenant Benson, would you have some recognition booklets or other guides to the Middle East that I could borrow, so that me and my officers could read up on the region?”

“Uh, I have only a couple of copies of such publications at present, Captain, but I was promised a shipment of booklets on the Middle East for this cruise, along with extra, more detailed maps of the Middle East. We are in fact expecting them today, before our departure. I will inform you as soon as I get them.”

“Thanks!” said Greta, who then joined up with her subalterns and spoke to them as a tight group.

“Okay, people. If the balloon does go up, our role will obviously be to go raid any ground location which is said to shelter one of those Pakistani nukes, either to confirm intel reports about them or to destroy or carry away such nuclear weapons if we find them. Any long-range strike will be a job for the weapons on this ship. For the moment, we will keep this information about possible nukes in the Middle East to ourselves. Do not tell our troops about this until I authorize you to do so. As well, tell your marines to not call home and talk about our deployment. The last thing we want is to have nasty rumors starting to spread at home while we are at sea. Understood?”

“Yes, maam!” was the collective reply.

## **CHAPTER 21 – FIRST DAY AT SCHOOL**

**08:02 (Seattle Time)**

**Tuesday, September 02, 2008 ‘C’**

**Parking lot of the Lincoln High School**

**924 West 9<sup>th</sup> Street, Port Angeles**

**State of Washington, U.S.A.**



Ingrid parked her Pontiac FIREBIRD TRANS AM sports car in a spot near the main entrance of the Lincoln High School, which was situated a mere 3.5 kilometers from her home, then shut down her engine and looked at her son **Michael**, who was sitting in the front passenger seat. According to his official birth certificate, Michael was now four and a half years-old but he presently looked like an extremely handsome eight- or nine-year-old boy, with a body of commensurate size. Before the time had come to start attending school for the first time in his life, Michael had expressed to his mother his anxiety about being possibly laughed at and ridiculed by teenage students because of his toddler's body. He had then proposed to Ingrid that he do the same as what his older sister Nancy had done at around the same age and for the same reasons: to use his celestial powers to morph his body from that of a toddler to that of a late preteen. Ingrid had hesitated at first to allow him to do so but had finally relented after reminding herself how that had worked out for Nancy: actually, pretty well. Like in the case of Nancy, Michael's level of maturity was already that of an adult, thanks to him remembering all of his past incarnations. Michael was in fact probably going to prove to his classmates to be a lot more mature than the teenage boys who were going to throw barbs at him about him needing to be in early primary school rather than in ninth grade. The main worry for Ingrid about all this was that, with his memories of having been both an adult man and an adult woman during his past incarnations, her son could get in trouble by showing premature sexual interest in the teenage girls studying at the Lincoln High School.

"Here we are, Michael. Ready for your big day?"

"I am, Mom."



"Then, let's step out of the car. I will go with you at first to see where you must go for your first class."

Coming out of the car and then linking hands with Michael while they walked to the main entrance, the mother and son duo passed the glass doors of the school and were greeted inside by a school staff member holding a clipboard with a printed list on it. The mature woman smiled to both of them and shook hands with Ingrid while speaking to her.

"Hi! I'm Janet Emerson, the school's executive secretary. Welcome to Lincoln High School."

"Thanks! My name is Ingrid Dows and I am escorting in my son Michael on his first day of school. Where should he go now?"

Emerson's smile faded a bit on hearing their names and looked down at Michael.

"Oh! So, you are our new angel, Michael?"

"Only half-angel, Misses Emerson." replied Michael with a relaxed smile, making the woman nod once before looking back at Ingrid.

"The classroom for the ninth grade is the first door on the left side once you will have turned into the main hallway, Miss Dows. It has been marked by a clearly visible panel. Classes will start in twenty minutes."

"Thank you, madam." replied Ingrid before starting to walk with her son towards the main hallway, visible from the school's reception lobby. Janet Emerson watched the duo go for a moment, then concentrated back on her reception duties as a pair of teenage girls entered the school.

Easily finding the ninth grade's classroom, Ingrid faced her son and gently kissed him on his forehead.

"Here you are, my sweet boy. Have a nice day in school."

"Thanks, Mom."

Ingrid then walked away, returning to the main entrance lobby and leaving Michael in front of the classroom's door. Readjusting first the carrying strap of his school bag, Michael then opened the door and stepped inside a large classroom with twenty neatly lined up school desks. However, only six of those desks were occupied by teenagers, while a woman in her forties stood in front of a big blackboard. The teacher smiled at once to him and grabbed a clipboard and a pen which had been lying on her front desk.

"Hello! Welcome to the ninth-grade class. I am Susan Moore, your English and history teacher and the person in charge of Ninth Grade. May I have your name?"

"Yes, Misses Moore. My name is Michael Dows."

Michael didn't miss the instant but discrete reaction of the woman to his name: she obviously had been told in advance about his special nature. Susan Moore however quickly recovered her composure and checked his name on her list of students before showing him the empty desks.

"Welcome to this classroom, Michael. You may take a seat while we wait for the still missing students for this new school year."

"Thank you, Misses Moore." replied Michael before quickly looking around at the six teenagers sitting at desks. Three of them were girls, with one of them, a very pretty Asian girl, attracting his attention at once. He thus made his way to the empty desk next to that girl and put down his school bag, then sat down and smiled to the girl, who was about fourteen or fifteen.

"Hello! I'm Michael, Michael Dows."

"And I am Li Jiang. You look a bit young to be in ninth grade, no?"

"Even more than you could think, Jiang." replied Michael with a malicious smile. "Appearances can be deceiving. But I will explain that to you later, during the first class break."

"As you wish, Michael."

The next student to show up was a boy of clear Asian ethnicity with light brown skin. He announced himself as 'Manuel Quezon' when Misses Moore asked for his name, making Michael nod his head: the boy was most probably a Filipino-American. He was quickly followed by a big black teenage boy named Thomas King, then by a pretty girl named Natalie Wood and by another girl named Kimi Oshiwa, whose beauty made Michael smile in appreciation. The two last students to show up were boys, one named Jose Bautista, who had obvious Latino looks, the other a Chinese-American named John Lee. With her class pupils now all present, Susan Moore put down her clipboard and pen and addressed her thirteen pupils.

"Welcome again to the Lincoln High School, boys and girls. Since this is the first day of the school year, there won't be formal classes today. Instead, you will get to become familiar with the layout of the school and will also meet with your various teachers assigned to ninth grade. The Lincoln High School is dedicated to providing

high quality, inclusive education between grades nine and twelve and to prepare its pupils for university-level education. We will start this day by you presenting yourselves in turn to your classmates. I will now start naming you in alphabetical order, following which you will then come forward and face the class to give us a quick presentation about yourselves. Jose Bautista, you're first!"

The Latino boy got up from his school desk and walked to the front of the class, then faced his classmates before starting to speak in a good English tainted with a Mexican accent.

"Hello! My name is Jose Bautista and I came from Mexico with my family nine years ago, when I was six years-old. I have since become an American citizen and I hope to one day become a musician and singer. I particularly like to play the guitar. Well, that's about it about me."

"Good presentation, Jose. Next will be David Cohen."

Cohen, a tall and fit boy with curly black hair, quickly came to the front of the classroom and smiled to his classmate.

"Shalom to all! My name is David Cohen and I am fifteen. I love cooking and have been learning from my mother, who is an expert baker and pastry chef. My dream is to become a pastry chef and to one day open my own bakery shop here in Port Angeles. I also like to play the violin and the bass."

As Cohen went back to his desk, Moore smiled to Michael.

"I believe that it is your turn, Michael."

"Yes, Misses Moore." replied Michael while getting up from his chair. As he walked to the front of the class, he reminded himself of the counsels Ingrid had given him about staying modest and not flaunt his nature as a half-Celestial. He thus kept his presentation short and unpretentious.

"Hello to all of you. My name is Michael Dows and I was born here, in Port Angeles. My mother works at the Hiller Corporation aircraft production plant, situated here at the airport. I am fascinated by airplanes and hope one day to become an aeronautical engineer, like my mother."

To his relief and that of Misses Moore, none of the other students connected him with his true nature and past public exploits, so he was able to return to his desk without having created a sensation. A few minutes later, the Asian girl who had caught his eyes on him entering the classroom took her turn to present herself, listened religiously to by Michael. One reason that attracted him to her was that Li Jiang bore a striking resemblance with

the Chinese slave girl Borscha, his past incarnation as a Siberian hunter, trapper and fisherman from the Third Century, had bought and then genuinely fell in love with. That girl, named Lu, had not been much older than what Jiang was now and had given Borscha three children, returning fully his love for her. Borscha had actually died defending Lu and their children from a group of marauders.

“Good morning to you all! My name is Li Jiang and I am fourteen years-old. I was born here in the United States but my parents came from Taiwan sixteen years ago. They now operate a small restaurant here in Port Angeles. My tastes are in classical music, painting and arts in general and I love creating things. I would like to one day become a professional artist, but I don’t know yet in what specialty. Well, that’s it for the moment.”

Michael had to restrain himself not to applaud as she walked back to her desk but gave her a big smile as she sat back, speaking to her in a whisper.

“Would you mind if we ate lunch together at noon, Jiang?”

She showed a mix of amusement and surprise at his question and replied to him in a whisper.

“Uh, okay.”

“Swell!”

As they listened to the other classmates presenting themselves in front of the class, Jiang wondered about the fact that a boy of no more than ten could be attracted to a teenage girl like herself. The other girls in the school were probably going to laugh at her for having lunch with a preteen. On the other hand, she did find this Michael Dows to be extremely handsome as a boy, even though he was on the young side for her. As she listened on to the presentations, Jiang couldn’t help rehash the boy’s name in her mind: she had heard it before in recent news but it had been connected to that of a small toddler boy of about four years of age, so this Michael Dows clearly could not be the same boy. She finally put that on simple coincidence and kept listening to her classmates.

Once the last student in the class had presented herself, Susan Moore distributed copies of their school class schedules, which indicated the matter and teacher they would attend and at which times and locations they would do so. Just before the school’s bell rang to announce the first class break at 09:40, Moore announced that the next class was going to be used to tour the school, so that the

students could get familiar with its layout and its staff. While Michael and Jiang got up from their chairs, they stayed inside the classroom, like many other students, while a few went to the washrooms for a toilet break. When the bell rang again, five minutes later, their teacher led them out in the hallway and guided them around the school, pointing out to her pupils the various classrooms, offices, laboratories and students' facilities, including the large cafeteria and the gymnasium. In the process, they got to meet briefly with the various teachers who would give them classes in mathematics, physics, biology, chemistry, physical education, arts and religion. The students met the teacher for that last subject matter in his office, as there was no specific classroom dedicated to the teaching of religion. Michael, who had not selected religion as an elective matter, showed little interest in Pastor Malcolm Brown, an Evangelical minister, but the reverse was not the same, as Brown locked his eyes on Michael on seeing him file in into his office with the other ninth grade students. He was still fixing Michael when Susan Moore presented him to her students.

"Boys and girls, this is Pastor Malcolm Brown, the school's religion teacher. I know that not all of you selected religious studies as an elective, but he will be available to all if you ever need spiritual counseling one day. He will also bless the various school-wide activities during the year."

Once Moore was finished speaking, Brown approached her and whispered into her ear while still looking at Michael, making Moore nod her head once. Li Jiang, who was an intelligent and perceptive girl, was intrigued by that, like a few of the other students, while Michael stayed impassive and simply stared back at Brown. As Susan Moore led her students out to go visit the school's gymnasium, Jiang couldn't help ask Michael about that.

"Why was Pastor Brown staring at you like that, Michael? Did you meet him before?"

"Today was the first day that I saw him, Jiang. He probably recognized me from the televised news back in last November. Let's say that our views about religion most probably don't concord."

Jiang, finally understanding who Michael was, froze and looked at him with big eyes, involuntarily raising her voice as she exclaimed her surprise.

"You're the small angel who performed mass healings in Washington and San Francisco in November?"

Michael then wished that he would have avoided that but it was now too late: the whole class was now staring at him with big eyes.

*'Damn! Here we go!'* he thought before replying to her in a calm, soft voice. "Yes, I am, Jiang. I was hoping to keep discrete about this but I guess that the cat is now out of the bag."

"I...I'm sorry, Michael. I should not have said that out loud."

"That's alright, Jiang. It would have blown in the open soon enough anyway, I guess."

Michael then faced the rest of his classmates and spoke quietly to them.

"I am sorry for having hidden this to you, my friends. I only wished to go to school like any normal kid and to stay discrete about my nature as a half-Human, half-Celestial. Yes, I have many superpowers but I don't intend to show them off or to brag about them. I came here simply to study and to socialize with other kids while growing up here in Port Angeles. I would be most thankful to you if you would still treat me like any other boy in this school."

"Why did you want to go to a school to study at all? Do you really need to attend school, with the powers you have?" asked Jennifer Hatfield, a fifteen-year-old blonde, making Michael shake his head.

"Powers do not equate with knowledge, Jennifer. I do already have a vast sum of knowledge, thanks to the souvenirs from my past incarnations, but I am somewhat lacking in modern knowledge, like contemporary biology and chemistry, and I also wished to learn to socialize with other American kids."

Susan Moore, seeing the impact that this could bring to her class, then took a decision and spoke to her students in a sober tone.

"Boys and girls, I find Michael's request to be most reasonable and sensible. After visiting the gymnasium, we will return to our classroom to digest all this in a calm manner. Michael, would you be ready to answer the questions of your classmates and to tell them more about you, once in the privacy of our classroom?"

Michael visibly sighed but still nodded his head.

"I would! However, don't expect me to demonstrate some of my powers to you. I vowed not to use them around school, unless someone gets into some kind of trouble and needs help."

The group nodded to that, bringing relief to him and to Susan Moore.

## **CHAPTER 22 – A TOUGH SET OF REQUIREMENTS**



**10:19 (Seattle Time)**

**Thursday, September 04, 2008 ‘C’**

**Head office, Boeing Airplane Company**

**Seattle, State of Washington**

**U.S.A.**

Harold Haynes, the Chief Executive Officer and President of the Boeing Airplane Company, was a bit surprised to see that the military visitor he was expecting was showing up in a civilian suit, rather than in uniform. Nonetheless, he came forward to shake hands with him after his visitor was introduced by his secretary into his executive office.

“Major General Harding? I am Harold Haynes, CEO and President of the Boeing Airplane Company. As you requested in your call of yesterday, I have my head aircraft designer, Daniel Jacobs, here with me for this meeting.”

“Pleased to meet you.” replied John Harding while pressing Haynes’ hand. He then exchanged a handshake with Daniel Jacobs before looking back at Haynes.

"Pardon me if I came in civilian clothes rather than in uniform, but the business I wanted to discuss with you concerns a classified aircraft program which the Pentagon wants to stay discrete about. Coming in my Air Force uniform would have inevitably attracted some attention."

"I understand, General Harding. Let's move to my coffee corner, so that we could discuss more at ease."

"With pleasure."

Once the three men were sitting around the low round table in one corner of Haynes' vast office, the latter looked at Harding with curiosity.

"So, what is it that prompts the Pentagon to act in such a discrete manner, General?"

"A classified program that was just decided on by the Pentagon to initiate the design and eventual production of a new military transport aircraft meant to replace in service the highly successful Hiller PELICAN, which is now approaching its sixteenth year in service and has fought in the Caucasus, in Somalia and in Afghanistan."

The mention of the Hiller PELICAN made Haynes' smile fade on his face. His company had competed against Hiller when the Marine Corps had requested a VTOL tactical transport able to operate from aircraft carriers and from other Navy ships. Unfortunately, at least for Boeing, Haynes' company's design had been simply crushed by the Hiller design, which had then become the Hiller PELICAN, with 226 of them then procured by the Marine Corps and the Navy, on top of the over 300 other PELICANs of the civilian variant which now served all around the World. That had been a most juicy contract which Boeing had seen slip between its fingers. He was about to say something when Harding added something while opening his locked attaché case.

"Oh, I forgot to say that this classified program, named the 'Tri-Service Tactical Assault Transport', or T.S.T.A.T. in short, will not only replace eventually the PELICANs used by the Navy and Marine Corps but will also replace most of the medium and heavy transport helicopters used by the Army and the Air Force. We are thus looking at a potential of upwards of a thousand or more aircraft to be produced in multiple variants." Haynes, like his chief designer, was left with his mouth opened wide on hearing that number.

"A thousand plus aircraft to be produced? For all of our military services? What prompted such a major request from the Pentagon, General?"



Harding appeared most sober when he answered Haynes.

“Basically, the late realization that we had been wrong about many operational and strategic assumptions concerning our required capacity for air tactical transport, and this for many years already. Let me explain. At first, when the Navy and Marine Corps stated their needs for a heavy VTOL armed transport able to operate from ships, a statement that eventually led to the acquisition in service of the Hiller PELICAN, neither the Army nor the Air Force showed interest in the PELICAN, reasoning that they already had a large paratrooper force in service, along with hundreds of tactical transport aircraft ready to carry those paratroopers around the World and to deliver them via paradrop on the battlefield. Well, our campaign against Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, nearly five years ago, showed us the error of our ways. Basically, the Navy and Marine Corps PELICANS, plus the late minute addition of a single, rented Hiller SKYTRUCK, proved ideal in that theater by bringing in at the vertical troops, supplies and vehicles, and this anywhere and in every possible conditions. In contrast, our Air Force transport aircraft, along with our Army transport helicopters, proved insufficient or even inadequate to fill the tactical requirements of our Army troops in Afghanistan. Most of our Air Force aircraft were unable to land vertically, forcing our troops to use existing airports, which were often at quite a distance from their intended destinations, while our helicopters proved to have too limited a payload capacity and were also of too short a range to properly cover the whole country. The Afghanistan campaign also revealed something that the Army and the Pentagon had been in denial about for decades: that parachuting a mass of men on the battlefield has become tantamount to a suicide operation due to the existence of modern air defense surface-to-air missile systems. It also showed us that, even if those paratroopers arrived intact on the ground, they were afterwards no more than a slow, foot-slogging force with inadequate heavy firepower and a very limited capacity to carry its own supplies. It was a hard pill to swallow for our paratroop leaders but the sad truth is that the days of mass parachute drops are over, unless you are ready to accept the possibility of a mass butchery in the air if we tried a large paradrop operation against a top tier opponent.”

Haynes and Jacobs exchanged shocked looks before the former looked back at Harding.

“Then, you could simply procure more PELICANs and SKYTRUCKs, or their equivalent, in order to adequately service our airborne units, no?”

