

AND AN ANGEL SANG

SCIENCE-FICTION NOVEL

BY

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

THIS FICTION NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF WAR, VIOLENCE AND SEX, AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE AND CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS THAT ARE UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN. WHILE THIS NOVEL DEPICTS SOME HISTORICAL PERSONS AND EVENTS FROM THE PAST AND PRESENT, THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION AND WORDS OR DEEDS ATTRIBUTED IN IT TO PERSONS WHO EXISTED DO NOT NECESSARILY REFLECT HISTORICAL REALITY.

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

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

OTHER BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR

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

Nancy Laplante Series

CODENAME: ATHENA

ADVENTURES THROUGH TIME

CHILDREN OF TIME

TIMELINES

DESTINIES

TIMELINE TWIN

FROM THE FIELDS OF CRIMEA TO THE SANDS OF MARS

THE ADVENTURES OF NANCY LAPLANTE IN THE 19TH CENTURY

UNITED STATES SPACE CORPS

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CHAPTER 1 – BUILDING THE BAND’S REPUTATION



Nancy

Lucy

Carmen

Sarah

Erika

21:34 (New York Time)

Wednesday, July 10, 1996 ‘C’

‘The 54th’ night club, 606 West 54th Street, near corner of 10th Avenue

Manhattan, New York City

U.S.A.

Roger Neville, owner and manager of the night club ‘The 54th’, applauded warmly, like the ninety or so customers in the lounge of his small night club, when the all-girl band on the stage finished the song they had been playing. Contrary to most of the discos and dance clubs one could find in Manhattan, his club’s clientele was mostly made of more mature people in their late thirties or even fifties who preferred a more varied and less loud music and singing than what was favored by younger crowds. The band of young women he had hired for this night on a trial basis, after they had been warmly recommended to him by a friend who was teaching at the Juilliard School of Music, had certainly satisfied his tastes and those of his patrons. While being barely in their late teens or early twenties, the five girls of the ‘D.C. Five Band’ were all very talented musicians and the lead girl was also a fantastic singer and dancer who was well supported by the other four band members, who possessed an unusual range of instruments skills. One thing that had pleased both Neville and the club’s patrons, apart from the high quality of instrument playing and singing, was the wide inventory of the band’s songs and music. Tonight, they had played in succession Pop, Rock, Folk and even Country songs, plus had played pieces that could nearly be called classical music.

The band had also proved to be able to sing in multiple languages, something very rare in modern bands. One old Celtic ballad sung in Gaelic had fired up many of the club's customers who happened to be of Irish descent, while a medieval song in German with surprising energy and beautiful lyrics had attracted stand-up applause. The lead singer of the band, a hauntingly beautiful teenage blonde, then announced a ten-minute pause in order to change both costumes and instruments. With the curtains of the small stage closing and hiding the band, the club owner used that pause in the show to slowly go around the tables and ask his customers about how they had liked the band so far. One couple with gray hair was particularly effusive in their comments, with the woman of the couple showing enthusiasm in her praise of the band.

"My God, Roger, where did you find this band? These girls are fantastic! And that young lead singer: she sang beautifully in no less than four languages! How often do you see that in a teenage band?"

"I must agree with you that these girls are extremely talented, Madam McLean. As for where I found them, they are students at the Juilliard School of Music and they were recommended to me by one of their professors of music, who told me that he had not seen such talent in a long while. So, would you like to have them here for more shows?"

"Hell yes!" answered the husband, an affluent lawyer of Irish descent. "Their ballad in Gaelic nearly threw me back to Ireland for a few minutes. And, as my wife already said, their lead singer is pure gold, with the best voice I have heard in decades." Sean McLean nearly added that the young singer was also a feast for the eyes but kept his tongue in check just in time, as his wife may not have appreciated that last remark.

"I am truly glad that you liked them, Mister McLean. I believe that they are due to do two more songs tonight."

"Could they go for a third one as an extra, Roger?" asked the wife. "I would really love that."

Neville smiled and bowed to his female patron.

"I will certainly pass your request to the band, madam."

After talking with the McLean, Roger Neville cut a path to the stage and slipped through one end of the stage's curtains, intent on talking with the girls of the band. He however quickly turned away on seeing that one of the five girls was in an advanced stage of undress, apparently in the process of changing her outfit.

"Oh, excuse me, ladies! I was coming to pass to you a request from a couple of my patrons."

The blonde lead singer, Nancy Dows, who was wearing a long light blue dress, came to him and walked around him so that he could look at her without having to twist his head. Her smile, allied with her sparkling blue eyes and angelic face, nearly melted Neville.

"And what would your patrons like to hear, Mister Neville?"

"Well, I know that you are scheduled to do two more songs tonight, as per our prior understanding, but the customers absolutely loved your show and asked for more songs, if possible."

"Everything is possible with good will, Mister Neville. We will be happy to play an extra song or two on top of the two next ones. After all, we came here in order to become better known around New York."

"Thank you, miss. That will be most appreciated. Be assured that you will get an appropriate extra for that. As for becoming known, you certainly will be in a few weeks if you continue playing such quality music. Uh, could you include a song in Gaelic for later tonight? A couple of patrons of Irish descent really loved your Celtic ballad."

In response, the blonde lead singer smiled and looked at her four band members.

"Hey, girls, will you be ready to play 'Teir Abhaile Riu' after playing 'Knocking On Heaven's Door' and 'My Heart Will Go On'?"

All four teenagers replied in the affirmative at once, making Roger Neville rub his hands together in satisfaction.

"Excellent! Thank you for your comprehension, ladies."

"We are the ones who need to thank you for your support, Mister Neville." replied Nancy. Neville nodded his head once while smiling and turned away, slipping back through the stage's curtains and leaving the five teenagers alone, free to complete their costumes change.