"In theory, yes, but there is one big problem with that: the PELICAN does not have an intercontinental range. It is perfect as a tactical transport but it is no strategic transport. As for the SKYTRUCK, it has lots of range but it is a very large aircraft, which would make it very vulnerable to ground fire and missile fire. We thus need something else, something even more performant than the PELICAN while being as tactically agile and compact as it is. After some very hot debates at the Pentagon, we have arrived at a consensus about the desired capabilities of such a PELICAN replacement aircraft. Here is a copy of that list of capabilities requirements. It is yours to keep, so that you could study it and determine if your company would be interested in competing in this program. If you do decide to compete, then you will need to be ready to share production with other companies, which would then pay you a license to produce your design. In view of the numbers required and of the urgency of this program, we just can't allow ourselves to wait ten or more years before receiving an adequate number of aircraft. This clause, by the way, will apply to all the companies which will compete on this program."

"And how many companies have indicated to date that they want to compete, General?" asked Jacobs, making Harding shake his head.

"None to date, for the good reason that I have barely started my tour of American aircraft manufacturers and that no company has had time yet to decide if they wanted to compete or not in this program."

"And what companies have you listed on your tour, General?" asked Haynes.

"You are only the second company I have visited to date, Mister Haynes, with Sikorsky being the first one I visited. Next, I will pay visits in turn to Hiller, Lockheed, Bell-Textron, Convair, Grumman, Northrop and Douglas. To be frank, I expect most of those companies to pass on this program, as our list of requirements is a very demanding one."

Taking the document handed to him by Harding, Haynes then started reading it, with Jacobs reading it over his shoulder. Jacobs, like Haynes, nearly choked after only a few seconds of reading.

"A payload capacity of twenty tons or more? Able to fit in an aircraft carrier's hangar? Subsonic, with intercontinental range? Fully VTOL-capable? But these requirements are in my opinion about impossible to fulfill, General."

"They are indeed very tough, but that is the kind of finished product we need for our troops, Mister Haynes. The Pentagon is ready to wait for another three weeks, to see who will take this challenge, thus don't give up too quickly about participating or not

in this program. If you decide to participate, then the Pentagon would be ready to finance at least partly the design and development of your prototype. Well, with this said, I believe that I must go and continue on my tour of our aircraft manufacturers.”

The three men got up and exchanged handshakes before Harding left. Haynes and Jacobs then reread carefully the list of requirements for the Tri-Service Tactical Assault Transport program. Jacobs, a very competent engineer and aircraft designer, slowly shook his head at the end of his lecture.

“Christ! This is a nearly impossible project. I suspect that even Ingrid Dows, at Hiller, will find this a hard pill to swallow.”

### **13:34 (Seattle Time)**

**Ingrid’s office, design department**

**Hiller aircraft production plant, William R. Fairchild International Airport**

**Port Angeles, State of Washington**

“Welcome to Hiller, General Harding. What can we do for you today?” asked Ingrid while shaking Harding’s hand.

“A miracle, General.” replied Harding while making a malicious smile. Ingrid then smiled as well, getting into his game.

“Aah, a miracle... We at Hiller normally ask for an extra week to do one.” Both of them laughed briefly before Ingrid pointed to three sofas surrounding a low coffee table.

“Please, let’s sit, so that we could be comfortable while discussing.” Once both of them were sitting, Ingrid flashed a warm smile to Harding, who couldn’t help think how beautiful and youthful-looking she was, despite her age of 82.

“So, to what do I owe your visit, General Harding?”

“To a new, classified acquisition project decided on by the Pentagon, General.”

“Please, simply call me ‘Ingrid’. May I call you ‘John’?”

“Absolutely, Ingrid. First off, I must tell you that this acquisition project, called ‘T.S.T.A.T.’, for Tri-Service Tactical Assault Transport, is being offered to all our major aircraft manufacturers, so that they all can have a fair shot at deciding if they want to compete in it. I must also tell you that the list of requirements for this project is quite severe: you could find it prohibitively difficult to achieve its goals.”

Instead of looking discouraged, Ingrid smiled even more widely to Harding.

“Try me, John!”

“Very well, Ingrid. Here is a copy of the list of requirements for this new project. It is yours to keep, by the way.”

“Thanks!”

As Ingrid started reading the short document, Harding basically repeated to her what he had said to Haynes at the Boeing Company and to Eugene Buckley at Sikorsky Helicopters. Ingrid listened to him while reading, then nodded her head when he was finished.

“I am happy that the Pentagon has finally seen the light about this business of paradrop operations after all these years. The time for such operations is long gone, in view of the ever-expanding surface-to-air missile defenses which exist around the World. So, what will happen to our airborne premier units, the 82<sup>nd</sup> and the 101<sup>st</sup> Divisions?”

“That is still being debated at the Pentagon, quite hotly I must add. The prevailing idea is to turn them into airmobile units, with adequate allotments of heavy support weapons and transport vehicles for them. However, all this will come to naught if we can't produce a suitable VTOL transport aircraft for them. As you must realize, if such an aircraft can be designed and built, then we will need well over a thousand of them...quickly. This means that production will have to be shared between a number of aircraft manufacturers, with licensing agreements to go with it. In the case of Hiller, I know that you already have your hands full with producing your SKYTRUCK VTOL transport, A-24 SHARK attack aircraft and TRAN-SONIC airliner, so producing any plane design you could come up with will most probably mean splitting the effort between you and at least two other manufacturers.”

Ingrid's expression was sober as she nodded her head to that.

“I fully realize that, John, and would have nothing against that. We at Hiller are ambitious but not greedy and I personally realize that winning contracts for our recent new planes have seriously hurt a number of our competitors, notably Sikorsky and Bell-Textron. Those are two good companies worth keeping around and I would be most happy to share production with them.”

Harding himself nodded, pleased to hear that from her.

“Good! So, do you think that Hiller would be willing to compete in this program?”

“I do!”

She then surprised Harding by getting up from her sofa while speaking to him.

"Before we discuss this further, I would like to show you something, John. Could you please follow me."

"Uh, sure!"

Getting up as well from his sofa, an intrigued Harding followed Ingrid out of her office, then crossed the large design drafting section and entered an elevator cabin with her. As the cabin started going down, Ingrid spoke to him in a calm voice.

"We are now going to my prototype construction hall: I have something there to show you."

Realizing that she would probably not reveal in advance what he was going to see, Harding didn't ask her about it and kept silent as they exited the elevator cabin and walked down a short hallway before passing a steel door equipped with a security access pass system. Ingrid used a magnetic card she wore from a chain around her neck and unlocked the door, then opened it for Harding.

"Our more recent prototype projects pushed us into boosting the security around our prototype workshop: industrial espionage has become such a widespread pest."

"I believe you on that, Ingrid."

Both of them then stepped inside a large hall full of aircraft construction jigs, tools and aircraft parts and where the noise of working tools was nearly constant. Harding froze on the spot on seeing a large metallic mass occupying the center of the workshop's floor space.

"What is this, Ingrid? It looks like one of your PELICANs but in a bit bigger size."

"You are close to the truth, John. This is the prototype for a project I have been working on for over two years already. It is now about 65 percent complete but is still missing its engines. This is the prototype of the Hiller STORK, which I designed as a worthy successor to my PELICAN VTOL medium transport aircraft. Like the PELICAN, the STORK will be made in many variants, depending on the demands for these variants. This initial prototype is being built as a basic, unarmed carrier-borne transport variant, but I already have drawn design plans for an armed tactical assault transport, the STORMER, and for a variant meant for the role of shipborne maritime patrol and anti-submarine aircraft, to be called the SEAGULL. Would you like to tour it, John?"

"Hell, yeah!" could only answer Harding, whose mind was now working in overdrive. As he closely followed Ingrid, who was now walking towards the unfinished

prototype, Harding asked her a question he had to ask, in view of the stakes in the T.S.T.A.T. project.

“Please excuse me for asking this, Ingrid, but how could you end up designing and producing such a new aircraft if you didn’t know beforehand about our T.S.T.A.T. project? This may attract a lot of suspicious questions at the Pentagon.”

Ingrid scoffed at those words while continuing to walk.

“You can tell your bosses at the Pentagon that they should get to know me better than this, John. Did they believe that, after I designed such successful VTOL transport aircraft as my PELICAN and SKYTRUCK, I would not eventually design new aircraft in order to eventually succeed them on our production lines at Hiller? If anything, the near-debacle I witnessed in Afghanistan concerning our tactical air transport capability pushed me into thinking about what kind of new aircraft could be designed to correct that situation. My PELICAN is still an excellent tactical assault transport aircraft but, unfortunately, only the Navy and the Marine Corps adopted it when I started producing it. The Air Force insisted that its present fleet of medium and heavy cargo aircraft was sufficient for our needs. However, our Afghanistan campaign quickly blew big holes into that assumption. In turn, the Army deferred to the Air Force and stuck to its fleet of transport helicopters and to using the Air Force cargo planes to transport its paratroopers. Yes, they did buy a number of my new SKYTRUCK after we withdrew from Afghanistan, but the SKYTRUCK is a big, unarmed aircraft and is too vulnerable to enemy ground fire to properly supplement my PELICAN on the battlefield. So, I decided to design by myself the STORK as a successor to the PELICAN, and this some four years ago. At first, I kept my work strictly to the level of private musings but, with the approval of Jeff Hiller, I actively started working on the STORK design some two years ago. We started building this prototype at a slow rate some five months ago and should complete it in about two months. The STORK will actually be meant to serve as much or more as a civilian transport than as a military aircraft.”

Ingrid stopped once some three meters to one side of the STORK prototype and started describing it to Harding, who could only listen and stare in fascination at the aircraft while she spoke.

“As you can see, the STORK design is following the same basic formula as all the VTOL machines produced to date by Hiller under my supervision. It is a pure flying wing design shaped like an aircraft wing section and with engines mounted on pivot points on two sides. In the case of the STORK, I adopted a supercritical wing profile

section in order to obtain as high a subsonic top speed for it as possible. I also rearranged its internal configuration compared to my PELICAN, in order to simplify its construction and to allow larger payloads to be carried inside it. It will be powered by two large high-bypass turbofan engines instead of by the four turboshaft engines and shrouded propellers used in my previous VTOL designs. However, it will be as agile and flexible as my PELICAN and will have as well a much longer range than my PELICAN, on top of being faster. Its military variants will be fitted with a probe-and-drogue air refueling system, something which will allow it to achieve trans-Pacific range.”

“What about its payload capacity, Ingrid?” asked Harding, his heart beating faster.

“Let me show you.” simply said Ingrid before starting to climb a ramp attached to one side of the prototype and lowered to the ground. Harding followed her up the ramp, to end inside the unfinished prototype. He now stood in a long, large and high-ceiling cargo hold oriented along the aircraft centerline. Ingrid then spoke further while sweeping one hand around.

“You are now in the cargo hold of the STORK. Its internal dimensions are thirteen meters-long, six meters-wide and three meters-high at its highest point, large enough to accommodate most of the vehicles and weapons systems in the Army’s inventory. However, its maximum payload capacity of thirty metric tons will not allow it to carry a main battle tank. That last task is more suited to my SKYTRUCK.”

Harding looked at her with a mix of disbelief and shock.

“A maximum payload of thirty tons? And it can land and take off at the vertical with such a heavy load?”

“Of course! It was designed for just that. The range will diminish according to how heavy its actual payload will be but my STORK should be able to cover over 6,500 kilometers while carrying twenty tons. If it uses air refueling, then it will be able to deploy such a payload across intercontinental distances while landing and delivering it at the vertical. Once folded up, my STORK will be able to fit inside an aircraft carrier’s hangar and on aircraft elevators, like my PELICAN can. The Marine Corps and the Navy should love my STORK.”

Harding then looked at Ingrid with undisguised admiration and wonder.

“Ingrid, you are true magician when it comes to aircraft design. This STORK design of yours is simply incredible.”

“Thanks! Before you go, I will give you a copy on USB drive of my initial design for the STORK, so that you could show it to the service chiefs at the Pentagon. However, this design is classified as a Hiller Corporation confidential document. It is not to be shown or even discussed with representatives or lobbyists from other aircraft manufacturing companies. As well, it is not to be discussed or shown to politicians in the Congress: that place is like a sieve in terms of confidentiality.”

“I will keep this strictly to the service chiefs, Ingrid. You have my word on this.”

“Excellent! I should be able to start flight-testing this prototype in about three months or earlier and I will keep you informed about the results. Do you have a business card with a phone number where I can join you?”

“Of course!” said Harding while fishing for his wallet. “It also has my unclassified email address at the Pentagon on it. Just alert me via email or telephone and I will then come here at a run. God, I never imagined that I would find something like this here today.”

“Welcome to the Hiller Miracle Factory, John.” replied a smiling Ingrid.



## CHAPTER 23 – A NEW MIDDLE EAST SHIT PIT



19:49 (GMT)

Sunday, September 07, 2008 'C'

Weightlifting room, Lower Deck, cruiser U.S.S. MONTANA

230 nautical miles west of the Strait of Gibraltar

Atlantic Ocean

**Greta Visby** was exercising hard and sweating in the well-equipped weightlifting room of the U.S.S. MONTANA, pumping up and down a pair of small dumbbells, when a navy junior officer came to her, apparently in a hurry.

“Maam, the skipper has called an urgent command meeting in the C.I.C.’s conference room, to be started in twenty minutes.”

“Twenty minutes?! Hell, I better hurry up then. Tell Captain Eldridge that I will be there in fifteen minutes.”

“Yes maam!”



Putting back her pair of dumbbells on their support rack, Greta then nearly ran to the women’s locker room, to the disappointment of the men who had been discreetly admiring her body while exercising. Once in the locker room, Greta quickly undressed, then went to one of the shower stalls, where she stepped under a lukewarm water spray. She however stayed there only for a few seconds, just enough to wash off the worst of the sweat covering her body, then summarily dried herself with her towel and returned to her locker, where she put back on her combat uniform. Less than six minutes after entering the female locker room, Greta was running out of the gymnasium and heading forward towards the command conference room, her gym bag held by one hand. She actually entered the conference room fourteen minutes after being advised that she was being summoned. There, she found most of the senior officers of the cruiser already sitting around the long table and waiting for Captain Eldridge. Sitting next to Charles Benson, she whispered a question to him.

“What’s up? Did we receive some new intelligence about the situation in the Middle East?”

“Uh, sort of.” answered the young intelligence officer. “We still have received precious little from Washington but we just saw some alarming flash news on open television news channels.”

“Television news channels?” said a surprised Greta. Before Benson could reply to that, Captain Eldridge entered the room, prompting those present to quickly get up at attention. Eldridge went to the seat reserved for him and looked around the table, checking who was in.

"At ease, people! Please sit down."

Once they were all sitting, Eldridge spoke in a calm but most sober tone to the assembled officers.

"I called this urgent command meeting on the strength of some very alarming televised news reports out of Lebanon. Basically, only one hour ago, BBC News, CNN and the French TF1 channels simultaneously started broadcasting images and reports showing that some kind of coup was being conducted in Lebanon against the government there. Those reports also showed huge crowds of agitated, pro-Islamic rioters massed around the gates of our embassy in Beirut. One alarming thing about those protesters was that the Lebanese soldiers ordinarily posted at the embassy gates were conspicuously absent, having either being pulled away or having fled their posts. A number of Islamist speakers spouting anti-American slogans were present in front of the gates and were encouraging the crowd to attack the embassy and capture or kill our embassy staff. Lieutenant Benson, while reviewing the tapes of those televised reports, did identify one of those Islamist speakers as being a known ex-member of the Taliban leadership who escaped capture in Afghanistan some five years ago. Also recognized on one of those reports was a Saudi cleric who is known to have condoned the actions of Al Qaeda against us and who advocates for the destruction of Israel. In turn, a number of armed Islamic militiamen were also present, protecting those speakers and encouraging the crowd into attacking our embassy. As for the Lebanese government, some furious fighting is being reported around the presidential palace and at a number of Lebanese government facilities. To resume all this, it seems that the Lebanese government is in danger of falling under a popular uprising led by known Islamist extremists, ex-Taliban members and even some Saudi clerics. Our embassy in Beirut is apparently being besieged by crowds of rioters and in imminent danger of being assaulted."

"And what is Washington saying about this, sir?" asked Lieutenant-Commander Patrick Russel, the ship's weapons officer. Eldridge made a sour expression that said a lot to Greta.

"Up to now, nothing! It seems that Washington has been taken completely by surprise by this. However, on the strength of those televised reports, I have ordered that this ship go to maximum speed and rush towards the Eastern Mediterranean, so that we could quickly be in position to act if need be."

Greta nodded her head to that, pleased by the sense of initiative demonstrated by Eldridge: she had seen too many senior officers sit and do nothing when faced with a developing situation, on the excuse that they had not received instructions or directives from the upper command echelons. Eldridge then looked directly at Greta while pointing an index at her.

“Captain Visby, I want us to be ready to react as quickly as possible to any future attack against our embassy in Beirut, including by being prepared to conduct an air assault and evacuation operation in Lebanon. While we are still waiting for directives from Washington about this situation, you are to prepare quickly your marines for such an airborne operation and to be on standby for launch at a moment’s notice. Be prepared to face both rioters and armed Islamic extremists while evacuating our embassy personnel and their dependents from Beirut.”

“I will include riot munitions in my troops’ allotment of ammunition, sir.”

“Good! Lieutenant Goodman, have four PELICAN A assault transport fueled up and armed for a combat mission as quickly as possible, then move them to our open flight deck, ready for quick launch. Lieutenant Benson, issue detailed maps of Beirut and of Lebanon to our marines and to our aviators. Commander Russel, start compiling a list of possible targets in and around Beirut for our long-range bombardment missiles. I will review that list as soon as it will be ready. In the meantime, I will advise the Pentagon that we are rushing eastward in order to be ready to react to any situation in and around Lebanon. That’s it, people. Let’s get moving!”

The officers around the table then quickly got up on their feet and filed out of the conference room. On her way out, Greta was accosted by Captain Eldridge, who spoke to her in a low voice.

“Captain Visby, you have plenty of combat experience against armed Islamic extremists. I expect you to use your best judgment once in Beirut in order to gauge the true intentions of those assholes and to be ready to counter their moves. Feel free to fully use your personal initiative in this matter: I will in turn back you to the fullest of my authority.”

“Thank you, sir! Me and my marines will do our best to protect our citizens in Lebanon.”

“I know you will, Captain.”

On that, Eldridge walked out of the conference room, leaving Greta free to run back to the quarters area of her marine company, where she dropped off her gym bag in her cabin before switching on the P.A. system dedicated to this section of the ship.

“Attention, all marines. I want the platoon leaders and their senior NCOs to come to my cabin at the double for an urgent orders group. In the meantime, all the marines are to get ready for possible combat operations. The marines quartermaster section is to prepare to distribute a full load of ammunition and two days of field rations to our marines and will include riot control rifle grenades on top of dual-purpose rifle grenades as part of the ammunition allotment. That’s all for the moment. Let’s get moving, marines.”