A few minutes later, the curtains of the stage were pulled open, revealing the teenage girls in position for a new song. However, the outfit worn by Erika Lang, the drum kit player, along with the instrument she now stood next to, attracted a few surprised exclamations and comments. The young blonde now wore nothing more than a loincloth and a narrow band of cloth rolled around her torso and covering her breasts. She also stood next to a huge drum laid on its side, rather than flat on the ground. While

Sean McLean definitely appreciated the skimpy costume of the drummer girl, whose loincloth covered very little of her firm, well-shaped buttocks, Mary McLean instead focused on the huge drum.

“My God! What kind of drum is that? It is huge! And why is it tipped on its side?”

“I believe that it is called a ‘Kudo drum’, Mary. I saw once similar drums being used at the opening of a circus act. They produce a very powerful beat. It is an instrument of Japanese origin, which would also explain the skimpy costume of that drummer girl: traditional Japanese Kudo drummers wear nothing but a loincloth when playing at ceremonials.”

“Oh! I see! That girl certainly looks quite muscular...for a girl.”

“She’s got the correct look for the job, dear.” replied Sean, repressing a smile.

Nancy Dows, the band’s lead singer then spoke softly in her microphone while standing in front of her band members.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are now going to play a song originally written and recorded in the future and which was then imported through time by Nancy Laplante, the late Canadian time traveler, when she was involuntarily projected back in time to the year 1940. The song is titled ‘Knocking on Heaven’s Door’ and was originally sung in the version you will hear by a female singer using the artist’s name of ‘Raign’.”

What Nancy didn’t say was that this song had not actually been part of the collection of music brought from 2012 to 1940 by Nancy Laplante but had instead been imported much more recently from the future of Timeline ‘A’ by her mother, Ingrid Dows. For years, Ingrid had hidden from Nancy the fact that she could travel through time, thanks to the implanted equipment she had gained as a secret field agent of the Time Patrol, a time travel enforcement agency from the 24th Century formed by Ingrid’s adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante. However, a mission conducted a few years ago by Ingrid as a last resort in order to save many innocent American citizens trapped inside the Soviet Union had decided Ingrid into revealing her secret to Nancy, who was now in the know about the Time Patrol.

With Sarah Weissman and Lucy Dows playing the electronic synthesizer, Carmen Estrada holding a steel triangle and small rod and Erika Lang standing in front of her Kudo drum, Nancy started singing a slow, melancholic song, accompanied at first by only synthesizer and triangle music. Then, as Nancy sang, Erika Lang started beating

her giant drum with spaced, carefully counted and coordinated hits with the two large wooden sticks she was holding. The combined effect of the instruments' music and of Nancy's singing was reinforced by the deep, powerful beat of the Kudo drum, making Mary McLean shiver from the rising emotions triggered by the song. Her husband, like the rest of the patrons, was equally taken and moved by the song, which ended after a bit over four minutes with Nancy Dow's voice having risen to a powerful crescendo. All the patrons then rose from their seats to applaud enthusiastically. Mary McLean applauded as well while bending sideways to speak to her husband.

"What a powerful song! It gave me goosebumps!"

"The same here, Dear. This band is going to have a great future if they continue like this."

As the patrons were sitting down after applauding, Erika Lang left the stage at a run to go out of sight, then returned a mere minute later, having slipped a short dress over her breast cloth band and loincloth, and took back position at her more usual drum kit. As for Nancy, she sat down behind a harp, while her adoptive sister Lucy grabbed a violin. What followed was a moving romantic song that brought tears to many of the female patrons in the club. The fact that Nancy sang in Italian only added to the emotional effect of the song on Mary McLean.

"Dear God! This is opera-quality singing at its best! That young Nancy must be the best singer I have heard in my life."

Her husband could only nod in agreement then.

"Her singing is truly heavenly. I..."

Seeing her husband hesitate and pause, Mary gave him a questioning look.

"What?"

Sean, who now appeared a bit agitated, replied to her in a low voice, so that other patrons could not hear him clearly.

"That girl, Nancy Dows: her name sounded familiar to me at first but I could not remember why. I now know why: she is that semi-human, semi-angel girl who flew in and stopped a racial riot in Chinatown last March and was then interviewed on CNN."

"Her, an angel? But she gave no sign of it and said nothing about that."

"Which makes her a modest girl: a trait that I appreciate. Let's keep that to ourselves. Clamoring about that could ruin her band's efforts tonight."

"You are right, Sean. I will keep mum about this."

Two more songs followed 'My Heart Will Go On', including the band's own success song, 'Sometime, Somewhere', which involved singing in five different languages and the playing of a number of old musical instruments from past centuries. The end of the last song was greeted by a long period of enthusiastic applause from the patrons and from Roger Neville, who then went to talk to the band members as they started to pack up their instruments.

"Girls, you were positively fantastic! Could you play here a couple of more nights per week during this school vacation period?"

Nancy exchanged quick looks with her band members before smiling to the club manager.

"We could give you up to two more nights during weekdays, plus one weekend night, and this until school resumes in late August. Once school is back on, we still could offer you one performance during each weekend."

"That would be great, Miss Dows! Let's go for representations on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday evenings, if that suits your band."

"That sounds perfect, Mister Neville."

"Excellent!" replied the happy manager while extracting a thick envelope from his vest's internal pocket and handing it to Nancy. "Here is your fee for tonight's performance, to which I am now going to add an extra two-hundred dollars as a bonus for your incredible music. I can thus expect you to be back this Friday, for seven in the evening?"

"We will be there then, Mister Neville." promised Nancy. "Thank you again for giving us a chance to play at your club."

"The pleasure was mine, Miss Dows." replied the manager, whose sales of drinks to his patrons tonight had been very good indeed.

Some twenty minutes later, the whole band was out of the club, with their instruments and sound equipment loaded back in their faithful minivan. As Erika was about to start the engine of her vehicle, Carmen Estrada let out a deep sigh of regret.

"Damn! I wish that our association with Ken could have worked out: I really miss him."

Nancy gave a sympathetic smile of support to Carmen on hearing that. Ken Lee was another student at the Juilliard School of Music whom Nancy had saved from a bunch of racist bullies and who had then been invited to join the band. Unfortunately, while

Carmen Estrada had quickly forged a romantic link with the handsome young man, Ken's relations with the band had deteriorated within weeks, with Ken complaining that too little of his music playing with brass instruments was being incorporated into the songs written or played by the band. After three months of increasing recriminations by Ken, Nancy had finally decided to ask him to leave, before the conflict could blow her band apart. While Carmen had been sad to see Ken leave, she had also understood by then that he was simply not compatible with the style of music the D.C. Five played.

"Nothing stops you from continuing to see him in private, Carmen. He is still welcome to come and visit you at our apartments as a simple visitor."

"I know, but I am afraid that his mere presence could revive our dispute. I better forget him and concentrate on our band instead."

"Please, Carmen, don't say that. Being in the band doesn't mean that you have to stop dating and avoid building relationships. I run a musical band, not a prison. How about inviting him to go to the beach in Atlantic City with us this Sunday? I'm sure that he would like that."

"Hey, that's a great idea, Nancy!" replied Carmen, a big grin appearing on her face. "I'm going to call him once at home."

"And tell him that we are going there to have fun on the beach, and not to practice with our instruments."

"Got it!"

Satisfied, Nancy then thought that she would need to advise her brother by adoption, Leonardo, of this, as the beachside cottage they were going to use in Atlantic City belonged to him. That cottage had belonged to Leo's father, with Leonardo inheriting it after his whole family had been murdered by a criminal gang during an organized crime war that had nearly cost the life of Leo as well. Only the protection both Ingrid and Nancy had provided to him then had saved his life. A nearly similar story had happened to Lucy, who had been adopted by Ingrid after her own parents had been murdered by the Chinese Triads. To say that the Dows' family history had been a tumultuous one would be no exaggeration indeed.

The trip back to their apartment building on West 51st Street took nearly twenty minutes despite being only a couple of kilometers from the night club. Actually, calling their place an 'apartment building' was a bit of a stretch. The building the band had lived in since arriving in New York to attend the Juilliard School was in reality an old garage

and warehouse in the Hell's Kitchen District that had been converted into a residential building and contained a total of six apartments. The place may have been old but the rent was reasonable...for Manhattan, and the plumbing had been redone to modern standards. Parking their minivan in the garage which they had rented along with two of the apartments, the five young women went up to the top apartment occupied by Nancy, Lucy and Erika, to store back their instruments and



sound equipment in the room they used to practice. Once that was done, they assembled in the large lounge of the apartment, where Nancy took out the envelope of cash Roger Neville had given her.

"Alright girls: pay time!"

She then proceeded to divide in five equal parts the cash, with Erika getting a little extra in order to reimburse her for the use of her minivan.

"Well, things are looking up, I would say." said a happy Lucy while pocketing her cash money. With four gigs per week at 'The 54th' night club, we should be able to live decently in New York without having to dip further into our savings or into our parents' pockets."

"True, but playing two more gigs a week would be even nicer." replied Carmen. "Then, we would have enough to improve our show wardrobes or to buy new equipment and instruments."

"Don't forget that we are also receiving regular royalty checks from the various radio stations that have started to play our tunes, plus from the records company selling our album." added Sarah. "All in all, I would say that we are having a good start in our musical careers."

"We are indeed," agreed Nancy, "but now is not the time to rest on our laurels. I have a few ideas about new songs of our own making that would enlarge our musical repertoire. We don't want to bore our new customers with endless repetitions of the same songs, right?"

"Right!" replied Erika. "Well, I think that I am due for a shower."

“Need someone to give you a back rub?” asked Lucy, a malicious grin appearing on her lips. In response, Erika winked to her while starting to walk in a sensuous way towards the bathroom. The three other girls, who were all either bisexual or lesbian due to their ability to remember their past incarnations as either men or women, simply smiled at that and went to their respective bedrooms or apartment in order to also change and clean up.

01:40 (New York Time)

Thursday, July 11, 1996 ‘C’

Nancy’s bedroom, Apartment # 4

607 West 51st Street, Hell’s Kitchen District

Manhattan, New York City

‘Nancy, wake up!’

The mental message immediately pulled Nancy out of her usual light sleep state, as she didn’t need sleep as much as a normal human being to be fresh and rested in the morning. Opening her eyes, she saw no one in her dark bedroom. Then, the male-sounding mental voice resonated again in her mind.

‘Nancy, this is Michael. Please go to the bathroom: I have things to tell you.’

‘I’m coming, Father.’ replied Nancy, who then got out of bed and, not bothering to put any clothes on, left her bedroom and went to the adjacent bathroom of her apartment, which she shared with Lucy and Erika. Once in the bathroom, she closed and locked the door and switched on the overhead light. At first, she saw no one inside the bathroom. Then, a luminescent humanoid shape appeared next to the bathtub, to materialize in seconds into a handsome man of tall stature and impressive physique. His face also had an angelic beauty to it. Nancy then approached the newcomer and gently caressed his face with one hand.

“Father, it is nice to see you again. Your visits are all too rare, I must say.”

“That’s because there are many things that I have to take care of, my daughter.” replied the archangel. “Tonight, I came to teach you a few things that will help you to better do good around you. You already possess many powers, but you still can control events in only a limited way.”

“And what new powers do you want to teach me, Father?”

Michael gently smiled down at Nancy before answering her.

“Just follow me and I will tell you all about them.”

Michael then hugged tightly Nancy just before disappearing with her from the bathroom. Both then reappeared a mere second later. Now, however, Nancy had a nearly transfigured expression on her face and she looked up at her archangel father while still glued to him.