With that said, Greta then went to prepare her own individual combat kit, adding to it her ankle holster for her compact 9 mm pistol and another ankle holster holding a commando knife and two spare magazines for her 9 mm pistol. Thinking about it for a second, she then replaced her commando knife with the spring-loaded Russian Spetsnaz projecting knife she had bought while in Somalia, years ago, reasoning that it could possibly come handy in Beirut.

Her platoon leaders and their senior sergeants, plus Master Sergeant Vincent ‘Mafioso’ Gambino, were soon assembled in her cabin, where she repeated the information given to her by Captain Eldridge, along with his orders to be prepared for a sudden combat operation. She then looked around soberly at her subalterns.

“People, this may result in either no action being taken on our part or in a flash order to fly out for combat operations in Beirut. We will soon get maps of Beirut and Lebanon from the intelligence section; at which time we will study them in order to prepare for any possibility. In the meantime, get our marines to the quartermaster’s section, so that they could get their ammunition and field rations. Make sure that our marines have their gas masks and that those are operational: we may need them once in Beirut. I want you back here in two hours, with everybody ready to fly off at a moment’s notice. This may well turn into the proverbial ‘hurry up and wait’ but we must be ready for anything. Dismissed!”

As her subalterns dispersed to go alert their marines, Greta ran to the quartermaster’s section dedicated to her marine force, where she grabbed some ammunition and field rations before returning to her cabin, where she loaded her rifle

and pistol magazines and pocketed rifle grenades and hand grenades in the various pockets of her armored vest. She was just finished doing that when a Navy petty officer leading a group of sailors carrying large, flat and heavy boxes presented himself to her, saluting her.

“Captain, we are bringing you the maps of Beirut and Lebanon that Lieutenant Benson assigned to your marines. Where do you want them?”

“Let’s bring them to my company’s operations center, P.O.. I will lead you there.”

Greta then left her cabin and walked a mere fourteen meters before arriving at the compartment used as her marine command post, where she pointed to the large map table occupying the center of the room.

“You may drop your boxes of maps on that table, P.O. Thanks for bringing them to me.”

“My pleasure, maam! Alright, you heard her, men: drop your boxes on that table over there, then return to your other duties.”

Once the sailors were gone, Greta opened the map boxes to see what they contained and was quickly satisfied by what she saw. As a perennial hotspot in the Middle East, Beirut and Lebanon were areas well covered by American intelligence imagery assets, with the consequent maps and photographic products being regularly kept up to date. She was pleased in particular by the fact that Lieutenant Benson had added to the maps a number of copies of an intelligence guide booklet on Lebanon, which listed some basic data and facts concerning the country, along with information on the various armed groups and militias present in and around Lebanon. Grabbing one of the booklets for herself, she then selected one copy each of the different maps she had received and started cutting and plastifying them before folding them so that they could fit in her cargo pockets. Once that was done, she started splitting the maps into separate piles to be distributed to her sub-units. Twenty minutes later, she greeted her subalterns in the command post, where she distributed the maps to them, along with the extra copies of the intelligence booklet. All the while, the television screens in her command post were left on, tuned to the CNN and BBC news channels. As she was doing her distribution, a breaking news report on the BBC channel made her and her subaltern stop and listen to it. A large crowd of angry rioters were shown trying to crash open the main gate of the American embassy compound, with the small security marine

contingent of the embassy reacting by firing a few riot gas grenades in the crowd. Greta felt dread on seeing how numerous and excited the rioters were.

"This is going to end badly, and soon. We may have to react quickly to this situation. Prepare your maps quickly and distribute them to our squad and fire team leaders, then stand by for further instructions."

As her subalterns were preparing their maps for field use, Greta used the ship's internal telephone system to contact Captain Eldridge, who was on the cruiser's navigation bridge when she connected with him.

"Captain Eldridge!"

"Sir, this is Captain Visby, in the marines' operations center. We just saw on the BBC channel that a large crowd of rioters were assaulting the main gate of our embassy in Beirut. Our embassy security contingent was firing riot gas grenades to keep them back but, in my opinion, they won't be able to hold those rioters for very long. Have you received any instructions from Washington about this crisis, sir?"

When Eldridge answered her, she could clearly distinguish some serious level of frustration in his tone.

"Up to now, it has been total radio silence from the Pentagon on this, Captain Visby. I am afraid that our embassy will be overwhelmed by those rioters well before Washington takes some firm decisions about what to do about this."

There was then a pause of a few seconds before Eldridge spoke further, having apparently taken a difficult decision.

"Fuck it! I am not going to sit idly by while our illustrious leaders in Washington try to decide what to do. When could your marines be ready to fly out for Beirut?"

"Give me another thirty minutes and I will then be ready to embark my marines in our PELICANs, sir."

"Then, do so, Captain! Your mission will be to secure our embassy in Beirut and to protect our staff and citizens there. If you decide that our people there need to be evacuated in order to ensure their safety, then pack them in your PELICANs and fly them out of that shit pit. I may not have the green light from the Pentagon for such an initiative but I will be damned if I would simply watch our people in Beirut being massacred while doing nothing."

Greta nodded to herself on hearing those words, with Eldridge gaining extra respect from her for his hard decision.

"You know, sir, this reminds me of another historical situation when a military commander also had to take an initiative without the prior approval of his superiors. In 1940, the Norwegian officer in charge of a coastal fort defending the Oslofjord had to face an invading fleet of German warships in what was later named the Battle of Drøbak Sound. That officer, who was in charge of an old coastal fortress called the Oscarsborg Fortress, had only a few officers and NCOs to lead a force of raw, untrained recruits and had no instructions about what to do if faced with an attacker, as Norway was then still officially neutral in World War 2. His guns and torpedo battery were also old weapons and he was now faced with a German fleet led by the modern heavy cruiser BLÜCHER. When he gave the order to fire, a subaltern objected that they had not received the authorization to fire in anger without first firing warning shots. That commander then replied, quote, "Either I will be decorated or I will be court-martialed. Fire!", unquote. His forty-year-old torpedoes hit and sank the BLÜCHER, forcing the German fleet to retreat, thus giving time for the Norwegian king to be evacuated to Great Britain."

Eldridge had a chuckle on hearing that story.

"I love that guy. I will have to read about this battle later, once we are out of this crisis. I will now tell Lieutenant Goodman to be ready to fly off as soon as your marines will be aboard her PELICANs. Good luck in advance on your mission, Captain Visby."

"Thank you, sir." replied Greta before putting down her telephone receiver and shouting instructions at her subalterns. "BE READY TO BRING YOUR MARINES UP TO THE FLIGHT DECK AS SOON AS YOU ARE READY. WE ARE FLYING TO BEIRUT TO SECURE AND PROTECT OUR EMBASSY THERE."

A concert of approving exclamations greeted her words at once, with her subalterns then quickly finishing to prepare their maps before going to collect their troops.

Less than half an hour later, Greta was leading her marines up to the open flight deck of the cruiser, where four Hiller PELICAN A assault transports were already waiting on the dark deck, ready to go. There, she was met by Captain Eldridge and by Lieutenant Charles Benson, with the former greeting her near the lead aircraft.

"Captain Visby, we are still waiting for instructions from Washington but your mission is still on. Lieutenant Benson took the initiative to call by cell phone our embassy in Beirut and was able to talk with our ambassador. Ambassador Kearny said that his situation is getting quite difficult and that rioters have started to climb over the perimeter fence, forcing his marines to retreat inside the embassy and to barricade the doors. He was most happy to hear that we were going to send marines to his rescue. While we are still near the Strait of



Gibraltar and are about to enter the Mediterranean, I had external fuel tanks mounted on our PELICANs, so that they would have sufficient range to get to Lebanon and then go land at our base of Incirlik, in Turkey.”

“That sounds fine to me, sir. We are ready to go.”

“Then, good luck to you and your marines, Captain Visby.” said Eldridge, who shook hands with her before she went up the aft cargo ramp of the lead PELICAN with the marines of her First Rifle Platoon and her company command section. Retreating with Benson to the opened doors of the vast aircraft hangar of his cruiser, Eldridge watched on as the four VTOL transport aircraft started their turboshaft engines in a concert of ear-splitting whines, then lifted off the flight deck, soon disappearing into the night sky, their navigational lights kept off.

“May God be with them.” said softly Eldridge before returning inside his cruiser.

### **03:36 (Eastern Mediterranean Time)**

**Monday, September 08, 2008 ‘C’**

**Lead Hiller PELICAN assault transport**

**On approach to Beirut, Lebanon**

“We have Beirut in sight dead ahead, Captain. There are quite a lot of fireworks going around the city, along with occasional large explosions from probable artillery rounds.”

Greta, seeing the same things as Lieutenant Janet Goodman, who was piloting the PELICAN she was in, nodded her head while looking at the numerous lines of tracer bullets and shells flying constantly across the night sky of the Lebanese city.

“It’s a shit pit alright. Hopefully, our marines at the embassy will still be holding the fort there. How far are we from our embassy, Lieutenant?”

“We are about five miles from it, Captain, and should overfly it in a bit over a minute. How do you want to proceed for your assault?”

“We will come in low and fast, then will immediately land in turn on the roof of the embassy, where we will run out and enter it to go reinforce our embassy marines there and start collecting the staff for evacuation. How much loiter time in the air do you have left before you will have to fly to Turkey due to low fuel?”

“We can loiter at medium altitude and low speed for another forty minutes before having to turn around.”

"Then, we will have to make it quick. When the last of your PELICANs will have unloaded its marines, have it stay on the roof, ready to take in evacuees. Hopefully, Ambassador Kearny will have prepared his staff and dependents for a quick evacuation."

What Greta didn't add then was that she had little faith in her pious hope. Her two years at the embassy in Stockholm had shown her how bureaucratic and inflexible the State Department could be, on top of its personnel too often acting like entitled prima donnas. Greta would actually not be surprised to arrive at the embassy only to find the diplomatic staff and their dependents waiting with a mountain of personal suitcases they would then insist were 'essential belongings'. If that proved the case, then Greta would have some hard news for them. She thus decided to preempt that possibility and grabbed her pocket tactical radio, changing its frequency to that used by the marine guards at the embassy, an information she had obtained via Lieutenant Benson after he had talked with Ambassador Kearny, along with the main callsigns used by the embassy.

"Castle, this is Cavalryman, come in, over!"

She had to repeat her call before getting an answer on her radio.

"This is Castle. How close are you right now, over?"

"Our ETA is one minute. What is your present situation, over?"

"Pretty bad, Cavalryman. The rioters tried to smash open our main door and are now about to blow it open with RPGs. They also have set fires in two of our annexes, over."

"I copy that, Castle. Have your staff and dependents assemble close to the rooftop access of the main building but don't, I say again, don't let them on the roof until we have landed. As well, restrict the number of bags carried to no more than two suitcases per person. Any more luggage could jeopardize safe takeoffs. Be advised that our fuel reserves are limited, so be quick and organized, over."

"Understood, Cavalryman: we will start sending our people to the top floor... Uh, one moment, please."

Greta didn't like what that temporary interruption could mean and she impatiently waited for ten seconds before a new male voice came on the radio.

"Cavalryman, this is Ambassador Kearny. We were just advised by telephone that a large group of American citizens are trapped and under siege at the American University Hospital, with militants shooting at them and trying to break inside. They need help right away."

Greta silently swore to herself before replying to Kearny with a question.

“What is their exact location, Castle? In which building and at what level are these American citizens, over?”

“In the hospital’s main building, on the second floor. Three private security guards are actually resisting those militants but the Lebanese Army soldiers who had been providing security around the University all fled or disappeared during last evening, at the start of the troubles.”

Frustrated by this extra problem to deal with, Greta thought it over for a couple of seconds before speaking further to Kearny.

“I acknowledge your info and will see what I can do to help there. Now, please get your people to the top floor, ready to be evacuated from the rooftop. Cavalryman out.”

Switching back her radio to her company frequency, Greta then grabbed her Beirut City map and consulted it quickly before speaking to her pilot, Janet Goodman.

“Lieutenant, veer to your two o’clock: this aircraft is going to the American University Hospital, where American citizens are barricaded and under siege. Your three other aircraft are to continue to the embassy.”

“Got it!”

Next, Greta called her second-in-command, First Lieutenant Jiro Watanabe, on her radio.

“Seven, this is Six. I am rerouting towards the American University Hospital with the First Platoon, in order to save a group of citizens under siege over there. Continue with the rest of our unit and go secure and evacuate the embassy, over.”

There was a slight pause before Watanabe, a young officer in which Greta had complete confidence, answered back.

“I copy that, Six. Will keep you informed via radio of our progress at the embassy, out!”

With that taken care of, Greta then looked outside with the help of her helmet-mounted night vision binoculars, trying to locate the American University Hospital inside the embattled city. It was actually quite easy for her to locate it, as it was by a good margin the tallest building in its neighborhood.

“I see the hospital, 600 meters to our one o’clock. It is the tallest building in that area.

"I see it!" replied Janet as she adjusted her flight trajectory. "You want me to land on its rooftop, Captain?"

"Do a loop around it first, to see what kind of force is besieging it. If need be, we will strafe the enemy before landing on the roof."

"Gunnery, be ready to open fire!" then ordered Goodman to her two side gunners and to her copilot, who controlled their PELICAN's twin 30 mm cannons and rocket pods. Fifteen seconds later, they arrived at the hospital complex, with Janet Goodman then starting to fly a wide circle around it. What they saw on the ground was alarming, to say the least: incessant muzzle flashes around the entrance area showed that there was an intense firefight in progress, with dozens of dark silhouettes running or crouching near the entrance. Greta then saw something that made her swear.



"I see a French-made **AMX-13** light tank rolling towards the main entrance. It is flying a large flag and is closely followed by over twenty armed men on foot. From its behavior, I would say that this was a Lebanese Army light tank that was captured by Islamists. Lieutenant, blow that tank to Hell!"

"With pleasure, Captain."

Goodman lowered the nose of her PELICAN, diving on the light tank and allowing her copilot to aim their cannons, which had only a limited arc of fire. A two-second burst then sent 38 30 mm shells at the tank, bracketing it at the same time that they butchered the men following closely behind the tank. The AMX-13, which sported only light armor, then burst out in flames and stopped, while the militiamen who had survived dispersed at a run in utter panic. As the PELICAN overflew the now burning armored vehicle, its two side gunners added the fire from their heavy machine guns, spraying the fleeing extremists and accelerating their retreat.

"Time to land on the rooftop, Lieutenant." ordered Greta. "Once on the rooftop, stay there at idle power while me and my marines will go get those besieged Americans."

"Got it, Captain!"

Another thirty seconds and the PELICAN was landing on top of the hospital's main building. Greta then got up from her seat, her rifle at the ready, and ran to the aft cargo ramp, which was lowering down, while shouting to her marines.

"FIRST PLATOON, FOLLOW ME!"

On emerging out of the PELICAN and on the darkened hospital rooftop, Greta quickly scanned her surroundings, ready to engage any armed suspect that could be present. Seeing nobody but her marines on the roof, she ran to the roof access hut and threw its door open before jumping inside. Again, she saw no one and pointed the staircase inside to her marines.

"OUR PEOPLE ARE SUPPOSED TO BE ON THE SECOND FLOOR. FOLLOW ME, MARINES, BUT BE CAREFUL ON WHO YOU WILL SHOOT AT!"

Greta then ran down the flights of stairs as fast as she could, closely followed by 47 marines.

To her relief, they didn't encounter any hostile persons on the way down and she arrived at the level of the second floor without firing a shot. Cautiously cracking open the door of the stairwell at that level, Greta shouted out loud into the hallway.

"AMERICAN MARINES! WE ARE HERE TO EVACUATE YOU!"

A female voice then answered her from somewhere down the hallway.

"THANK GOD! WE WERE GETTING DESPERATE."

Reassured, Greta looked at Lieutenant Carlos Gonzalez, who commanded her First Platoon.

"Lieutenant, disperse your platoon to cover all the accesses to this floor, in order to prevent any Islamist to get up here. As well, post your machine gunners to watch the approaches to the hospital. I will now go see how many people we will have to evacuate: we may well have a few bed-ridden patients in the lot."

"Understood, Captain." replied the young platoon leader. As Gonzalez distributed orders to his marines, Greta came out of the stairwell with Master Sergeant Vincent Gambino and the three other members of her command team. A nurse dressed in surgical garb then ran to her, a big smile on her face.

"If you knew how happy we are to see you here, miss."

"Well, you will be able to tell me after we will have evacuated the lot of you by air: our transport is waiting on the roof. How many people here needs to be lifted to safety, miss?"

“Uh, quite a lot, I’m afraid, miss. We have 39 members of the night staff here, plus fourteen walking patients. Our big problem is that we also have over thirty bed-ridden patients who are still in their rooms on the upper floors, plus four mothers with their infants on the pediatric floor. Unfortunately, we are presently on emergency local battery power only and the elevators won’t work without power from our backup generators. Unfortunately, our local technicians all fled at the start of this insurrection and we don’t know how to start our diesel generators.”

“We may help you with that, miss.” replied Greta before turning around to look at her senior NCO.

“Master Sergeant, do you think that you would be able to start up those backup diesel generators?”

Vincent ‘Mafioso’ Gambino grinned at that question.

“Maam, before joining the Marine Corps, my specialty was to steal cars by hot-wiring them. I will only need someone to lead me down to the generator room.”

That made Greta look at the nurse, who in turn twisted her head and shouted to someone visible as part of a growing crowd of hospital employees gathering near her in the hallway.

“MARWAN, COULD YOU GUIDE THOSE MARINES DOWN TO OUR GENERATOR ROOM?”

She then looked back at Greta, explaining herself.

“Marwan Gemayel is a Christian Lebanese-American who is one of our male nurses. He knows every corner of this hospital.”

“Excellent! He can go show the way to my senior NCO. Sergeant Rossini, Corporal Somoza, you will escort Master Sergeant Gambino and Mister Gemayel during their excursion down to the generator room. Gunnery Sergeant Blackburn, you stay with me. Miss, I will now need you to show me the patients who are with you.”

“Right away, miss. Follow me.”

The nurse then led Greta and her NCO down the hallway and to a sort of patients’ lounge, where fourteen men and women, most of them in their fifties or older and wearing hospital gowns, were sitting away from the windows. One critical look around them was enough to convince Greta that most of those ‘walking’ patients would be unable to climb by themselves the ten flights of stairs leading to the rooftop. She

then faced the nurse who had first spoken to her, a small woman in her mid-forties and with a distinct Semitic look to her.