“It is as if we just spent days together, yet I can feel that we came back here only a short moment after jumping away. Am I right?”

“You are, my dear daughter. You now can control space and time according to your will. The funny thing is that a mere human from the future of the original timeline also managed that feat while using purely scientific principles. As you were able to practice with me, you can not only travel through time and space but also between parallel dimensions. However, know that other angels and Chosen are already at work in those two other timelines. If you have to use your powers, then do it in this timeline.”

“I understand, Father, and I will follow your counsel. Will you stay here a bit more?”

“Not with you, but I will be somewhere else in this timeline. If you need me, then simply ask mentally for me. Goodbye, my sweet daughter.”

Michael then gently kissed her on her forehead before stepping back from her and vanishing, leaving Nancy alone and with a heavy heart. She however regained her composure after a moment, then returned to her bedroom and slipped back into her bed. She was not able at first to return to sleep, as her mind went through what she had just experienced and learned. Nancy fully realized the incredible extent of her new powers but the real question for her was about how to use correctly those new powers without abusing them.

“Just do good, Nancy. Just do good.” She told herself before getting back to sleep.

CHAPTER 2 – A MARKED WOMAN



General of the Army Ingrid Dows (Commander of all U.S. armed forces (as she appears at age 71).

20:03 (New York Time)

Tuesday, September 17, 1996 ‘C’

‘Aperossimo’ bar, East 56th Street

Midtown East District, Manhattan

New York City, U.S.A.

Toni Franchetti shook his trench coat once inside the small bistro, in order to get rid of the raindrops on it, then went to a table near the back of the long but narrow room, where a bearded man was sitting and sipping on a beer. That man was wearing a red scarf around his neck, the recognition sign agreed to on the phone with Toni. The later didn't know the name of the man but that was customary for Toni in the case of

preliminary meetings when eyeing a new contract. The bearded man also had a folded newspaper lying on his table, near him. That was another thing Toni was accustomed to: that newspaper probably hid an envelope containing details about the contract that was going to be proposed to him. Acting as if he knew the bearded man well, Toni took off his trench coat and hat before sitting facing the man and smiling to him.

“Nice to see you again, Peter.”

The bearded man, a big, beefy guy in his early forties, replied to that recognition phrase with the pre-set answer.

“It’s been a long time, Tony. How are things with you?”

“Things are okay, but business is a bit slow these days.”

“Then, I may have some business for you, Tony. I have a really troublesome pest infestation in my warehouse and I need a real pro to take care of it.”

“Okay! How big is your warehouse?” asked Toni, who wanted to know how much the man was ready to offer for the job. The bearded man took another sip of his beer before answering him nonchalantly.

“It’s a big warehouse and I have a lot of valuable merchandise in it that are vulnerable to mice. The place covers a good 100,000 square feet and the mice there are a really tough problem. Another company tried to get rid of them before but they failed miserably to complete the job.”

‘So, this guy is offering 100,000 dollars to get rid of someone who has already thwarted a prior assassination attempt and who could be quite dangerous.’ thought Tony, mentally translating the coded talk.

“I see! And how urgent is that problem becoming for you?”

“Quite urgent! Those damn mice could cost me a fortune in ruined merchandise if I don’t get rid of them quickly.”

“You do realize that urgent jobs also mean more resources needed to complete them quickly, Peter.”

“I understand that, Tony. I am ready to add a bonus to your normal fee in order to expedite the work. Here are the details about the location of my warehouse, plus a few photos of it outside and inside, so that you can evaluate the scale of the job to do. Take a day to look at them and then we will again meet here tomorrow evening at seven, so that we can agree on the cost of the job.”

Tony Franchetti took the medium-sized envelope ‘Peter’ had grabbed from under his newspaper, then shook hands with the man while getting up from his chair.

“I will get you a cost evaluation by tomorrow afternoon, Peter. Have a good day!”

Tony slipped the envelope inside a pocket of his trench coat, then put it back on, along with his hat, and exited the bar to go back to his car, parked some fifty meters away. The rain was still falling but was relatively light now. Walking quickly to his car, a discreet mid-sized sedan, Tony unlocked the driver’s door and sat behind the wheel, then locked back his door. While keeping an eye on the entrance of the bar, in order to see if ‘Peter’ would now come out, Tony took out the envelope he had been given and opened it, taking out of it a couple of folded paper sheets and a few photos. Tony’s blood suddenly rushed to his brain when he had his first look at the target of this contract. Not only was she well known in the United States and around the World, she was also a very powerful and very dangerous person. Tony then reminded himself of the slight accent displayed by ‘Peter’, an accent that he had heard before quite a few times while dealing with business ‘rivals’. If he was right about his sudden hunch, then Tony had a fair idea about who was trying to hire him for this job. He then looked again at the color photo of the target, staring at the beautiful young face of a woman with reddish-brown hair and blue eyes. He finally put the photos and sheets of paper back in their envelope and kept watching the entrance of the ‘Aperossimo Bar’. Three minutes later, ‘Peter’ walked out of the establishment and got into a beige-colored car, sitting in the front passenger seat. A man who was already at the wheel and had apparently been waiting for him then started the engine and rolled out of the car’s parking spot. Tony, who had already started his own engine, took the time to note down the plate number, make and color of ‘Peter’s car before starting to cautiously follow the beige sedan from a respectful distance. While Tony’s real identity and occupation was known by only a very few persons, he himself liked to find out who was hiring him, in the case that his employer tried to screw him over. This time however, he had another, very different reason why he now wanted to find out who was ‘Peter’ and for whom he worked for.

08:16 (New York Time)

Wednesday, September 18, 1996 ‘C’

New York F.B.I. offices, 23rd floor, 26 Federal Plaza

Corner of Worth Street and Broadway Avenue

Manhattan, New York City

Special Agent in Charge Marc Reading was already reading through a thick investigation report file when his telephone rang, making him quickly pick it up.

"Special Agent in Charge Marc Reading!"

Reading then heard the voice of a mature man who sounded a bit muffled, as if he was speaking through a mask.

"Special Agent Reading, my name is not important but the information I have for you is. Don't bother trying to trace this call: I am calling from a public telephone booth which is not in view of any camera."

"Okay, mister, I am listening." said Reading, his attention fully focusing on this call: this had all the hallmarks of an anonymous tip, and one apparently made by a man who was no amateur at the game. He thus grabbed a pen and notepad at once while listening.

"Good! Know that I am in the professional assassination business, which is why I want to stay anonymous. Yesterday, someone offered me a job, along with a big fee to do it. I normally would have accepted the job but the identity of the target made me reconsider my response to it. I am due to see again the man who offered me the job this evening, in order to give him my answer and finalize the contract but I decided instead to call you guys rather than take that contract."

"Oh?! And who is the person targeted by that contract, mister?"

"General of the Army Ingrid Dows. Know as well that my interlocutor spoke with a slight Russian accent. I may be what you would qualify as a very bad guy, but I am a patriotic American bad guy and I refuse to even try to assassinate such an American hero as General Dows."

While surprised, Reading believed the man: experience had shown him that not all criminals were completely devoid of scruples or principles.

"I certainly can appreciate your patriotism, mister. Can you tell me more about this guy with a Russian accent?"

"I can tell you plenty, in fact, Special Agent Reading. First, I am due to meet with him at seven this evening at the 'Aperossimo Bar', on East 56th Street, in the Midtown East District. He is a big, beefy guy in his forties with a short black beard and a receding hairline and he is due to wear a red scarf around his neck as a recognition sign for our meeting. He has a short scar on his left temple and calls himself 'Peter'. I was able to follow the car he came in when he left the bar: it was a beige Toyota COROLA sedan

with the plate number NHG 862 and another man was at the wheel. I was able to trail them up to the area of Pier 36, in the Lower East Side, but lost them there.”

“That is already quite a lot of information, mister. I suppose that you would not be ready to meet me, right?”

The man on the phone laughed briefly before answering him.

“Definitely not, Special Agent Reading. However, you should soon receive a large padded envelope destined to you via a bicycle courier. That envelope will contain the envelope I was given by that ‘Peter’. I was wearing gloves when I was given it but that ‘Peter’ wasn’t, so you may be able to get his fingerprints on the content of the envelope. Please tell your agents not to screw up by carelessly manipulating that envelope. I will not personally go to that meeting at the ‘Aperossimo Bar’ this evening but, if you go just prior to seven, you may be able to catch that ‘Peter’. Be careful, though: he gave me the impression of being a tough, dangerous man. Be also ready to catch his driver while he is parked outside the bar. With both men in your hands, you should be able to find and neutralize the bastards who want General Dows dead. I will now hang up. Please don’t try to find me after this. Good luck and goodbye.”

The line was then cut, leaving Marc Reading to look at his own receiver for a moment before he got up from his chair and nearly ran out of his office, emerging in the open office space where his agents had their work desks.

“LISTEN UP, PEOPLE! THIS IS IMPORTANT! WE SHOULD BE RECEIVING AN ENVELOPE BY BIKE COURIER THIS MORNING. WHOEVER TAKES RECEIPT OF IT WILL HAVE TO MAKE SURE TO MANIPULATE IT WITH GLOVES AND TO BE CAREFUL NOT TO ERASE ANY FINGERPRINTS WHICH COULD BE ON IT. I WANT TO BE WARNED THE MOMENT THAT THIS ENVELOPE ARRIVES. AGENT SCHAEFFER, GO DOWN TO THE LOBBY OF THE BUILDING RIGHT AWAY AND INTERCEPT ANY BIKE COURIER WHO WILL SHOW UP WITH AN ENVELOPE ADDRESSED TO US. MAKE SURE YOU WEAR GLOVES.”

“Uh, yes sir!” replied his most junior agent, a young man barely out of the F.B.I. Academy, before nearly running out of the office. That left Reading fervently wishing that this whole thing was not some kind of hoax or bad prank.

His fears were negated some twenty minutes later, when Agent Schaeffer came back and put down a large padded brown envelope on Reading’s desk.

“Here is the envelope you were waiting for, sir. It has no return address on it.”

"I kind of expected that, Schaeffer. Thanks! Tell Agent Browning to come here on the double with a fingerprint kit."

"Right away, sir!"

In turn, the specialist in crime scene processing showed up within three minutes and, putting latex gloves on first, then cautiously examined and dusted off the outside of the brown envelope. He found a few fingerprint marks on the outside but gave a cautious look at Reading while starting to record them.

"Those fingerprints are probably those of the bike courier, sir. What will be inside may however be of more interest to us."

"I concur! Just make sure to record all the prints you will find, so that we could run them afterwards through our database."

"Understood, sir."

Reading then let his specialist work, simply watching as he recorded the prints found on the outside of the brown envelope, then opened it cautiously and emptied its content on the desk. Reading's eyes opened wide on seeing a color picture of a young woman as part of the content.

"General Dows! My caller was telling me the truth after all. Browning, make sure that you record and list all the prints you will find on these photos and those sheets of paper: this may concern a planned assassination attempt against General Dows, our highest military commander."

"Shit! This could disturb a lot of highly-placed people, including at the White House."

"It certainly could! Continue your work here while I gather my assistants."

Leaving Browning to his work, Reading quickly walked out of his office and went to one of the cubicles in the open office space which were made with mobile partitions. There, he pointed an index at the man and woman whose desks occupied the cubicle.

"Michael, Anna, I need you to come to my office: we may have a case of attempted assassination involving possible Russian agents."