"I believe that we will have to wait until the elevators are back in operation before leading your patients upstairs, miss. By the way, what is your name?"

"I am Aisha Rahal, the head nurse for the night shift at this hospital."

"Are you an American citizen, Miss Rahal?"

The nurse hesitated, guessing the reason why Greta was asking that.

"I have dual American-Lebanese nationality but I have a family and two children here in Beirut and I am unwilling to leave them behind. I will thus have to skip your offer of flying out of here with my patients."

"But you could well be killed by those extremists if they catch you after we are gone, Nurse Rahal."

"Maybe, but they could also spare me and let me go.

Greta couldn't help stare in silence at the small woman for long seconds before speaking again.

"Nurse, believe me when I say from experience that such religious extremists possess little sense of decency or even basic humanity. They will probably rape you first, then kill you, when they will see that your patients and staff have escaped them. Here is what I propose to you: fly out with us to the American embassy, where I intend to stay in and hold while my aircraft fly our rescued citizens to our base in Incirlik, Turkey. That way, you will be able to stay safe while still being relatively close to your family, and that until order can be restored in Beirut."

Her last sentence somehow attracted a smirk on the nurse's face.

"Order, restored in Beirut? This city is already well past the point of being governable, miss. While our government would deny that, Lebanon is for all practical purposes a failed state, where ethnic and religious hatreds combine with rampant government corruption and incompetence to make it a hellhole for decent, moderate persons like me and my family."

"Then, why not move to the United States with your family. Do your husband and children hold dual American-Lebanese nationality like you?"

"We would probably go now, in view of how bad things have become in Lebanon. However, I won't abandon my family here."

Greta, whose mind was working in overdrive, thought for a moment before looking into the nurse's eyes.

"Your husband, would he be able to bring your children to the American embassy today? Does he have a car?"

"He doe...if it was not destroyed in the more recent street fighting and artillery bombardments. But isn't the American embassy under siege right now?"

"Not for long, Miss Rahal." replied Greta with a ferocious smile. "What I propose is that you fly with us to the American embassy, where you will be able to call your husband to ask him to drive with your children to the embassy compound, which will stay under the protection of my marines."

"But you could end up being trapped there, miss, surrounded and under mortar and machine gun fire."

"First off, please call me 'Captain', not 'miss'. Second, I fully intend to push those extremist bastards away from the embassy compound with the support of our aircraft and ships, so that it could become a haven for our citizens in Beirut. Once my aircraft will have been able to transport our first load of American citizens to Turkey, they will return here to pick up more of our citizens. Believe me, Miss Rahal: this is the best chance you will get to get out of Lebanon with your family. Come with us to the embassy, please."

After a moment of reflection, Aisha Rahal nodded her head once.

"Alright, I will fly with you to the embassy, where I will call my family and tell it to join me there."

"Thank you, Miss Rahal."

"It is I who needs to thank you, Captain. By the way, what is your name?"

"Greta Visby. Captain Greta Visby, at your service."

To Greta's surprise, the nurse opened her eyes wide on hearing that.

"The U.S. Marine Viking Shield Maiden?"

"Uh, don't tell me that I am known even in Lebanon, miss?" said Greta, not exactly liking the implications of such celebrity in a place like Beirut. For one thing, it could make her a prime target for the local Islamist extremists, as she had often bashed hard in the past other groups of Islamist extremists around the Middle East, South Asia, Somalia and Europe. That also meant that she could expect a long and painful death if she was ever captured alive. However, the nurse nodded again at her question.

"You were in the local news a few times during the past years. After all, you are a woman who stands out of the norms. Some of our male medical staff here did tell me that they had some fantasies concerning you."



"Why am I not surprised by that." replied Greta with a sigh. As she said that, the main lights came back on in the hospital, making her smile in satisfaction.

"Aaah, it seems that Master Sergeant Gambino would make a good electrician indeed. Now, before we start getting your walking patients up to the rooftop via the elevators, I want you and your staff to retrieve the personal effects of your patients and of themselves and, most importantly, their American passports, if they brought them to the hospital. Once ready, Gunny Blackburn will escort your patients up. As for you and me, we will go see how your bed-ridden patients are doing, so that we could prepare them for air evacuation. Act fast: time and fuel are limited."

"I will get my nurses on it right away, Captain." replied Aisha Rahal. Only then did Greta catch on to something she should have noticed earlier.

"Uh, your nurses are here but where are the doctors of the night shift?"  
That question brought a bitter expression on the face of Rahal.

"Our senior doctor was killed when he tried to dissuade the rioters from storming the hospital. The three other doctors present then fled."

"I see! Well, let's take care now of those who stayed."

As Aisha Rahal distributed orders to her staff so that they could go retrieve their personal effects and those of the fourteen walking patients, Greta activated her pocket radio and called her second-in-command.

"Seven, this is Six, over!"

Lieutenant Watanabe answered her nearly at once, with the noise of some gunfire in the background.

"Go ahead, Six."

"How is the situation at the embassy, Seven?"

"We have full control of the embassy compound and the diplomatic staff and their dependents are in the process of getting in our PELICANs. We are presently exchanging fire with a few gunmen sniping at the embassy from about 300 yards away. Thankfully, those gunmen shoot like pigs. I have suffered two light wounded to date but I am confident that we can hold the embassy at this time, over."

"Good! We have repelled an assault against the university hospital and are in the process of gathering the staff and patients for air evacuation. Be advised that the rioters had an AMX-13 light tank they had apparently captured from the Lebanese Army. My PELICAN destroyed it but the rioters may have captured more armored vehicles, so

watch out for them. Your orders are to fly the embassy staff and dependents to Turkey, where our PELICANs are to refuel and return to Beirut to pick us up. I will soon join you back at the embassy, where I intend to hold the complex as a safe haven for fleeing American citizens presently in Lebanon. We will hold it for as long as needed or until ordered out. Any questions, over?"

"Negative, Six. Will wait for your return. Seven, out!"

Next, Greta called Janet Goodman, who was still waiting with her PELICAN on the hospital's rooftop.

"Bird Six, this is Marine Six. We should have hospital staff and patients coming up to you soon. Once all in, we will fly to the embassy, where I will disembark. You will then fly the evacuees to Turkey, refuel there and return for us at the embassy compound, which we now hold. Pass to the MONTANA that we hold the embassy and will soon be evacuating American citizens out of Beirut. Our casualties to date at the embassy are limited to two light wounded, while I suffered zero casualties at my location, over."

"I copy, Marine Six. Will call the ship right now, out."

#### **04:18 (Beirut Time) / 03:18 (Western Mediterranean Time)**

#### **Navigation bridge of the cruiser U.S.S. MONTANA**

#### **Sailing into the Mediterranean from the Strait of Gibraltar**

Captain (Navy) Richard Eldridge was sitting in his command chair on the navigation bridge of his cruiser when his signals officer, Lieutenant Nadia Kaminsky, came to him with a message clipboard in her hands. Kaminsky stopped at attention next to the command chair, then presented her clipboard to Eldridge.

"Two messages for you, sir: one from our air assault force in Beirut, the other from Admiral Adams, at Sixth Fleet Headquarters in Naples, addressed to all ships in the Mediterranean."

"Thank you, Lieutenant." said Eldridge while taking the clipboard from the very pretty and sexy 31-year-old blonde female officer. As per standard routine, Kaminsky stayed near the chair while Eldridge read both messages, ready to write down for transmission any response her captain would have to those messages. While obviously pleased by the message received from Beirut, Eldridge seemed distinctly displeased by the one from Naples. Having herself read that last message, Kaminsky easily

understood why her captain would dislike it: it was the latest example of the rigid, by-the-book command style which Vice Admiral Thomas Adams, the commander of Sixth Fleet, was known for. Once he had finished his reading, Eldridge looked up at his signals officer.

"Have you already acknowledged receipt of this message from Sixth Fleet, Lieutenant?"

"Not yet, sir: I was intending to do so at the same time as you would respond to it, sir."

"Then, ignore it and play dead about it, Lieutenant. Advise me if we get further messages from Naples later on."

"Uh, yes sir!" replied Kaminsky, who then took back her clipboard and left the bridge. Eldridge, still sitting in his command chair, muttered to himself in a near whisper tainted with disdain.

"Hold positions until State Department and National Security Council can decide on how to react to the events in Beirut... In the meantime, our staff and citizens there are supposed to sit tight and take shelter while we sit on our thumbs? What a dud this Adams is!"

Taking a decision, Eldridge then got out of his command chair and approached his bridge duty officer, Lieutenant Kate MacDonald.

"Lieutenant MacDonald, pass into hydrofoil mode and push our engines to maximum: we need to get to the Lebanese coast as quickly as possible."

"Hydrofoil mode and maximum speed, aye sir!"

The young navigator then pushed all the way forward the engine control throttles of the cruiser and dialed a new setting for the ship's triple pairs of stabilizer elevons, which connected together all three hulls under the waterline. Now set at a slight upward angle, those elevons then started acting like hydrofoil surfaces, making the hull of the 30,000-ton battlecruiser partly rise out of the water under the push from its four shrouded propellers. With its hydrodynamic drag greatly diminished by this, the U.S.S. MONTANA's speed sharply increased, something that in turn raised its hull further out of the water and increased its speed even further. Eldridge grinned with contentment when MacDonald soon announced that their speed was now 56 knots, equaling the best speed achieved during the initial sea trials of the cruiser. This capability to hydroplane and its consequent top speed had been kept secret for years now and had not been used since the initial sea trials, both to keep it secret and because it had not been

needed in the past. It had not been used even during the 1996 naval war against Russia, for the reason that hydroplaning at full power generated a huge amount of underwater noise, something that could have been fatal to the MONTANA in that war, when it was facing dozens of Russian submarines on the prowl. Now going at nearly twice its publicly known top speed, Eldridge was confident that his cruiser would soon be within bombardment range of Beirut, ready to support the marines of Captain Visby. He then whispered to himself words from a popular country music song.

“We have a long way to go and a short time to get there... Give them Hell, Captain Visby!”

#### **04:51 (Beirut Time)**

#### **Rooftop of the main American embassy building**

#### **Beirut, Lebanon**

Greta was smiling with satisfaction as she watched the last of the four PELICANs fly away northward towards Turkey, with over 186 American citizens aboard the four assault transports. The first part of her mission was now a confirmed success. However, she still had another 23 American civilians at the embassy who had elected to stay while waiting for their families to join them here, so that they could eventually fly out together. Her chief worry now was to see those family members being able to reach the embassy compound without being stopped or attacked by Islamist extremists. Using a hand-held thermal imager camera, she slowly scanned the façades of the buildings lining the opposite side of the avenue which ran past the embassy compound and on which the embassy’s main gate opened. If American citizens came and tried to find refuge here, then that would most probably be the way they would come. She did spot half a dozen thermal silhouettes peering at the embassy while trying to hide at window corners or from behind low roof parapets. Mentally taking note of where they were, she then looked at her second-in-command, First Lieutenant Jiro Watanabe, who was crouching next to her on the flat roof of the embassy, and passed her thermal camera to him.

“I can see seven signatures of probable extremists looking at us from those buildings across the avenue. I doubt very much that simple Lebanese residents would take the risk of staying in such positions and stare at the embassy after the exchange of gunfire which happened in the last half hour.”

"Agreed!" said Watanabe while scanning the buildings with the thermal camera. "They have to be Islamist extremists left behind to watch us after that mob of rioters retreated after tasting our firepower. What do you want us to do about them, maam?"

"We still have over one hour of darkness left before Sunrise and I doubt very much that those assholes have night vision devices. I want you to take our first and second rifle platoons with you, lead them as stealthily as possible to those buildings and then get rid of those enemy observers. I want our marines to use their pistol and rifle silencers for that search and destroy mission, so that the enemy doesn't realize that we came out of the compound. Once that is done, you will covertly lead one platoon east down the avenue in order to eliminate any roadblock which could prevent American citizens from reaching the embassy. Keep this camera for the moment: you will need it. I will have our light mortars ready to cover you. Start as soon as you are ready to go."

"Yes, maam!" replied Watanabe, more than happy with her orders: he, like her, was a believer in taking the initiative from the enemy and in moving aggressively. He then keyed his pocket tactical radio to call the leaders of First and Second Platoons.

Alpha One Six and Alpha Two Six, this is Alpha Seven: join me for a quick orders group on the rooftop, over."

"Alpha One Six acknowledged."

"Alpha Two Six acknowledged, am on the way."

Less than two minutes later, both Lieutenant Gonzalez and Lieutenant Vaughn were crouching next to Watanabe near the roof parapet. The latter then let them use the thermal camera so they could observe where the presumed enemy observers were, while passing to them Greta's orders, finishing with a question.

"Any questions before we go? No? Then, gather your marines and make sure that they fit their silencers on their weapons."

Both lieutenants nodded their heads at that: due to the combat experience gained during the past decades in various theaters of operation, including Afghanistan and Somalia, the Marine Corps had slightly modified its combat procedures and tactics and had acquired a large number of the best and most effective pistol and rifle silencers available on the commercial market, on top of modifying its individual small arms in order to make them able to fit silencers on. The value of stealth, especially during night close combat operations, was fully appreciated in the Marine Corps and that measure had been meant to maximize the operational stealth of its soldiers in battle. In that, the Marine Corps

surpassed the U.S. Army, which had balked at the cost of so equipping all of its soldiers. Quickly explaining to his two platoon commanders how he intended to proceed, Watanabe then led them off the rooftop and down to the basement level of the embassy main building, collecting the marines of the two rifle platoons in the process. There, Watanabe opened the steel trap giving access to the main sewer line linking the embassy with the city sewer section situated across the avenue passing by the embassy compound. The marines of the security detachment assigned to the embassy had shown to him the blueprints they had of the various access routes to the embassy's main building, which included the sewer lines. Thankfully, it had been a dry few weeks lately, so Watanabe was not worried about having to wade waist-deep in raw sewage. When he set foot down in the sewer collector tunnel, he in fact found it to be nearly dry. Thanking his luck, he lit his rifle-mounted flashlight and started cautiously walking southward along the concrete tunnel, followed by 83 marines.

After walking as silently as he could for a few minutes, Watanabe arrived at a junction with another large sewer concrete pipe oriented East-West, which he knew from the embassy blueprints was roughly following the main avenue which passed along the embassy compound. Signaling his two platoon leaders to gather next to him, he then whispered fresh orders to them.

"We should now be right under the avenue running past the embassy. First Platoon will now climb out of the sewers through the nearest manholes and will start to quietly secure the buildings directly facing the embassy. You may encounter up to a half dozen or more gunmen hiding in those buildings and watching the embassy. Take them out as quietly as possible. In the meantime, I will lead Second Platoon eastward down this sewer main and will emerge once we will have walked at least 200 yards down, then will make sure that the enemy has not established some kind of roadblock along the avenue. If we don't encounter roadblocks at first, then we will go further East, but on the surface, to secure a good length of the avenue. Our goal is to secure a route to the embassy for our nationals who will try to flee Beirut. Questions?"

"No, all is clear for me." replied Carlos Gonzalez, while Sydney Vaughn shook his head.

"Good! Let's get to work!"

As Jiro Watanabe went down the sewer line heading eastward, Lieutenant Carlos Gonzalez walked to the nearest street manhole cover he could see overhead, then slung his rifle and grabbed his pistol, screwing a long silencer on its muzzle before starting to climb silently the rusting steel ladder going up to the manhole cover. Once in contact with the heavy steel grill, Gonzalez slowly pushed it up and sideways, taking it out of his way before cautiously sticking his head above the level of the street. It was still quite dark outside and, luckily, some stray bullets had cut the power lines running along the avenue, plunging the whole district in the dark. Listening as well as looking around, Gonzalez finally decided that it was safe for him to come out and climbed the last steps of the ladder, stepping on the street and immediately crouching next to the front bumper of a parked car. While keeping watch for possible enemy gunmen, he made hand signals to his marines as they emerged from the sewer manhole, directing them in fire team groupings to specific buildings lining this side of the avenue. He however kept one fire team with him, so that its two light machine guns could cover by fire the avenue in both of its directions. Some four minutes later, as they were still watching the avenue, Gonzalez heard the first muffled shot from a silenced rifle, coming from the third floor of the building he was in front of it.

“Here we go: the dance has now started.”

Some 280 meters to the East, Watanabe found a street-level manhole and decided to check it out. Climbing the steel ladder to the manhole, he raised and slid it out of the way as silently as he could, only to realize that a truck was parked right over the manhole. In fact, one of its rear wheels had nearly blocked the cover from opening. Watanabe was mentally swearing about this when he heard a male voice speaking Arabic very close to his location. Tensing up, Jiro used his night vision goggles to scan the surroundings of the parked truck and soon realized that he was only some six meters to the west from an improvised checkpoint set across the avenue with a bunch of garbage cans and containers arranged to form a chicane. Four armed men in various civilian garbs mixed with an eclectic mix of pieces of military uniforms were standing or slouching around the chicane while talking between themselves. Jiro then examined the truck parked overhead, to see if it would be possible to crawl out from under it without being seen. Thankfully, that truck, a four-wheeled vehicle, had a quite high ground clearance which made it easy to crawl out from under it. However, that detail also raised an alarm into Jiro's head: this looked like a cross-country capable vehicle and, with the

fact that it was parked very close to a checkpoint, could mean that it belonged to the gunmen manning the checkpoint. Signaling by hand to the leader of the Second Platoon to climb up to him, he then whispered in a very low volume to Lieutenant Sydney Vaughn.

“The manhole we are in has a possible enemy light truck parked right over it, while there is a checkpoint some six paces down the street, with four gunmen manning that checkpoint. There may well be one or two more gunmen aboard the truck parked over us. Make sure that all of your marines have silencers on their weapons, then tell your first squad to start climbing quietly to street level and crawl out from under that truck. Me and you will come out first and will use our silenced pistols to cover our men as they crawl out of the manhole. Go down and pass the word quietly while I take a prone position on the sidewalk, ready to cover you.”