On hearing that, Michael Bogdanov and Anna Decker, Reading's two counter-espionage specialists, immediately dropped what they were doing and got up from their chairs as their superior walked to another cubicle occupied by two male agents. Reading then addressed one of the two men, a small and unassuming agent who was his top surveillance and tailing specialist, Thomas Krasner.

"Tom, alert your team to be ready for an operation this evening, then come to my office: we have something on our hands that may prove to be an important case."

"Yes, sir!" simply said Krasner, who then grabbed his telephone and composed a number. Reading did not wait for him to do his phone call, returning instead to his office, where Bogdanov and Decker were already sitting in chairs facing his desk and watching Browning as he was dusting off fingerprints on the content of the brown envelope. In turn, Reading did not ask questions to the crime scene specialist and sat behind his desk. A couple minutes later, Krasner and his three assistants entered the office and closed the door behind them. Reading nodded to them before starting to speak.

"Thank you for coming quickly. Bob is presently looking for fingerprints on the content of an envelope just delivered by bike courier. That envelope in turn arrived after I received an anonymous phone call at eight fifteen this morning, warning me about a planned assassination attempt against General of the Army Ingrid Dows. That planned attempt may in turn be engineered by possible Russian agents. While that last point is still only a supposition, this case may well become our most important one this year and I intend us to do our maximum to arrest the responsible ones. As you may well know, our diplomatic relations with Russia are still cut, following the Russians' attempt at colluding with the Caucasus Islamic Republic in order to attack one of our warships in the Black Sea a few months ago. There are thus no Russians, either diplomats, businessmen or tourists, left in the U.S.A. If we catch some Russians tonight, then we will treat them as illegal foreign agents."

"Uh, how did we learn about this, sir?" asked Anna Decker, a blonde in her mid-thirties who was well worth at least a look. In response, Reading pointed at the picture of Ingrid Dows still laying flat on his desk, careful not to touch it.

"The someone who called me this morning claimed to be a professional hitman who had been offered a job to kill General Dows. That hitman told me that he was due to meet again this evening with his would-be employer at a bar on East 56th Street, in order to finalize his contract with him. That hitman will not show up for that meeting, but we will! We also may have to take into account an accomplice who drove that would-be employer around."

"And what pushed that hitman into warning us, sir?"

"That hitman, who wants to stay anonymous, claims to be a patriotic American, despite his present occupation, and said that he was not ready to kill a national hero like

General Dows. Maybe that hitman served in the military before, possibly under the command of General Dows, and worships her. While rare, I have seen before cases of professional assassins who held some moral principles. Besides, the content of the envelope he sent us quite convinced me that his story was legitimate.”

“Just out of curiosity, sir,” asked Ronaldo Reyes, who originated from Puerto Rico, “how much money was that hitman offered to kill General Dows?”

“A hundred thousand dollars.” answered Reading, making many of his agents open their eyes wide.

“A hundred thousand dollars? And that hitman is ready to spit on that, sir?”

“Apparently. Now, here is how we will operate this evening...”

18:52 (New York Time)

F.B.I. car, parked along the East 56th Street, near the ‘Aperossimo Bar’

“Heads up, people: the target car is in sight and approaching the Aperossimo Bar... It is now parking some twenty yards short of the bar... The lead suspect is now coming out of that car and heading towards the entrance of the bar.”

Mark Reading then watched and listened as the big bearded man entered the Aperossimo Bar, while the man driving the beige Toyota stayed at the wheel. Next, he heard the voice of Michael Bogdanov, who was already inside the bar with Anna Decker.

“The suspect is now inside the bar and heading to one of the tables near the rear of the lounge... He is now sitting at the last table and is close to where the emergency exit door and the restrooms are.”

“Understood, C.I.! Back Door Team, be ready to block that exit if the suspect tries to flee.”

“We are ready, Big Cheese.”

The use of that codename to address Reading made young Donald Schaeffer giggle a bit.

“Big Cheese... You really chose that nickname for you on this operation, sir?”

“Hey, some humor can only help keeping our agents alert and awake. Hopefully, our suspect has brought some incriminating evidence with him.”

“Well, Robert Browning did lift up some clear fingerprints from the content of the envelope we got this morning, sir. If our suspect’s fingerprints prove to concord, then we will have a serious case against him, sir.”

"True! However, I never sell the bear's fur before I have killed the animal, Schaeffer. Overconfidence has sunk many F.B.I. operations in the past."

"Uh, understood, sir."

A few more minutes passed in silence as Reading looked repeatedly at his watch while keeping an eye on the beige Toyota and the entrance to the bar. At precisely seven, he spoke again in his radio microphone.

"C.I. Team, move in and arrest the suspect! All agents, be ready for action!"

"C.I. Team moving now!"

Inside the bar, Anna Decker was the first to get up from her bench seat, then headed towards the rear of the lounge and the restrooms, her handbag suspended from her left shoulder. She walked past the suspect, who only gave her a cursory look, and stopped just short of the entrance to the narrow hallway leading to the restrooms and the rear exit, then grabbed her revolver from inside her handbag and pivoted around. Michael Bogdanov, who had waited a few seconds before getting up from his seat, then approached the suspect's table. Stopping two paces short of it, Bogdanov then produced both his F.B.I. badge and his pistol, pointing the latter at the bearded man.

"F.B.I.! You are under arrest! Keep both of your hands on the table, where I can see them."