“Got it!” whispered back Vaughn before climbing back down to go speak with his marines in the sewer. Steeling himself and with all his senses in high alert, Watanabe then cautiously came out of the manhole and crawled to the nearby sidewalk. He turned on his back before moving out in the open, his silenced pistol pointing up and ready to shoot any gunman who could be sitting in the light truck. He barely kept a chuckle in when the first thing he saw was the butts of a man sitting on the ledge of the truck’s cargo box: if he shot now, that man would definitely say ‘ouch’ before dying. Finishing to crawl out in the open but staying on his back for the moment, Watanabe signaled by hand to Vaughn, who was emerging out of the manhole, to crawl to a position behind the front left tire of the truck, where he would be in good position to aim his pistol at the gunmen manning the checkpoint. Next out of the manhole was Sergeant Mike Harris, the leader of the first squad of Vaughn’s platoon, who was then followed by Corporal Steven Parker, the leader of Fire Team Charlie of the first squad. Once he had four marines out of the manhole and ready to crawl out from under the truck, Jiro judged that he now had enough firepower at the ready to deal with this checkpoint and, raising first to a sitting position, then quickly got up on his feet, next to the right side of the truck. That was when he faced the gunman who had been sitting on the truck’s side ledge. That man, a rather hirsute guy in his thirties, could only look at him with stunned surprise before Watanabe shot him between the eyes with his silenced pistol. Jiro then pivoted in a flash and started firing at the four gunmen holding the checkpoint, with Vaughn and Harris joining in and killing all four men in a couple of seconds, with none of the gunmen able to even raise their rifles before getting killed. Running quickly to the checkpoint,



Jiro then looked up and visually inspected the balconies of the apartment buildings lining both sides of the avenue near the chicane. He was just in time to see a man's head emerge from past the railing of a balcony, looking down at the checkpoint and shouting a brief question in Arabic.

"Sorry: I only speak nine-millimeter tonight." replied Watanabe before shooting that man in the face. The man crumbled down on the balcony, letting a pair of binoculars he had been holding fall to the sidewalk, where it shattered into pieces. Watanabe, understanding that he had just shot a watchman covering the eastern approaches to the checkpoint, keyed his tactical radio.

"Alpha Two Six, from Alpha Seven: have a squad man the checkpoint and send your two other squads to clear and secure the buildings next to it."

"Understood, Alpha Seven."

Within less than a minute, the thirteen marines of the first squad were in position at the checkpoint, their weapons pointing mostly eastward, with Private First-Class Penny Stone crouching next to Watanabe, who stood behind a steel dumpster. The redhead young woman then smiled to Jiro.

"From a sewer line to a trash dumpster: a rather smelly start to combat, sir."

"Who said that being a marine was like a bed of roses, Private Stone?" replied Jiro, making the Irish-American ex-professional wrestler chuckle.

"Right, sir!"

Becoming serious again, Jiro keyed his radio again and called his first platoon.

"Alpha One Six, this is Alpha Seven. Send situation report, over."

"From Alpha One Six, we have finished scouring the buildings facing Castle. Eight gunmen, including six of them asleep at the time, taken out. Area secure, no casualties on my side, over."

"Alpha Seven acknowledged, out."

Jiro was about to call Greta when Sergeant Harris shouted a warning to him.

"TWO CARS ON APPROACH FROM THE EAST!"

Twisting his head in that direction, Jiro saw two medium-sized sedan cars approaching at a good rate of speed. However, their drivers slowed down, then stopped, on seeing the chicane and the dark silhouettes around it. Taking a chance, Jiro stepped from behind the chicane and walked slowly towards the two cars, his empty arms waving high above him while shouting in English.

“AMERICAN MARINES! IF YOU ARE AMERICAN CITIZENS, CONTINUE TOWARDS THE AMERICAN EMBASSY, WHERE MORE MARINES WILL OFFER YOU PROTECTION.”

His risky choice of action was then rewarded by a man’s head sticking out of the driver’s window of the lead car, with the man then shouting back in English.

“WE ARE AMERICAN CITIZENS, MISTER. WE HAVE OUR PASSPORTS WITH US.”

“THEN, COME FORWARD AND STOP AT THE CHICANE, SO THAT I COULD CHECK YOUR PASSPORTS.”

Walking back to the chicane, Jiro then bent down to speak to the lead car’s driver once the man stopped next to him. Looking quickly inside the car, he saw that the man had one teenage girl and three younger children with him. The car was also packed with suitcases and bundles.

“May I see your passports, please?”

“Of course, sir! Here they are.”

Taking the five American passports offered to him, Jiro quickly examined them, then gave them back to the driver and saluted him.

“You may now proceed to the embassy, sir. You will encounter another group of marines at the main gate of the compound, so don’t worry about your safety beyond this point.”

“Thank you, mister.”

The first car then negotiated the chicane and continued westward towards the embassy as the second car came forward. This time, Jiro saw one woman and two young teenagers in that car, with all three of them having valid American passports. The woman who was driving that second car smiled to him before going forward.

“Thank God for the U.S. Marines!”

That warmed the heart of Jiro Watanabe, who saluted the departing car while grinning and talking to himself.

“This is a good day indeed to be a marine.”

**06:36 (Washington Time) / 13:36 (Beirut Time)**

**Monday, September 08, 2008 ‘C’**

**National Combined Combat Command Center (NC4)**

**The Pentagon, Washington, D.C., U.S.A.**

General of the Army Joseph 'Shit Thrower' Shuman, having taken a two-hour nap and a good breakfast after spending the whole night up while following the chaotic situation in and around Lebanon, was feeling much better as he walked in at an energetic pace in his NC4 operations center, situated in the heart of the Pentagon. His first move was to go to the desk of his night shift operations officer, Brigadier General Linda Clarkson, a very competent Air Force flag officer whom he appreciated and respected.

"Anything new and notable, General Clarkson?"

"Uh, you could say that, sir. Quite a few things happened during the last few hours but, due to late reporting or delays caused by multiple command echelons being at play, we now know that the U.S.S. MONTANA, which entered the Mediterranean some seven hours ago, reacted to the news of our embassy in Beirut being besieged by Islamist-led rioters and launched its embarked marine company towards Lebanon in four PELICAN VTOL assault transports. It did so despite of a general order to all our ships in the Mediterranean to not react to the crisis in Lebanon until formal orders could be given by Sixth Fleet Headquarters."

"WHAT?" nearly shouted Shuman, instantly angry. "Who is the idiot who gave such an order?"

"Vice Admiral Adams, the commander of the Sixth Fleet in Naples, sir."

"Alright, I will square his peg later on. What happened afterwards? Were the marines sent by the MONTANA able to help our embassy in Beirut?"

"They certainly did, sir." replied Clarkson, grinning. "The marines of Alpha Company, First Battalion, Sixth Marine Regiment, succeeded in reinforcing our embassy just in time and in securing it. They then used their PELICANs to evacuate to Incirlik the embassy personnel, their dependents and quite a few American citizens trapped by the fighting in Beirut. They even managed to go rescue and evacuate the personnel and patients of the American University of Beirut's Hospital, which had been under assault by Islamist extremists. To date, the total number of American and dual-national citizens evacuated from Beirut by air thanks to our marines is at 319 men, women and children, with more due to be flown out from our embassy in Beirut once our four PELICANs return from their latest round trip to Turkey. By the way, the media news channels are already reporting on this ongoing rescue operation."

"Now, that's the kind of news I like. Do you know who commands our marines in Beirut?"

If anything, Clarkson's grin widened even more then.

"None other than Captain Greta 'The Viking Shield Maiden' Visby, sir. That girl is truly becoming a celebrity on the news channels."

"Yes! I knew that I made the right decision when I commissioned her in the field while in Afghanistan. Okay, what do we have now on the way to reinforce or at the least support our marines in Beirut, General Clarkson?"

Shumer's smile disappeared when Clarkson made a face while shaking her head.

"Nothing, sir. Vice Admiral Adams still has not rescinded his 'hold' order to our ships in the Mediterranean, while the commander of our European Command, General Vance Horner, has not ordered Adams to cancel his previous order. General Horner did order his special forces units to prepare for deployment to Lebanon but those units still have not left Germany, sir. On the other hand, the U.S.S. MONTANA is still ignoring the directive from Admiral Adams and is speeding towards the Lebanese coast at 56 knots. It should be within bombardment missile range of Beirut in about three hours, sir."

"And what is Vice Admiral Adams saying about this rush eastward by the MONTANA?"

"Nothing, sir, because the MONTANA has not advised Naples about its movements and is apparently ignoring Admiral Adams' orders to hold in place. That cruiser captain is risking court-martial for insubordination by doing so, sir."

"The only one who will get court-martialed in this affair is Vice Admiral Adams, for gross incompetence and dereliction of duty. Find the name of that cruiser commander for me, General Clarkson, so I could later reward properly his sense of initiative and resolve in this crisis. In the meantime, I am going to call General Horner in Stuttgart and ring his bells real good."

Linda Clarkson wrung her right hand as Shuman charged towards his private office in the operations center. General Joseph Shuman had been nicknamed 'The Shit Thrower' after he had a bucket of raw sewage dumped over the work desk of the then American theater commander in Afghanistan, for having done nothing to prevent his troops from being exposed to the toxic smoke from the infamous 'burning pits', where raw sewage and trash were being burned around the American camps. That hapless commander had then been unceremoniously relieved of command and replaced by the legendary ex-General of the Army Ingrid Dows, who had been recalled out of retirement by President

Bush in order to straighten up the mess in Afghanistan. General Horner and Vice Admiral Adams were thus likely in for one memorable taking down by General Shuman.

### **10:06 (Washington Time)**

#### **The Oval Office, The White House**

#### **Washington, D.C.**

President George W. Bush was discussing with his chief of staff, Joshua Bolten, and with Barry Steven Jackson, one of his senior political advisors, about the approaching presidential elections of November, when his intercom buzzed. Activating it, Bush saw that his private secretary was the one on the line.

“Yes, Martha?”

“Mister President, the Director of National Intelligence is here with the directors of the CIA and of the NSA. They say that they need to speak with you on a most urgent and sensitive question of national security.”

“Very well: let them in, Martha.” replied Bush before giving an apologetic look to Bolten and Jackson. “I am afraid that we will have to continue this conversation at another time, gentlemen.”

“We understand, Mister President.” said Bolten while getting up from his sofa with Jackson. The pair walked out of the Oval Office at the same time as Mike McConnell, Michael Hayden and James Loyd walked in through another door. Bush noticed at once the somber, nearly alarmed expression on the faces of his three top intelligence officials.

“What do you have for me, gentlemen?”

“A potential national security and World crisis of the first order, Mister President.” answered glumly McConnell. “It is about those Pakistani nuclear warheads which went missing and which we suspected were handed to Al Qaeda via the Saudis. The NSA just intercepted a cell phone conversation between a high-level Saudi intelligence operative in Beirut and a surviving Al Qaeda senior leader, who was also in Beirut. While they spoke using coded speech, we were able to surmise that at least one of the missing Pakistani nuclear warheads is in Beirut, along with a Pakistani nuclear scientist capable of arming and detonating that warhead.”

“WHAT?” nearly shouted Bush, shaken by that information. “Are you sure about this?”

"Quite sure, Mister President. Both the identity and location of that Saudi operative and that of the senior Al Qaeda leader have been confirmed via voice analysis and cell phone transmission links. Furthermore, that Pakistani nuclear expert's name was mentioned, something that actually triggered the attention of our surveillance systems. From what they said, it appears that an Al Qaeda team of operatives are about to carry out a suicide mission out of Beirut, using that Pakistani nuclear warhead. Thankfully, they spoke for long enough for us to be able to triangulate the position of that Al Qaeda team: as of two hours ago, that team was aboard a cargo ship presently docked in the port of Beirut. However, our surveillance satellites showed that this ship, which by the way is registered under a flag of convenience but is owned by a Saudi company, was under steam and ready to sail. It thus could sail out of Beirut at any moment now. As for where these Al Qaeda bastards are heading, our best guess would be a port in Israel, either Haifa or Tel Aviv. That cargo's official destination is Alexandria, in Egypt, so its route will make it sail very close to Israeli coastal waters. I am not sure that, even if we alert the Israeli to this, they will have time to properly react before that cargo ship would be close enough to harm Israeli coastal cities. Further, if the Israelis would bomb that ship and sink it, it could result in some serious radioactive contamination of the waters off Israel."

Bush was silent for a moment, his mind in turmoil about the possible consequences of such a catastrophic scenario. Before he could speak, McConnell's cell phone, which was equipped to handle encrypted conversations, started buzzing, making the Director of National Intelligence fish it out of one pocket and answer it.

"Yes?"

Bush, along with Hayden and Loyd, saw McConnell's expression clearly change from concerned to alarm.

"What? When?... Alright, keep me posted if you get any new information about this."

As McConnell closed and pocketed his encrypted cell phone, he gave Bush a dejected look.

"Mister President, that ship was just reported having sailed out of Beirut about one hour ago, and is now doing at least fifteen knots. At that speed, it will be at the level of Haifa in about three to four hours, and passing by Tel Aviv in less than eight hours."

"My God! Can we send a SEAL team to board that ship and stop this operation?"

"No, Mister President: our nearest SEAL team is in Naples, Italy: way too far for it to get to that ship in time."

As Bush, McConnell and Hayden were left pondering grimly the consequences of a nuclear weapon detonating in the Middle East, James Loyd suddenly remembered something that made him exclaim out loud.

"Our marines in Beirut: they could fly out of our embassy there and take by assault that ship in less than one hour."

"But, do they have aircraft available to them right now?" asked McConnell. "I thought that their PELICANs had flown to Turkey to evacuate some of our citizens stuck in Beirut."

President Bush' reaction then was to hurry to his secure telephone on his desk.

"We will find out quickly enough: I'm going to call our NC4 operations center at the Pentagon."

**17:31 (Beirut Time) / 10:31 (Washington Time)**

**Rooftop of the American embassy, Beirut**

**Lebanon**

Greta was watching on as the latest group of American and American-Lebanese citizens were starting to board Lieutenant Janet Goodman's PELICAN, freshly back from Turkey, when her satellite phone rang. Grabbing that phone and looking at the caller I.D. number displayed on its small screen, she stiffened on seeing that she was getting a call direct from Washington. She however couldn't say who in Washington was calling her. Still, that could only be something important. Maybe someone at the Pentagon was relaying to her some new information about some American citizens in Beirut. She thus didn't waste time in conjectures and opened the line.

"Captain Visby, First Battalion of Sixth Marine Regiment!"

The voice she then heard made her heart accelerate at once.

"Captain Visby, this is the President speaking. I know that it is highly unusual for me to transmit orders like this directly to a junior officer in the field but time is short, very short and I didn't want to waste time by passing through our military chain of command. First off, do you have at least one VTOL transport aircraft presently available at your location, Captain?"

"Yes, Mister President. It is presently on the rooftop of our embassy in Beirut and is in the process of loading up some of our citizens who sought refuge at the embassy."

"Stop that boarding at once, Captain! I have a mission for your marine that is critical to our national security and to peace in the Middle East."

"Uh, one moment, Mister President." said Greta before running to the PELICAN and climbing aboard via the opened aft cargo ramp, to then shout to Janet Goodman, who was standing at the door of the cockpit, at the forward end of the cargo bay.

"STOP THE EMBARKATION AND HAVE THE PASSENGERS GET OFF YOUR AIRCRAFT! WE HAVE A NEW PRIORITY MISSION DIRECT FROM WASHINGTON." Not waiting for the surprised pilot to ask her questions about what was going on, Greta ran back out and spoke in her satellite telephone.

"I am sorry for this delay, Mister President: I just ordered my pilot to stop the embarkation of civilians and to be ready for an urgent mission. What do you need my marines to do, Mister President?"

Master Sergeant Vincent 'Mafioso' Gambino, who was standing close to Greta, snapped his head around on hearing the words 'Mister President'. However, he didn't speak to Greta then, not wanting to interrupt what had to be a most important call. As for Greta, she plugged one ear, so that the noise of the rotating propellers of the PELICAN would not prevent her from understanding what the President was saying. For good measure, she nearly ran away from the PELICAN in order to decrease the perceived noise from the VTOL aircraft. President Bush then spoke in a most somber tone on the phone.

"Captain Visby, I want you and your marines to fly out of Beirut and out to sea, to intercept a cargo ship possibly carrying an Al Qaeda suicide team which is in possession of a nuclear warhead taken from Pakistan. That ship, the MONROVIA STAR, may be on its way to an Israeli port, possibly Haifa or Tel Aviv, where those terrorists are planning to detonate their nuclear bomb. I am told that they know how to detonate that bomb. If they succeed, then the whole Middle East could catch fire."

"I will fly out in the following minutes, Mister President. What do you want me to do with that bomb and those terrorists?"

"Kill the terrorists and stop them at all cost from initiating that bomb. Once you will have control of that bomb, steer that cargo ship away from Israeli waters and head West to the open sea. One of our warships will then join you and assist you in fully securing that nuclear device. Do you have any questions, Captain Visby?"



"Just one, Mister President: how long ago did this ship sail out of Beirut harbor?"

"I am told that it sailed out about ninety minutes ago, officially heading towards Alexandria, in Egypt."

"We will do our best, Mister President. I will keep you informed of the results of my mission."

What Greta didn't add then was the words 'if we survive this'.

"I know you will, Captain Visby. Good luck and God speed to you and your marines."

"Thank you, Mister President. Captain Visby out!"

Greta took a deep breath to calm down as she ended the call and looked at Vincent Gambino.

"Take all our citizens who were due to board our PELICAN and lead them back inside the embassy: they will have to wait for the next PELICAN before leaving for Turkey. I will now assemble our Third Platoon in a hurry."

"Uh, can I ask what is going on, Captain?"

"Sorry, no time for that!" replied Greta, who then activated her pocket tactical radio.

"Alpha Three Six, this is Alpha Six, urgent message, over."

Thankfully, the leader of her Third Platoon, Lieutenant Terence Green, answered her at once.

"This is Alpha Three Six. Send, Alpha Six."

"From Alpha Six: gather your platoon at once and climb with your marines to the rooftop. We have a flash combat mission of the utmost importance to accomplish. Make sure that your men are ready for combat but make it damn quick: the time is measured in minutes, over."

"Understood, Alpha Six."

Greta then looked back at her senior most NCO.

"Master Sergeant, I am going to fly out with our Third Platoon on a critical combat mission to intercept a ship carrying an Al Qaeda terrorist team heading towards Israel with a nuclear bomb. Once I am gone with Lieutenant Green, Lieutenant Weathers and his Heavy Weapons Platoon will be in charge of the embassy and of the evacuation process. I am counting on you to assist him as best you can."

"Yes, Captain. Good luck on that new mission, maam."

"Thanks, Master Sergeant."

Greta then ran back to the PELICAN, from which the last civilian would-be passengers were being led out, confused and frustrated. She ignored the few angry questions and protestations thrown at her and went to see Lieutenant Janet Goodman, who was about as confused as her civilian passengers.

“What is going on, Greta?”

“I just got an order straight from the President, Janet. We are to fly out to sea and intercept a cargo ship named the MONROVIA STAR, which is officially heading towards Alexandria but really is sailing towards Israel with an Al Qaida terrorist team onboard. That team has an ex-Pakistani nuclear warhead with them and they know how to detonate it, according to Washington. We will fly out as soon as my Third Platoon is aboard. Our mission is to intercept that ship, board it, kill the terrorists and secure that nuclear device.”

“Christ! You have a plan on how to do all that?”

“Nope, but I will improvise something. Be ready to fly out as soon as my marines are inside your aircraft.”

“Right! I will be in the cockpit. Just yell out once your marines will all be aboard.”

As she waited for Lieutenant Green and his marines to arrive aboard the PELICAN, Greta thought furiously about how she would conduct her air assault once they will have found the MONROVIA STAR. With a bunch of Al Qaida terrorists ready to commit suicide to accomplish their mission, any attempt by her at taking those armed men prisoners could only end up costing the lives of some of her marines, on top of wasting precious minutes. She thus decided that her marines would shoot to kill on sight, unless they met unarmed ship crewmembers. There was also the possibility that one Pakistani nuclear scientist could be aboard the MONROVIA STAR, in which case he would constitute a target of prime interest to be taken alive. Then, there was the question of what to do if they found that Pakistani nuclear device already armed and possibly on a countdown. However, there were too many unknown factors in that scenario at this time, so she decided to keep all her options open until she would be on the ship and will have found that device. Thankfully, Lieutenant Green and his platoon arrived at a run after only four minutes and climbed the aft cargo ramp, with Green stopping next to Greta while urging his men to go take their seats in the cabin.

“What’s up, Captain?”

"Basically, we have to fly out, catch a cargo ship carrying an Al Qaida suicide team armed with a nuclear bomb and stop them before they could blow up Haifa or Tel Aviv. So, we will do a snap air assault, rope down on the top of that ship's bridge superstructure, kill all the terrorists and secure the nuclear device. I will brief you and your men in more detail once we will have lifted off. LIEUTENANT GOODMAN, YOU MAY LIFT OFF NOW!"

"DUSTING OFF NOW!"

With the PELICAN carrying less than half of its maximum payload mass, the VTOL aircraft jumped into the air, making Greta's and Green's knees bend under the vertical acceleration. Going to the middle of the cargo cabin, Greta then shouted out her instructions for the intended air assault and answered the couple of questions she got in return from Lieutenant Green and his marines. With that done, she went forward and entered the large cockpit area, Green close behind her, where she took one of the four seats reserved for officers and senior NCOs of the marine unit transported by the PELICAN. There, she could see outside in a large arc of view and saw that the Sun was already quite low in the sky. If they took too long to find the MONROVIA STAR, then locating it in the dark would make things quite a lot more difficult. On the other hand, that would allow her PELICAN to approach the cargo ship in the darkness, something that would distinctly favor her marines, who were well equipped with night vision devices. Getting up from her seat, she went next to that of Janet Goodman and spoke near her right ear.

"I believe that it would be a lot safer to approach and assault that cargo ship once the Sun will have set: that would give us more chances to take those terrorists by surprise. Would an air assault at night be too problematic for your flying?"

"Me and my crew practiced night assault operations a lot, Greta. I am game for it. On which part of the cargo ship will you want me to drop your marines?"

"Right on top of the bridge superstructure, if that's possible. Landing on the open deck forward of the bridge would make us perfect targets for any terrorists posted on the bridge. If you have rappelling ropes aboard, we will slide down on the ship rather than jump out. That way, you will be able to stay clear of any ship's mast or antenna atop the bridge house."

"We certainly have plenty of ropes aboard for that. Go see my loadmaster and he will have those ropes readied."

"Thanks!"

Greta then walked out of the cockpit and into the cargo cabin, where she went to speak with the loadmaster, Chief Petty Officer Mat Schenke, to prepare in advance four rappelling ropes, one per each side door of the PELICAN.

Flying on a South-southwest heading and top speed, Janet Goodman kept an eye on her radar screen, trying to locate the MONROVIA STAR. There were actually quite a few radar contacts on her screen but most of them were heading in the wrong direction, going either westward or northward. That left only four possible contacts which could be the MONROVIA STAR. She thus looked to her right at her copilot, Warrant Officer Peter Jensen.

"We have four radar contacts which could be the MONROVIA STAR. We will approach each of them in turn from their rear and from low altitude, from the nearest to the farthest. I want you to use our long-range target identification camera and read the name of the ships we will approach, until we find which one is the MONROVIA STAR."

"Got it!"

With Greta and Lieutenant Terence Green anxiously watching on, the crew of the PELICAN sped South-southwest at its top speed of 750 kilometers per hour and at an altitude of 300 meters. They approached their nearest radar contact after some ten minutes but Warrant Officer Jensen quickly threw cold water on Janet Goodman's hopes that it was their intended target.

"Niet on this one, Janet: it is an Italian tanker named the UMBERTO FALCHI."

"Damn! Then, let's go sniff out our next candidate."

Their second contact also proved to be the wrong ship, making Janet speed towards their third candidate, only to find out fifteen minutes later that the ship in question was a Turkish ferry ship. By then they were getting close to Israeli coastal waters, making Janet and Greta quite nervous. As they were now only minutes from starting to sail past the Israeli coastline, some forty kilometers away, Warrant Jensen shouted out in triumph.

"We have the **MONROVIA STAR** in sight at our eleven o'clock, nine miles away."



"Damn!" said Janet with some frustration in her voice. "The Sun is still up and won't set for another twenty minutes. If we wait until darkness falls, then that ship will already be sailing past the Israeli coast. What do you want us to do, Captain?"

"We can't wait further: we will make our approach and assault now. I will now go tell my marines to prepare to rappel out."

As Greta left the cockpit with Green, Janet made her aircraft go down to just above the waves, so that she would be more difficult to spot from the MONROVIA STAR.

"Gunners, be ready to pepper any armed man who will come into your sights on this ship but hold fire until I say otherwise. Peter, use our zoom camera to watch for any gunman visible on this cargo ship."

Janet then lowered her speed drastically, in order to make it safe enough for the marines to rappel down and to adjust her speed to that of the cargo ship. She was still flying at an altitude of fifteen meters and was some 250 meters from the back of the MONROVIA STAR when Warrant Jensen shouted a warning.

"ARMED MAN ON THE STARBOARD SIDE OPEN BRIDGE WING!"

"GUNNERS, ENGAGE! MARINES, PREPARE TO GO DOWN!"

In the cargo cabin, Greta grabbed the rope hanging down from the forward left side door of the PELICAN and shouted at her marines.

"GET READY TO SLIDE DOWN, MARINES. REMEMBER: MAKE IT QUICK, WALK AWAY FROM YOUR ROPE AS SOON AS YOU HIT THE ROOF OF THE BRIDGE AND START A TOP-DOWN HOUSE CLEARING PROCEDURE."

Greta, who had slung her rifle and was now holding her pistol between her teeth, looked across the cabin at Terence Green, who was holding the rope hanging down from the forward right-side door, and gave him a nod of encouragement, then did the same at the two marines ready to rappel down from the two aft side doors of the PELICAN. Chief Petty Officer Schenke, who was listening to Janet Goodman via his intercom headset, then shouted out loud while making the light above each door turn from red to green.

"MARINES OUT, OUT, OUT!"

Greta reacted immediately and started sliding down, using both of her feet and her hands to slow down her descent while applying only a minimum of pressure around the rope. She took less than two seconds to slide down the seven meters between the PELICAN and the top of the ship's bridge structure. She actually landed with a 'THUD' on the roof of the bridge and, seeing that the port-side open bridge wing was close and only one level down from her position, took one side step and slid down further, still

holding her rope. The moment that she landed on the deck of the open bridge wing, she grabbed her pistol in her right hand while still holding the rope with her left hand, so that the next marine to use her rope would also land on the open bridge wing. That marine was still sliding down when a man wearing a camouflaged combat uniform and armed with an AK-47 assault rifle emerged from the bridge via a steel door situated some four meters from Greta. That man never had a chance to point and fire his weapon before being killed by a bullet to his forehead. The man was still falling backward when Greta rushed to the open bridge door and rushed inside, her pistol held with both hands. She found three other men inside, one manning the ship's steering wheel and the two others pivoting to face her and point their rifles at her. Two quick shots from Greta downed those two gunmen, with one of them reflexively firing a wild burst around the bridge as he fell on his back, a bullet in the heart. The man at the wheel, who also wore a combat uniform and had a pistol at his belt, attempted to do a quick draw but Greta beat him to it, hitting him twice in his upper torso and killing him. As that man crumbled to the deck, Lieutenant Green rushed inside the bridge from the starboard side door, one marine at his back. Greta immediately shouted an order to him.

"HOLD THE BRIDGE WITH YOUR MARINE WHILE I CONTINUE CLEARING THIS SHIP."

Not giving time to Green to possibly protest her order, Greta ran to the internal staircase leading down to the lower levels of the superstructures, then ran down the steep stairs, still holding her pistol in her right hand. She was nearly at the next lower level when a gunman in camouflaged uniform suddenly opened a steel door and appeared in front of her. The man swore violently in Arabic and tried to point his assault rifle at her but Greta was again faster than him, peppering him with three shots and killing him. She was about to pass through the door used by the gunman when a salvo of automatic fire coming from the adjacent compartment hit the steel door, piercing it. Greta barely had time to take a step back and avoid those bullets. Realizing that the steel partition wall she was now leaning against would probably not stop rifle bullets, she crouched down in a hurry. That decision probably saved her life, as a dozen bullets pierced the partition she had been leaning against, with one bullet missing her head by only a few centimeters. Truly pissed, Greta grabbed one hand grenade from a pouch and pulled its safety pin, then let fly the safety handle and waited three seconds before quickly throwing her grenade inside the next compartment. She then heard a warning shout in Arabic before her grenade exploded in a loud 'BOOM' that half deafened her. As soon

as it exploded, Greta rushed inside that compartment, her pistol at the ready, only to find two dead men covered with blood from shrapnel wounds. Seeing another door at the back of that compartment, she ran to it but stayed to one side of it while holstering her pistol and grabbing her assault rifle. She then heard a panicked voice calling up in Arabic. While she didn't speak Arabic, Greta had heard quite often in the past Islamist militants, Al Qaeda terrorists and militiamen shouting at each other during combat to understand that the man inside that other compartment was asking his two comrades if they were alive. Greta answered for those two by jumping inside the adjacent compartment, her rifle pointed. Blood rushed to her head when she saw that a single man, dressed in civilian clothes, stood beside a table on which lay a large conical object. A panel was open on the side of the object, showing a complicated-looking mechanism and an indicator panel. On seeing Greta, the man had a flash of anger appear on his face and spat a few words in English at her.

"You fucking Americans! You devastated my country and killed my colleagues but you won't win this time: you are too late and..."

Greta didn't let the man, who had a pistol at his belt, finish his sentence and fired a four-shot burst, killing him. Cautiously approaching him and making sure that the man was dead, Greta then went to the conical object resting on the table and quickly examined it. Her heart sank when she understood that it was the nuclear device she had been warned about and that it was now armed, with a half-hour countdown having just started. She threw a dirty look at the dead man near her, then crouched down and quickly searched him. She found at once a wallet and a passport that made her clench her teeth: it was a Pakistani passport! That dead man, who had just activated that ex-Pakistani nuclear warhead, had to be the Pakistani nuclear scientist who had allied himself to Al Qaeda. Pocketing the wallet and passport, Greta then keyed her pocket tactical radio.

"Attention to all marines, this is Alpha Six. I have found the nuclear device but a terrorist had time to activate it. It has been set to explode in a bit less than thirty minutes from now and I can't see how to prevent that. We will now evacuate this ship after turning it away from Israeli waters. Grab all the documents and papers you will find on the terrorists, then we will assemble for departure on the open cargo deck. Navy Bird Six, I will need you to land on the cargo deck and evacuate my marines. I will join you in a minute. Alpha Six, out!"

Greta's next move was to try to pick up the nuclear warhead but she quickly had to give up on that: the device was obviously not as sophisticated as its American and Russian counterparts and was quite heavy, weighing well over a hundred kilos. On the other hand, that could also signify that it was a powerful device containing a large amount of fissile material. Either way, she would have to leave it here, on this ship. Her priority now was to save her marines and to prevent that bomb from causing catastrophic damage to Israel. The best way to do that in the short time she had would be to turn this ship away from Israeli waters at full speed and put as much distance as possible between that ship and Israel before this bomb detonated. Taking out of one pocket a small still camera she carried, she took a couple of photos of the nuclear device, concentrating on the markings visible on it and on the mechanism exposed by the open panel. Next, she took a picture of the dead Pakistani man, then ran out of the compartment. Before going back to the bridge, she took the time to quickly search the terrorists she had killed, taking wallets and passports from them.

When she arrived back on the bridge, Greta found Lieutenant Green at the helm, holding the steering wheel. The young officer gave her a grim look at her arrival and fished out a passport from one pocket, handing it to her.

"I have turned the ship westward and pushed the engines to maximum. I found this passport on the man who had been holding the wheel before you killed him."

Taking the passport offered by Green, Greta stiffened on seeing that it was a Saudi passport, and a diplomatic one at that. Throwing a dark look at the dead owner of that passport, she again took out her still camera and took two pictures of his face before pocketing back her camera and looking at Green.

"That nuclear device I found was way too heavy to be moved, so we have no choice but to leave it on this ship. Let's set the auto-pilot to head West and then let's evacuate this ship. We now have less than 24 minutes before that bomb explodes. Hopefully, this ship will then be far enough from Israel to avoid heavy damage to be caused there. Are your men ready to evacuate?"

"Yes, they are, Captain. There is however a big problem: the auto-pilot system was shot up by some stray bullets and we can only steer this ship on manual mode. If we leave, then this cargo ship may well start turning in circles or, worse, head back East towards Israel."



That piece of bad luck left Greta aghast for a moment before she regained some composure. Taking out the passports and wallets she had taken on the terrorists she had killed, she added to them the Saudi passport found by Green, along with her still camera, and gave the lot to her subaltern.

"I will take the wheel. Take those documents and my camera and make sure that our intelligence people will get them. Now, evacuate with your men, quickly! This nuclear device may well be a fusion bomb, in which case our PELICAN will need to get the hell out from here if it wants to survive the blast from that device."

"But...what about you, maam?" asked Green, visibly horrified at her plan to stay aboard the cargo ship. Greta gave him a grave, resolute look.

"When I enrolled in the Corps, I was ready to serve our country, whatever the cost. Time for me to pay the piper, Terence. Now, leave! That's an order."

Greta saw Green's lips start trembling, while tears appeared in his eyes. He however didn't object further and, coming to attention, saluted her.

"It was an honor to serve under you, maam."

"And it was an honor for me to serve with my fellow marines, Lieutenant." replied Greta, returning his salute. "Now, leave! Our PELICAN is waiting for you on the open cargo deck."

"Yes maam!"

Greta went to the steering wheel and grabbed it as Green ran out of the bridge and down to the open deck. He was soon inside the waiting PELICAN, which lifted off as soon as he was in. The VTOL transport pivoted on the spot once in the air, then sped towards the Northeast. Now alone on the ship, except for dead terrorists, Greta checked that she was still steering true west and that the ship's engines were at full power, then looked quickly at a digital nautical chart of the Eastern Mediterranean displayed on a screen next to the steering wheel. If she kept that course and speed, she should be about 64 kilometers west of the Israeli coast by the time the Pakistani bomb detonated: far enough for Israel to avoid most of the damage, with the exception of the radioactive contamination the bomb was going to cause to the air and water of the region. She then started reflecting mentally on her life and accomplishments. At the age of 32, she could already say that she had done plenty of good and had served her country well. While continuing to steer the MONROVIA STAR, she started scanning the sea around her, hoping that no other ship would pass by her close enough to be hit by the blast from the Pakistani bomb.

Looking frequently at her watch, Greta stayed at the steering wheel as the clock approached the time at which the bomb was due to explode. Strangely enough, she didn't feel fear grow in her then, only resignation and the conviction that she had made the right decision. The sea around her was empty of ships when she checked her watch and saw that she now had less than five minutes left on the countdown. She suddenly started hearing an engine and propeller noise that was most familiar to her. That brought anger to her, the more so when Janet Goodman's PELICAN appeared over the cargo ship. Grabbing her tactical radio, she keyed it and spoke in an angry tone in it.

"Navy Bird Six, what the fuck are you doing here? I told you to fuck off and return to Beirut. We now have about four minutes left before this ship goes 'BOOM'."

"Alpha Six, from Navy Bird Six: your ship is now far enough to prevent serious damage to the region. Even if it starts turning in circles now or turns eastward, it will still be out of lethal range from Israel at the time it will explode. Now, get the hell out on the open deck, so that we can pick you up with my rescue basket. Time to haul ass, marine!"

Understanding that any more delay would render Janet Goodman's gesture pointless, Greta ran down to the open cargo deck, where she jumped into the lowered rescue basket waiting for her. The PELICAN started flying away from the ship at once, even before the rescue basket had time to be fully reeled back inside the aircraft. When Greta's basket entered the cargo cabin of the VTOL transport, she found all of her marines waiting for her and smiling to her. She feigned an angry look and shouted at them.

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING, SMILING LIKE IDIOTS? GET BACK TO YOUR SEATS!"

"YES MAAM!" was the collective answer.

With her marines returning to their seats and buckling their safety belts, Greta ran to the cockpit, where she patted Janet Goodman's shoulder.

"Janet, I will owe you a beer for this. Hell, I will owe you all a beer."

"Now we're talking! Time to see how powerful that Pakistani nuclear device is. We have 98 seconds left on the countdown. You better sit down and buckle up now, Greta."

"Right!"

Sitting down and buckling her seat belt, Greta then grimly looked at her watch: evaluating the power of a bomb by the damage it made to you was not exactly a practical method.

“Ten seconds... Five seconds... Four, three, two...”

At that moment a blinding flash of light filled the sky for long seconds, nearly blinding the Americans sitting inside the cockpit area. They didn't hear or felt anything at first but, some fifty seconds after the flash, a titanic detonation and a powerful shockwave hit the PELICAN, accelerating it forward as if it had received a powerful kick in the ass. Thankfully, Janet Goodman was able to quickly regain control of her aircraft and then blew air out in relief.

“That was no puny nuclear device. Thank God: my aircraft seems intact.”

On Greta's part, she looked at her watch and made a grimace.

“Shit! My watch was off by two seconds.”

“Could someone please beat the crap out of that crazy girl?” replied Janet Goodman.

### **14:17 (Washington Time)**

**Tuesday, September 09, 2008 'C'**

**The Oval Office, The White House**

**Washington, D.C.**

For this meeting, President Bush had decided to hold it directly in the Oval Office, as the number of his aides and officials meeting with him on this extremely sensitive foreign affair had been kept to only five: Vice-President Dick Cheney; Secretary of Defense Robert Gates; Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice; Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell and General of the Army Joseph Shuman. Both to be more at ease to discuss and to be as far away as possible from the large windows of the Oval Office, Bush had made his visitors sit around the low table in the discussion corner of his presidential office and had strong coffee served by a White House steward. After taking his first sip of hot coffee, George W. Bush looked first at Mike McConnell.