The big, bearded man stiffened at once and his eyes narrowed while fixing the federal agent. His left hand, which was holding a nearly full glass of beer, then moved at lightning speed, throwing beer in the face of Bogdanov. Blinded for a second, the F.B.I. agent quickly wiped the beer off his eyes and face and pointed back his pistol, but that delay had been enough to allow the suspect to get up and start running towards the rear exit. The poor Anna Decker was bowled over by the much bigger and heavier man before she could say something like 'freeze' or 'stop' and was then literally trampled by the suspect, who continued his mad rush to the rear emergency exit. That exit door was equipped with a 'panic bar' system, so he pushed it while ramming the door, which opened violently on impact. 'Peter' was starting to grab his own pistol from his shoulder holster rig as he ran out of the bar but never had a chance to pull it out. Special Agent Anthony Borletti, who was watching the rear exit with Ronaldo Reyes, swung the baseball bat he had brought for the occasion and hit hard the suspect in his belly as he was about to run past him. 'Peter' let out an audible 'Oof!' and tripped on Borletti's extended leg, crashing on his belly and badly scratching his face as he slid for a short

distance on the dirty pavement of the back alley. His breath cut and half knocked out, the bearded man did not have a chance to get up or even turn on his back before Reyes jumped on his back with both knees, taking out the little air left in his lungs. Fighting for air and hurting, the suspect was then cuffed by Reyes and turned on his back, allowing Borletti to take away his still holstered pistol and then search him. Borletti was still going through the man's pockets when Michael Bogdanov belatedly got out of the bar via the emergency exit, his pistol at the ready. Seeing that the suspect was under control, Bogdanov spoke quickly in his hidden lapel radio microphone.

"SUSPECT APPREHENDED AT THE REAR DOOR OF THE BAR!"

On hearing that, Reading spoke in turn into his microphone.

"FRONT TEAM, BLOCK THE SUSPECT VEHICLE AND ARREST THE DRIVER!"

Special Agents Krasner and Taylor, who had been waiting in their car nearby, then quickly drove their car level with the suspect's car and braked, blocking it from rolling out of its parking spot. Thomas Krasner then jumped out of the F.B.I. car and pointed his pistol at the driver of the beige Toyota, his weapon's muzzle pressed against the driver's window.

"F.B.I.! TAKE YOUR HANDS OFF THE WHEEL AND KEEP THEM UP!"

The Toyota's driver, who had let his engine run at idle, reacted in a way that surprised Krasner: he put his car in reverse and turned his steering wheel to the right while flooring the accelerator. The Toyota jumped backward while its front pivoted to the left, sandwiching the unfortunate Krasner between it and the F.B.I. car as it violently impacted its rear bumper against the car parked behind it. Putting his car on 'drive', the driver of the Toyota rammed the front right side of the federal car in an attempt to evade the police trap. Seeing that Krasner was in very real danger of being run over by the Toyota, Marc Reading jumped out of his car while swearing and pulled out his service pistol, a.45 caliber Smith & Wesson. Pointing it at the driver of the Toyota, Reading then shot four times in quick succession, shattering the rear window of the car and making the driver jerk before falling limp over the steering wheel. With the suspect driver now unmoving, Reading hurried to the badly shaken Krasner, who was having difficulty in getting back on his feet.

"KRASNER, ARE YOU OKAY?"

"Uh, yes sir! I... OUCH! Shit! My left knee is all banged up. That asshole sure reacted quickly. He took me by surprise."

"He acted like a pro, that's for sure. Will you be alright?"

"I can stand by myself, but my left knee is really painful, sir."

Reading nodded his head at that, then looked at Agent Schaeffer, who had stepped out of his car.

"CALL AN AMBULANCE FOR OUR AGENT!"

"RIGHT AWAY, SIR!"

Reading then went to check on the driver of the Toyota, finding him dead, with three bullet wounds in his back. Searching him quickly after opening with some difficulty the driver's door, he found a 9mm pistol worn in a shoulder rig, along with a miniature radio transceiver. He was in the process of searching the inside of the Toyota when his rear team walked out of the bar's front entrance with the main suspect and with the C.I. team. Reading noticed at once the large bruise on one side of Anna's face.

"You're okay, Agent Decker? What happened to you?"

"That asshole literally bumped me and trampled me while running for the rear exit, sir. He could qualify as a football linebacker in the Major Leagues, sir."

"He also had this on him, sir." added Anthony Borletti, showing a compact 9mm pistol. Reading looked for a moment at the weapon before looking at the big bearded man.

"Do you have a permit for that gun, mister?"

Getting no answer apart from a black look, Reading nodded his head once.

"Alright, you want to play that kind of game? Then, be ready to pay the price for it. Agent Browning, you will stay here with Agents Taylor and Schaeffer, in order to thoroughly search this Toyota and document the crime scene. The rest of us will go back to the office with the suspect."

The group then split, with Reading replacing Schaeffer at the wheel of his car, in which the suspect and Agents Borletti and Bogdanov also took place. Driving back to the F.B.I. office took some fifteen minutes, with the suspect then solidly escorted to the 23rd floor of the Federal Plaza Building, where he was thoroughly searched before being put in a temporary holding cell while Reading's team went through what had been found on the suspect. Some twenty minutes later, they were able as well to examine what had been found in the beige Toyota and on its dead driver. While not exactly a gold mine of information, that evidence quickly made a few things clearer to the F.B.I. agents, with Reading giving a few orders to his agents as a result.

“Michael, Anna and James, you go to the suspect’s residence and search it thoroughly. Don’t be afraid to pierce holes in the walls if need be. Ronaldo, Anthony and Donald, you will do the same at the dead driver’s home. If anyone is found at those addresses, then bring them in for interrogation. Each team will also be accompanied by a four-man security team, in case you face any opposition. I didn’t like the way those two suspects reacted violently to us. Be careful and expect anything. As for the suspect in our hands, I will let him stew in his juice until I get the results of your home searches. Let’s get to it, people!”

20:58 (New York Time)

Unit 34, Madison Street Condominium

Two Bridges District, Manhattan

A woman in her mid-thirties answered the door when Special Agent Michael Bogdanov knocked on it as a formality, surprising him as he was not expecting anyone to live in that condo unit except for the suspect presently being held at the F.B.I. offices. In turn, the woman, a pretty blonde with an athletic body, eyed suspiciously the two men and one woman standing in the hallway in front of her door.

“Yes?”