“So, what do we know now about this mess in and around Lebanon, Mike?”

“That the duplicity of the Saudis seemingly knows no bounds, Mister President. Thanks to the heroic actions of our marines on that cargo ship carrying a nuclear device, we now know that a senior Saudi intelligence operative who held a diplomatic passport

was with the Al Qaeda terrorist team and probably directed it. The fact that he was ready to commit suicide in order to nuke Israel is a testament to the degree of religious fanaticism and hatred towards Israel that are held by a significant number of highly-placed Saudi government officials. The Saudis also most probably engineered this whole plan and also probably assisted the transportation to Beirut of both the bomb and of the Pakistani nuclear scientist accompanying it. That scientist, Doctor Hamad Khan, was one of the few Pakistani nuclear specialists to survive our airstrikes on the Pakistani nuclear arsenal and production complex, some five years ago. Khan was also known to be a religious zealot and had many contacts with the Afghanistan Taliban and with Al Qaeda.”

“What about that nuclear device which exploded on that cargo ship? How powerful was it?”

“Powerful enough, Mister President.” answered General Shuman. “Our experts have since estimated its power to be around 200 kilotons: it was definitely a thermonuclear device and would have been powerful enough to destroy the whole of the Tel Aviv area if it would have succeeded in being brought to within a mile of the Israeli coast. In that, the Israelis owe us big, thanks to our marines.”

“Talking of our marines, how many casualties did they suffer while assaulting that ship and in securing our embassy in Beirut?”

Shuman answered that in a sober voice: every single one of his marines was precious to him.

“One of our marines assaulting the MONROVIA STAR was killed in a gunfight with three Al Qaeda terrorists, while another one was wounded in that battle but survived. As for our losses incurred while securing our embassy and protecting the evacuation of our citizens in Beirut, our losses to date amount to three dead and seven wounded. By the way, those losses may grow during the next few days: our embassy has started to be targeted with mortar and rocket fire. Thankfully, our cruiser U.S.S. MONTANA is now sailing off the Lebanese coast and has started to support our marines with long-range gunfire. I ordered yesterday that our marines in Beirut be reinforced by one of our special forces units based in Germany, but the commander of our European Command was rather slow in having his units ready for action. In my opinion, General Horner, along with the commander of Sixth Fleet, Vice-Admiral Adams, should be relieved of command and replaced: both of them showed a shocking lack of initiative, along with poor judgment, in this crisis.”

Bush nodded his head and threw a look at Robert Gates.

"I agree with General Shuman: sack Horner and Adams and find more competent flag officers to replace them."

"It will be done, Mister President."

Bush then looked back at General Shuman, a faint smile on his lips.

"I must say that our marines in Beirut have impressed the hell out of me in the last few days. Their commander, Captain Visby, has shown herself to be a truly heroic and effective combat officer, General. I hope that you have something in mind to reward their actions."

"I do, Mister President. I am recommending that this marine rifle company be awarded a Presidential Unit Citation. As for the good Captain Visby, I am hesitating between a Medal of Honor and a Navy Cross: the fact that she was ready to sacrifice herself by staying at the helm of that cargo ship in order to steer it as far as possible from the Israeli coast was an incredible act of courage and self-sacrifice. As for the other marines who assaulted that ship and for the crew of the PELICAN which transported them and went back to save at the last minute Captain Visby from certain death, I am planning to award them all the Bronze Star."

"Go for the Bronze Star and the Presidential Unit Citation, General. As for Captain Visby, this is far from being her first heroic action in the field: it is high time in my opinion to properly recognize her bravery and expert combat leadership. I will be most happy to personally give her the Medal of Honor. Have written recommendations for all those awards ready for my signature, General."

"Thank you, Mister President. About our marines' actions in Beirut, we now need to decide how far we will intervene in this present Lebanese shit pit and how we will 'thank' the Saudis for their duplicity, Mister President."

"Judicious questions indeed! Condoleezza, what are your recommendations on how to handle this crisis in Lebanon and in the Middle East. Let's not forget that we still are looking for at least one more hijacked Pakistani nuclear device, which I suspect could well be in Saudi Arabia right now."

His Secretary of State thought for a moment before answering Bush.

"Personally, I would wrap the Saudis' knuckles with a ten-pound sledgehammer and warn them that even more painful stuff would await them if they persist in their clandestine support of Al Qaeda and of other terrorists. However, the Saudis could

retaliate in turn by cutting their oil exports to us, something that would prove quite painful for our economy.”

“Can’t any of our allies provide us with more oil, in order to compensate for any possible Saudi oil embargo?”

“In terms of dependable allies with large deposits of oil, I see both Canada and Iran as possible sources of oil for us. While the Canadian oil production capacity is significantly less than that of Iran, it is still quite important. They also have the huge advantage for us of being our next-door neighbor.”

“Indeed! Talk with Energy Secretary Bodman on this and arrange together a program for an alternate source of extra oil for our country.”

“It will be done, Mister President.”

“Talking of Iran, Mister President,” quickly interjected McConnell, “I believe that it is one major reason for the actions of the Saudis around the Middle East, something to be added to the Saudis’ long-time hatred of Israel.”

“How so, Mike?”

“Basically, the Saudis have been hating the guts of the Iranians for decades and even centuries, for religious reasons mostly but also because of their competition to export oil around the World. Saudi Arabia is a profoundly conservative Sunni Muslim country, where the extreme views of Wahabism, the same sect to which most Al Qaeda leaders belonged to, direct the views and actions of the Saudi government and people. In contrast, Iran is still a moderate democracy where most of its people are followers of Shia Islam, which Sunni Muslims typically equate to heresy. By supporting Al Qaeda terrorists and other extremists of the same ilk, the Saudis are probably aiming to weaken us and our allies and to indirectly hurt our links with Iran. If they would have succeeded in their plan to detonate a nuke close to Israel, it could have inflamed passions around the Middle East, with most of the Sunni countries around that region then turning against Iran because of its commercial and diplomatic ties with Israel. Ironically enough, the situation was the complete reverse in the parallel universe known to Nancy Laplante, the dead time traveler, with Iran being the sponsor of terrorism around the Middle East and Saudi Arabia being our ally.”

“I see! I believe that it is now high time for us to put the Saudis back in their proper place and to counter their negative influence around the region. Now, how much of all this should we let the American public know about?”

“Without divulging the most sensitive information we have about this affair, Mister President,” said Vice-President Cheney, “I would liberally smear the Saudis’ faces with eggs and fully expose their duplicity and support of terrorists to the American public.”

“I concur, Mister President.” added Robert Gates. “We should also cancel at once any military or other type of aid program we had with the Saudis and switch that aid to Iran. As a precaution against possible Saudi retaliation against Iranian oil tanker traffic in the Persian Gulf, I would also push a substantial number of our warships to that region and offer to escort the Iranian tankers sailing around Saudi Arabia.”

“Agreed!” said at once President Bush. “Let’s give a good lesson to these hypocritical Saudi bastards!”

**22:24 (Sweden Time)**

**Friday, September 26, 2008 ‘C’**

**Single officers’ quarters, Life Guards caserne**

**Stockholm, Sweden**

Despite all the news going around about the situation in Lebanon and the Middle East, a secondary item on the Swedish news channels was what Captain Alexander Akerman, of the Swedish Life Guards Regiment, had been looking for and was now enjoying watching. Greta Visby, in full ceremonial Marine Dress Blues uniform, was being given the American Congressional Medal of Honor by President Bush in person in the White House gardens, with a large crowd of dignitaries, V.I.P. guests and media reporters and photographers in attendance. Akerman felt pride as he watched Bush clip the light blue collar ribbon of the Medal of Honor, the highest American award for valor, around Greta’s neck.

“Only the second American woman to earn the Medal of Honor in history, after General Ingrid Dows: you richly deserved this, Greta. I can’t wait to be able to see you again...and kiss you all over.”

## **CHAPTER 24 – A NEW PRESIDENT**



**President John McCain**



**Presidents McCain and Bush**



**Vice-President Condoleezza Rice**

**23 :36 (Seattle Time)**

**Tuesday, November 04, 2008 'C'**

**Ingrid's home, 1402 South McDonald Street**

**Port Angeles, State of Washington, U.S.A.**

While her son Michael had wanted to watch the presidential election results with her, the fact that the West Coast was a full three hours before the East Coast time meant that the national level results would be available only around midnight in Port Angeles, so a disappointed Michael had to go to bed well before a winner could be unofficially declared by the medias. Now alone in her living lounge, Ingrid watched on as the reported results started to turn in the favor of the Republican Party ticket of John McCain and Condoleezza Rice. With George W. Bush having completed two terms as President and thus being ineligible for a third term, the Republican Party had chosen a ticket formed of the popular John McCain and of Condoleezza Rice, whose solid performance as the Secretary of State for President Bush had won her widespread praise. On the Democratic Party side, Barak Obama had become the first African-American to become a nominated candidate for the presidency. However, the continuing troubles around the Middle East and the public unmasking of Saudi Arabia's duplicity had created a lot of suspicions in the minds of the American voters about Barak



Obama and his Muslim-sounding name, something that had severely undermined the chances of someone Ingrid considered an honest and caring man. Something else that had hurt the chances of the Democrats was the past protests by the more progressive left wing of the Democratic Party about the way Mexico had been treated during the war against the drug cartels. Those protests, both on the streets and inside the Congress, had irked many voters who would have otherwise voted for the Democrats. Now, it seemed that the Republicans were well on the way to win control of both chambers of the Congress, on top of winning the presidency. Normally, that would have disturbed Ingrid, who had a liberal, open-minded view of national politics, but John McCain was a man whom she highly respected for his honesty, decency and fairness towards all. That respect for McCain had actually pushed Ingrid in secretly giving him some advice about his candidate partner for the post of vice-president. With the nomination of Condoleezza Rice, McCain had won over many voters for having chosen an African-American woman, a first in American politics, thus seriously cutting into two categories of voters who had initially favored voting for Barak Obama. Despite him being a conservative Republican, Ingrid was confident that, as President, McCain would be able to moderate the views and actions of the more far-right members of the Republican members of the Congress. John McCain had further helped his cause by choosing as members of his proposed cabinet a few independent politicians, playing the card of bipartisanship in order to assuage independent and undecided voters.

Ingrid stayed up until John McCain was unofficially proclaimed as the winner of the presidential elections by the main media channels, then went to bed at around one in the morning. Presidential elections or not, she had plenty of work awaiting her at the local Hiller plant, where the prototype of her Hiller STORK was now nearly completed. When they had learned that she and Hiller had already been working for over two years on a prototype able to fulfill the requirements of the T.S.T.A.T. project, Hiller's competitors, including giants like Boeing and Lockheed, had given up at once, unwilling to spend hundreds of millions of dollars to develop prototypes which would most likely lose the competition to Hiller. Instead, three of those competitors, Grumman, Bell-Textron and Sikorsky, had decided to enter into a partnership with Hiller to eventually help it produce its future STORK and its variants. While Hiller would concentrate on the civilian cargo variant of the STORK, Grumman would produce its armed shipborne variants, to be named respectively the STORMER and the SEAGULL, while Bell-Textron

and Sikorsky would produce the variants destined respectively for the U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Army. Two other partners in this deal, and most happy ones at that, were General Electric and Pratt & Whitney, who were going to provide thousands of jet engines for the project. With this split contract, everybody was going to be able to keep their production lines open and make at least a fair profit, even after paying a license production fee to Hiller. As for Hiller, that contract would bring to it some very significant revenues, while avoiding overstressing its already quite busy production lines. In all, the Hiller STORK was already on its way to become the most significant American aircraft program of the decade, with thousands of them to be eventually produced. However, Ingrid still had to complete her prototype and then prove to all that it was up to the high level of performance expected from it, so now was no time for her to slouch on the job or to cut corners in her design.

**09:14 (Washington Time)**

**Monday, November 17, 2008 'C'**

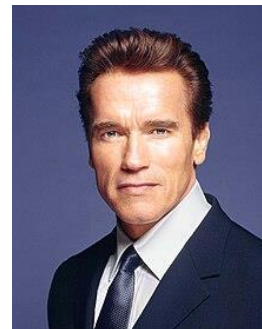
**The Situation Room, basement of the White House**

**Washington, D.C.**

With President George Bush taking the chair at the head of the long conference table of the Situation Room, John McCain sat to his right as the incoming President. The mixed present and future members of the presidential cabinet selected to attend this special intelligence briefing then sat around the table. Most of the present cabinet members were in fact going to continue on as members of McCain's cabinet, the newly-elected president having favored experience in their respective positions in order to start administering in January with a solid team at his back. The two notable exceptions to this as brand-new member of the cabinet were the Secretary of State Designate and the Secretary of Defense Designate, both of whom were due to start officially filling their duties after the official assermentation of John McCain as President in January. With Condoleezza Rice becoming the Vice-President Designate, she had then recommended to McCain who to name in her place as Secretary of State, with McCain agreeing with Rice. Thus, 61-year-old **Hien Jordan-Dows**, a veteran career



diplomat, was now sitting at the conference table of the Situation Room. For Hien, this truly constituted the crowning of four decades of service with the U.S. State Department after serving in multiple embassies, either as a junior attaché, then as ambassador. Apart from Hien's exemplary service file and obvious competence, what had decided Condoleezza Rice to name Hien as her replacement was the fact that Hien remembered her 21 prior incarnations, which made her able to speak fluently over a dozen current languages and also gave her an astounding amount of life experiences, ranging from having been a simple nomadic hunter-gatherer to that of ruling as a powerful king in Antiquity. As for the Secretary of Defense Designate, who was present with the current Secretary of Defense, McCain had created quite a media sensation by choosing the famous actor **Arnold Schwarzenegger**, who had served one term as governor of California. That move by McCain had in fact convinced many voters who were fans of Schwarzenegger to switch their votes for him. Many Democrats had decried that as a cheap political stunt, to which McCain had pointed out the successful term as governor of the actor, who had however lost the elections for a second term due to a scandal which had been caused by his lieutenant-governor, a scandal Schwarzenegger had nothing to do with but which still had negatively tainted his administration.



Also present in the Situation Room and ready to brief the politicians present were the service chiefs of the six military services, plus General of the Army Joseph Shuman, the commander of all the American combat forces, who would direct the briefing, and the heads of the CIA and NSA, two of the most important national intelligence agencies of the country. Once everybody was present and sitting, George Bush nodded once to General Shuman.

"You may begin, General Shuman."

"Thank you, Mister President. Misters President, Madam Vice-President, ladies and gentlemen of the cabinet, the briefing you will assist to today is classified 'Top Secret Codeword', so I will invite you to avoid taking notes. At the end of this briefing, we will distribute to you printed documents on the information we are about to give you, documents also classified 'Top Secret' but without the sensitive 'Codeword' content of this briefing, which will cover the present military and security situation around the

Middle East. First to brief you will be the Director of National Intelligence, Mister Mike McConnell. Mister McConnell...”

“Thank you, General.” said the career CIA man before making a detailed map of the Middle East and of the Eastern Mediterranean appear on a large plasma display screen.

“Mister Presidents, ladies and gentlemen, as you well know by now, a unit of marines based on the nuclear cruiser MONTANA flew out to Beirut on September eight, to rescue the personnel of our embassy and our citizens caught in the middle of an insurrection led by Islamist extremists. Those extremists attacked our embassy and also conducted a coup against the Lebanese government of President Aoun. While the Lebanese government fell, with most of the Lebanese Armed Forces either collapsing, deserting or changing sides, our embassy was saved by the intervention of our marines, who flew in aboard four PELICAN VTOL assault transport aircraft based on the USS MONTANA. Our marines also successfully evacuated the American staff and patients of the American University of Beirut Hospital, flying them first to our embassy, then to our base of Incirlik, in Turkey. Our marines also protected the access routes to our embassy, permitting over 500 American citizens and dual American-Lebanese citizens to reach our embassy, to then be safely evacuated by air to Turkey. Later that same day, we got some very sensitive intelligence about a nuclear warhead which had belonged to Pakistan and which was one of two such warheads to have disappeared from Pakistan five years ago. According to our intelligence, which came from cell phone intercepts, that nuclear warhead was on a ship in the port of Beirut and was under the control of a team of Al Qaeda terrorists bent on launching a suicide attack on an Israeli port. With no other American unit close enough to react quickly, our marine company holding our embassy in Beirut was alerted about that threat and tasked to stop that terrorist team and, hopefully, gain control of that device. The commander of that marine company then flew out with one of her rifle platoons in a PELICAN, found the ship in question as it was about to enter Israeli waters and took control of it in a textbook air assault operation. Unfortunately, a Pakistani nuclear scientist travelling with the Al Qaeda team had time to arm the device and start a thirty-minute countdown before being killed by our marine officer. Unable to stop that countdown, that marine officer, Captain Greta Visby, ordered her marines to leave, then stayed at the helm of the cargo ship, in order to ensure that the ship would sail as far away from Israel as possible before it would explode. Just minutes before the explosion, her marines came back to

extract her from the ship, just in time to save her from a thermonuclear explosion which was later estimated by our experts to have a yield of about 200 kilotons. Detonating as far from Israel as it was at that time, it caused no real damage, apart from causing radioactive contamination of the air and water of that area. Our marines, with Captain Visby safely aboard, then flew back to Beirut, where they continued to hold our embassy despite sporadic shelling and small arms fire from Islamic militants. Our marines held our embassy for another two weeks before they were relieved and withdrew by air.”

“Wow!” said Arnold Schwarzenegger, visibly impressed, “that story would make a great scenario for an action movie.”

“Yes, and you would probably be interested to know that Captain Greta Visby is an avowed culturist with an impressive set of muscles for a woman, Mister Secretary.” replied a smiling Shuman.

“Really? Then I must meet her one fine day.”

“Really! But I diverge. What followed in Lebanon and around the Middle East was pure chaos, as we found out via our marines who assaulted the ship carrying the nuclear device that a senior Saudi intelligence operative was aboard and was probably leading the Al Qaeda terrorist team. That operative was killed by our marines but his diplomatic passport was found on him and taken back to Beirut, to then be sent to us via Turkey. That exposed Saudi Arabia’s role in all this and prompted us to immediately stop any military and economic aid sent by us to the Saudis. In retaliation, the Saudis slapped an oil embargo on us, joined in this by a couple of other Arab Gulf states. We however were able to counter that embargo by getting extra oil supplies from Canada and from Iran. Seeing that, the Saudis tried to cut the traffic of Iranian oil tankers carrying oil for us but our navy responded by closely escorting those tanker ships. That led to a number of tense naval encounters in the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, with our ships having to fire warning shots to keep Saudi warships and aircraft at bay. In one incident that was kept secret from the public, our fighters had to shoot down four Saudi fighter-bombers who had launched anti-ship missiles against an Iranian tanker and the two American destroyers escorting it. Thankfully, the air defenses of our destroyers were able to shoot down those missiles. I then ordered, with President Bush’ approval, a retaliatory strike by long-range bombardment missiles fired from the USS MONTANA against the airbase from where those four fighter-bombers had taken off. Right now, we are still in a standoff against the Saudis in that region, while Lebanon is in a state of civil war, with no effective government in place. We have cut all diplomatic,

economic and financial ties with Saudi Arabia, with no indications of when the Saudis will become reasonable again. This is the gist of my briefing to you, ladies and gentlemen. Do you have any questions to date before the next briefer takes over from me?"

"I do have one question, General," said Hien Jordan-Dows. "How did the Israelis react to that nuclear explosion off their coast?"

"With dismay and alarm, Madam Secretary. They immediately put their force of nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles on top alert but, not knowing who was responsible for that explosion, didn't know who to target. Our embassy in Tel Aviv then passed to them an urgent message from us, basically explaining to them what had happened and asking them to hold off on any offensive action on their part. Thankfully they listened to us and refrained from launching any missile or air strike. However, they did put their forces along the border with Lebanon and Syria on full alert, with those forces still at top readiness. Right now, it would take only a small match to light up the whole Middle East."

"What a shit pit!" exclaimed Schwarzenegger. "Are our forces capable of containing this situation, General? Do you feel that you have everything needed to control this, or at the least contain the worst of the damage? Would you need more resources to do this? If yes, I promise you that I will fight tooth and nail to get you those extra resources."

"That is most appreciated, Mister Secretary. However, unless the Saudis try to use the one nuclear bomb we suspect them of still having, we should be able to manage with what we have, although more resources are always welcome."

That was when President Bush spoke up to cut into that conversation.

"For your information, Secretary Schwarzenegger, I decided to take the funds and military equipment originally meant to go to the Saudis and to instead inject them into our own forces, in order to speed up a number of our priority military programs. Secretary Gates will be able to brief you in detail about those programs later on."

"Thank you, Mister President."

Another briefer from the State Department then took over from General Shuman and spent some twenty minutes to review the stance and reactions of the individual countries in the region to the crisis in Lebanon and to the detonation of a nuclear device near Israel. Overall, the picture painted by that briefer made Hien grimace, being less than encouraging and announcing more instability and hostilities to come: she definitely

had her job cut out for her around the Middle East. When the meeting came to an end, Condoleezza Rice came to Hien and gently patted her shoulder.

"Don't worry about your first days in the job, Hien: I will help and support you through this crisis."

"Thanks, Madam Vice-President. I am starting to wonder if anyone could ever be able to bring true peace to the Middle East."

"Some would say that only God could do that."

Hien shook her head on hearing that.

"Madam Vice-President, the various beliefs about God held around the Middle East are actually a big part of the region's problem."

### **10:02 (Seattle Time)**

**Thursday, November 20, 2008 'C'**

**Ingrid Dows' executive office, Hiller Aircraft plant**

**William R. Fairchild International Airport, Port Angeles**

**Washington State**

When Jenny Nakamura entered Ingrid's office to bring her a document she had requested, she found her boss in the process of putting down her telephone receiver, while a nearly stunned look was on her face.

"Uh, something is wrong, Ingrid?"

"On the contrary, Jenny: the Pentagon just called me to tell me to speed ahead with the completion of our STORK: they now want it for yesterday."

"Wow! It must be this Middle East business that is pushing Washington in this."

"Most probably. That is not all, however: the Pentagon acquisition office also wants me to start a new, high priority project to design and build a supersonic VTOL fighter-bomber which would reequip the Navy's and Marine Corps' carrier-borne attack squadrons. And they are not even bothering to put that project up for competition: they say that I am the only one who could possibly deliver on that new requirement quickly. On that I must agree with them, pardon my lack of modesty about this."

"But this could make big waves in the Congress, Ingrid. Such a no-competition major military contract is unheard of. Congress lobbyists will shriek like skinned cats."

"True! However, we are facing the real possibility of entering into a major war in the Middle East, one that could involve nuclear weapons. Besides, even if I design by

myself that new aircraft, Hiller doesn't have right now the industrial capacity to build it in quantity, what with all the other aircraft orders already jamming our customers' orders lists, so the Pentagon is already planning for us to have it licensed-built by other aircraft manufacturers, the way we already plan to do with the production of the STORK and of its variants. That should assuage most of the protests from other manufacturers. The ones who will still scream murder will be their respective aircraft design teams, who will again have to play second fiddle to me. Presently, I must be the most hated person around in the aircraft design business in the United States."

Jenny Nakamura chuckled at that.

"Tough! If they want to compete with you in aircraft design, then they will have to learn to be as efficient and imaginative as you. However, with their ingrained habit to do 'design by committee'-style work, they will never be able to beat you at this game, Ingrid. So, do you think that you could really design quickly such a new aircraft?"

"Yes! I will now make it my primary goal, on top of completing, testing and certifying my STORK."

"And what will you call that new fighter-bomber design, Ingrid?"

Ingrid thought for a moment before a smile came to her lips.

"How about the Hiller COBRA? It will jump up at its opponents and will bite them hard, like a cobra."

"Nice! I like it. By the way, here is the file you requested."

"Thanks, Jenny."

With her secretary then walking out of her office, Ingrid sat back in her chair and closed her eyes, trying to picture what her future COBRA could look like. It took her only a couple of minutes before a new smile appeared on her face. Punching a few commands on her work computer, a very powerful model programmed to handle aircraft conceptual designs, she called up a number of digital blueprints, many of them linked to her successful A-24 fighter-bomber design. She slowly nodded her head after a few minutes of work and spoke to herself.

"Yup! This could work."



## **CHAPTER 25 – THE MIRACLE WORKER**



**15:22 (Seattle Time)**

**Wednesday, December 17, 2008 'C'**

**Tarmac of the Hiller Aircraft Plant, William R. Fairchild International Airport  
Port Angeles, Washington State**

The outside air was close to the freezing point but at least the day was sunny, with only weak winds, so Ingrid and her visitors from Washington didn't need to be heavily bundled up in winter clothes when they walked out of the Hiller aircraft

production plant. They then approached the prototype of the Hiller STORK, which sat on the tarmac in front of the prototype construction hall, ready for a new test flight. The eleven Washington officials, which included both the current and incoming secretaries of defense, their service secretaries and the military service chiefs, eyed with avid interest the big aircraft, which had been designed according to the lifting body/flying wing formula used by many previous Hiller aircraft designs. Before going inside the big VTOL transport aircraft via its lowered aft cargo ramp, Ingrid presented to her guests the four-woman crew of the STORK, who were standing at the foot of the cargo ramp.

“Gentlemen, may I present to you the test crew of my Hiller STORK: pilot Shirley Slade, copilot Elizabeth Gardner, flight engineer Carmen Morena and loadmaster Janet Morton. Girls, may I present to you Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, his incoming successor Arnold Schwarzenegger, Secretary of the Army Nelson McCain Ford, Secretary of the Air Force Michael Donley, Secretary of the Navy Donald Winter, General of the Army Joseph Shuman, Generals Thomas Steeler, Thomas Fletcher, William Rumley and Admirals Mack Benson and Roger Purnell.”

There was an exchange of handshakes before the commander of the U.S. Air Force, General Thomas Fletcher, made a remark while pointing at a patch sewn on the leather flight vests of the four women and at the multiple rows of medal ribbons pinned on their chests.

“Miss Dows, all four of your crewmembers wear the unit patch of the Fifinellas, the old 99<sup>th</sup> Composite Air Wing that was disbanded over twenty years ago. They also wear medal ribbons from wars which happened decades ago. Yet, except for Miss Morena, they all look way too young to have been members of that unit.”

Ingrid rolled her eyes briefly before answering Fletcher, a bit of resentment in her voice.

“All of them, like myself, were effectively members of the Fifinellas and fought with me in a number of past wars, General. Both a grave injustice and a stupid mistake was done when the 99<sup>th</sup> Composite Air Wing was disbanded on the excuse that it was ‘not needed anymore’ by the then commander of the Air Force, General Fullbright. The reason for their apparent youth is that I used my supernatural powers to rejuvenate them a few years ago. Miss Slade is actually 87-year-old and fought at my side, first as my wingman, then as a squadron commander, in World War 2, the First Korean War, the Indochina War, the Palestine Crisis of 1954 and the East Europe War of 1955. She retired from the U.S. Air Force in 1983, with the rank of colonel. Miss Gardner is also 87-year-old and fought with me in the same wars as Miss Slade, to finally retire from the

Air Force in 1983 with the rank of lieutenant colonel. Miss Morena is 69-year-old and joined the Fifinellas in 1963, retiring from the Air Force after the disbandment of the Fifinellas in 1986. As for Miss Morton, she is 86-year-old, joined the Fifinellas as an ordnance technician at its creation in 1942, fought in seven wars and eventually became a qualified loadmaster with the Fifinellas, serving in it until its disbandment and retiring with the rank of master sergeant. She served as a loadmaster in about every type of cargo aircraft the Air Force ever used. All four of my crewmembers are decorated combat veterans, General.”

Despite the fact that she was widely known to hold a number of fantastic powers, the group of officials still stared with awe at her for long seconds. Arnold Schwarzenegger then stared admiringly at the four women, all of whom looked no older than 35.

“Wow! So much valor on display here. And what was the reason given by this General Fullbright to disband the Fifinellas, Miss Dows?”

“That an all-female Air Force unit was no longer needed, due to the full integration of women in our military, Mister Secretary, an argument I consider to be complete crap. While we officially integrated women in all military trades in the 1960s, with supposed complete equality with servicemen, the sad truth is that crass sexism and even sexual harassment continued on for decades and still can be encountered in some of our military units, with male unit commanders too often sweeping any accusations of sexual improprieties under the rug or being themselves the problem. I did my best to eradicate this curse while I was in command of the American forces but misogyny and sexual abuse are still a scourge in our armed forces.”

Arnold Schwarzenegger then looked at Robert Gates, whom he was due to officially replace after the inauguration of John McCain as President in next January.

“Maybe we should reactivate the Fifinellas and possibly make it an all-female unit again. What do you think, Bob?”

“I would personally be ready anytime to reactivate the 99<sup>th</sup> Air Wing, but making it again as an exclusively female unit would attract cries of sexist reverse discrimination and the Congress would probably nix it. However, feel free to act on this once you are officially the Secretary of Defense, Arnold.”

Ingrid and her four female crewmembers held their breaths as Schwarzenegger mentally pondered that question. The big actor turned politician then nodded his head and smiled to Ingrid.

"Come and see me at the Pentagon in February, Miss Dows. We will then discuss this subject together."

"I will be there, Mister Secretary," replied Ingrid, her heart beating furiously. She then concentrated back on the business at hand. "Well, time to show you my STORK, gentlemen. Please follow me inside."

Climbing the aft cargo ramp of the big VTOL transport aircraft, the group of politicians and flag officers hesitated when they saw that the cargo bay already contained a big truck which had a trailer attached to it. The Navy secretary, Donald Winter, then pointed at the vehicle and asked a question to Ingrid.

"Uh, what's that, Miss Dows, and why is it in your prototype?"

"That, Mister Secretary Winter, is a fully loaded five-ton truck towing a water bowser, the lot representing a payload of 23 tons. My STORK will take off and effect a demonstration flight with it inside."

"And you are sure that this will be safe, Miss Dows?" asked a bit naively Winter, bringing a pinched smile on Ingrid's face.

"Secretary Winter, I am not the kind of aircraft designer who will put at risk my test pilots just to brag about my designs. My STORK has already been tested in flight with loads even heavier than this one. Now, for the performances my STORK demonstrated in actual flight, it can carry payloads of up to thirty tons while taking off and landing at the vertical, can do short takeoffs of less than 300 meters with a combined 75 tons of payload and fuel, has attained a recorded top speed of 1,000 kilometers per hour, just below the speed of sound, and has a range of 8,000 kilometers while carrying a twenty-ton payload. It can also use air refueling to extend its autonomy to trans-Pacific range. Parts of it also fold to allow it to fit in aircraft carrier and cruiser aircraft hangars. There are a total of 55 passenger seats along the sides of the cabin and in the cockpit section, with those seats being of commercial business class standards in terms of width and pitch. Too many aircraft manufacturers tend to forget that our soldiers are on average bigger than the common American citizen and also often wear pistol or equipment belts which make them even larger. You may try those seats to see how comfortable they are, gentlemen."

The officials didn't have to be told twice before sitting down in the rows of well-cushioned chairs. The big and muscular Arnold Schwarzenegger even made his seat recline to the rear to judge its comfort for a sleeping passenger and was thoroughly impressed.

"Hell, I could think that I am travelling business-class on Pan Am! You are positively going to spoil our soldiers, Miss Dows."

"Our soldiers are ready to risk their health and lives for us, Mister Secretary: they deserve to be 'spoiled' a bit instead of being treated like heads of cattle."

"You are absolutely right about that, miss."

"Well, to continue describing my STORK, I have to say that this prototype represents the unarmed, civilian cargo variant of my basic design. The VTOL assault variant, to be named the STORMER, will have a bit smaller payload capacity but will be armed with two semi-fixed 30 mm automatic cannons, two machine gun turrets, two side door machine guns on swivel mounts, two rocket launcher pods, each for eleven five-inch tubes, and five belly weapons pylons. As for my SEAGULL maritime patrol and anti-submarine variant, it will carry the same armament, plus will have eight extra external missile launch rails, but will not have a cargo cabin. Instead, it will contain a number of radar and sonar systems, plus a retractable magnetic anomaly detector boom and an ejection system for sonobuoys. All my variants will be equipped with a rescue winch and basket operated through a floor trap, plus will be able to float safely on the surface of the ocean, where a pair of hydro jets will allow it to sail around in near silent mode."

Both Secretary Winter and Admirals Benson and Purnell opened their eyes wide on hearing that.

"Gee! We really couldn't ask for more than all this, miss."

"I hope so, Mister Secretary. We will now visit the cockpit area, where I will explain to you the way my STORK can be flown. Please follow me, gentlemen."

Some nine minutes later, Ingrid walked out of the aircraft with the dignitaries and went to a safe spot in front of the prototype workshop's hangar doors. Using a pocket radio, she gave a short order to the crew of the STORK, which was now inside. The two big turbofan engines mounted on both sides of the aircraft then started up and gradually increase their thrust in an increasingly loud and ear-splitting whine. Then, to the astonishment of the Washington officials, the STORK nearly jumped up into the air before quickly pivoting around and starting to accelerate forward at an impressive pace that made even the seasoned Admiral Benson open his mouth with awe.

"Christ! You would never know that it is presently carrying a 23-ton payload, Miss Dows."

"Hopefully, that kind of performance will shock our enemies as much or more than it does shock you, Admiral." replied Ingrid, smiling and enjoying that moment. I am still conducting testing and certification flights of my STORK while one prototype each of its STORMER and SEAGULL variants are being built. So, what do you say about my proposed Tri Service Tactical Assault Transport aircraft candidate?"

"I have only one word to answer you, Miss Dows: Sold!"

Twelve minutes later, with the STORK having landed at the vertical back in front of the prototype workshop, Ingrid led her duly impressed guests up to her executive office, intent to discuss with them production details, like the number of aircraft per variant to be produced for the American armed forces and their individual and total acquisition prices. That discussion went on for a good hour and went quite well in Ingrid's opinion, with the price requested by Hiller accepted easily enough by Secretary of Defense Gates. However, as she thought that their discussion was now closed, Arnold Schwarzenegger looked at her in a most sober way, while the other politicians and flag officers stayed in their seats, apparently having expected the ex-actor to raise a new point with her.

"Miss Dows, you have again proved today to be a precious asset for the United States as an aircraft designer. You have also proved countless times during the past decades to be an even more precious asset to our country as a presidential advisor and as a top military leader and strategist. What I am going to say comes from President John McCain, who is backed up in this by President Bush. Our nation is now entering a most dangerous and unstable period of time, with what we believed before to be a reliable ally and one of our main providers of crude oil, Saudi Arabia, to prove instead to be in reality a supporter of some of the most dangerous terrorists we are now facing. This is now forcing us to do a nearly complete turnaround in our World strategic views and plans. While we certainly have plenty of competent people in Washington who are available to counsel our President and to devise new strategic plans and initiatives, there are simply no one equal to you in that respect. President McCain thus has tasked me to formally ask you if you would accept to become again a presidential advisor, even if it is only in a partial or temporary capacity. The President would like to use your services at least for the time needed to pass through this period of danger and instability. We would of course be ready to compensate financially the Hiller Corporation for losing your services for that said period of time. Apart from advising the President, you would also

be able to again put on your military uniform and rank of General of the Army, as General Shuman's strategic planning assistant. So, what do you say to that, Miss Dows?"

Completely taken by surprise by this, Ingrid stayed quiet for long seconds as her visitors stared with anticipation at her. She finally spoke up in a soft voice.

"Mister Secretary, you may tell the President that I am ready to advise and counsel him on a part-time basis, as needed. However, I will not put back on my military uniform. I still have so much to do here, designing and testing new aircraft for our forces, something at least as important as acting as a presidential advisor. I also want to stay here in order to care for my young son and his education in a place he feels comfortable and familiar with. I won't even ask for a salary as a presidential advisor and will be more than happy to provide advice in times of need to the President as a friend and American patriot. I have been serving this nation for 66 years and fought for the United States in over a dozen wars and conflicts. I also won't live eternally, and the U.S.A. will have to learn to one day go on without me. For all those reasons, I wish to stay here, in Port Angeles, and continue to work as an aircraft designer and test pilot."

If Arnold Schwarzenegger felt disappointment at her decision then, he didn't show it and simply nodded once his head while looking straight into Ingrid's eyes.

"Ingrid, I fully understand and accept your decision about this and I am sure that President McCain will also feel the same as me. Keep up your good work here and take good care of your son."

"Thank you for your comprehension, Mister Secretary." said softly Ingrid, relieved to see that Schwarzenegger was not insisting further. "You can tell President McCain that he can call me at any time in the future, for whatever reasons. I will always be available to him if he needs advice."

"I am sure that he will greatly appreciate that, Ingrid. Enjoy your life in Port Angeles with your son."

"Thank you again, Mister Secretary." replied Ingrid. "In turn, I wish you a successful term as Secretary of Defense and a successful term in office for President McCain. With him at the helm of our country, I am sure that the United States will stay a great nation and a leader of democracy around the World."

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