In response, Bogdanov showed her his F.B.I. badge while watching carefully the woman’s expression.

“Special Agent Michael Bogdanov, F.B.I.! Do you live here, miss?”

“Of course I do!” replied the woman. “Why do you ask such a question?”

“Because a man named Peter Kirchner and who was arrested by us this evening is supposed to live here. Are you his wife?”

“Yes, I am! This must be a mistake. Why did you arrest my husband?”

“Because he is accused of conspiracy to murder, resisting arrest and assaulting a federal agent. Here is the search warrant authorizing us to search this residence.”

“This is ridiculous! My husband owns a warehouse in the Seaport District. He couldn’t have done what you just said.” protested the woman. “You must have the wrong man!”

“I don’t think so, madam. The man we arrested carried a driver’s permit bearing the name of Peter Kirchner and listing this condo as his home address. Now, please let us in, or do you prefer to be charged with obstruction?”

The woman stiffened at those last words, then opened the door wide and stepped out of the way, allowing the three F.B.I. agents to enter the dwelling. She was further shocked when four more agents, who were openly carrying either submachine guns or shotguns, also entered, with one of them telling her to go sit on a sofa in the living room of the condo unit, then stood next to her to watch her. Alexandra Kirchner thus couldn't do much as the F.B.I. agents started searching methodically every room of the suite.

The agent watching Alexandra Kirchner was also checking her for any change in facial expression or body attitude as the other agents searched the condo. He thus spoke up when he saw her stiffen a bit as Anna Decker was starting to examine a large combination radio-CD player-record player housed in a wooden cabinet.

"Agent Decker, I believe that you are getting warmer."

Anna Decker threw a hard look at Alexandra Kirchner before concentrating on the wooden cabinet and examining it closely from all angles. Pulling the cabinet away from the wall, she took out a small screwdriver set with multiple heads and started removing the screws holding the rear metallic plate of the radio-CD player in place. With the plate removed, she then used a small flashlight to examine the electronic parts inside. It didn't take her long to locate something that attracted her attention.

"Michael, you better come and look at this."

Her partner hurried to join her behind the wooden cabinet and looked at something she was pointing at with her flashlight. Inserting his right hand inside the cabinet, he then pulled out of it a flat metallic box which was linked to the radio's antenna by a pair of long wires. With the box out, he was then able to see a sort of small notebook, which he also took out and then opened. Sifting through the pages of the notebook for a moment, he then threw a severe look at Alexandra Kirchner.

"This appears to me to be a code book...written in Cyrillic, while this box is a miniature radio transceiver with a mini-printer integrated to it. Would you care to explain this to me, Madam Kirchner?"

"I will not speak until I can have my lawyer present and until I can speak with my husband." replied Kirchner in a frosty tone.

"As you wish, Madam Kirchner. Ross, cuff her and escort her with Bob down to the van."

As two of the armed agents escorted out the woman, Michael and Anna exchanged concerned looks, with Anna being the first to comment.

"So, we have Russian illegal agents in the United States who were ready to hire a professional hitman in order to have General Dows assassinated. This could well trigger quite an international crisis, no?"

"It sure can...and will, in my opinion. Let's continue our search: there may be more to find here on top of this clandestine radio set and code book."

13:37 (New York Time)

Thursday, September 19, 1996 'C'

Office of General of the Army Ingrid Dows

The Pentagon, Arlington, Virginia

Ingrid Dows, informed by her secretary that she had a visitor, got up from behind her work desk and met the man in civilian suit in the middle of her office, shaking his hand once he was in.

"Good afternoon, Special Agent Kendrick. Ingrid Dows, at your service. To what do I owe your visit?"

"To something our office in New York unmasked yesterday that is of direct concern to you, General. To be direct and to the point, a few Russian illegal agents were arrested after they tried to hire a professional hitman in order to have you killed." That quickly erased the welcoming smile from Ingrid's young face and she then pointed to a set of sofas surrounding a low coffee table in one corner of her office.

"I believe that we better sit down to discuss this, Special Agent Kendrick. Would you like some coffee, or tea?"

"Thank you but no, General: I already drank too much coffee in the last few hours."

With Kendrick moving with Dows to the coffee corner and sitting down in one of the sofas, the F.B.I. man then extracted a file from the briefcase he had been carrying and gave it to Ingrid, who opened it and started reading its content as Kendrick spoke.

"Basically, a Russian illegal agent who had escaped up to now our attention tried to hire a professional assassin in New York, offering him 100,000 dollars to have you killed, General. Thankfully, that hitman, who apparently is a genuine American patriot, tipped us anonymously about this instead of accepting that contract. That allowed us to arrest to date five illegal Russian agents and seize a number of weapons and

explosives, plus incriminating documents and equipment, thus dismantling a whole clandestine Russian espionage operation in and around New York. I came here today to warn you that the Russian government apparently wants to get rid of you. Would you have an idea about why, General?"

Ingrid chuckled at that question, with a smile returning to her lips.

"The why is easy enough to figure out, Special Agent Kendrick: I have been a thorn in their side for decades already. As the commander of all United States armed forces, I thwarted their plans to help the Caucasus Islamic Republic attack our new battle carrier, the U.S.S. NEPTUNE, in the Black Sea. I also hammered the Kremlin when hardline Russian coup leaders tried to blame innocent American citizens for the bombing of previous moderate leaders and put them through a show trial after torturing them into 'confessing'. Without wanting to brag about myself, Russian leaders fear my strategic talent at thwarting their geopolitical plans and at countering their every military moves."

Kendrick could only nod at that: Ingrid Dows' reputation as a master tactician, strategist and geopolitical player dated from many decades already. She had forcefully countered many Soviet, Chinese and Russian aggressive moves since the end of World War 2, notably by devising and implementing a lightning offensive air operation campaign that had stopped cold the late Stalin's attempt at invading Poland and the Baltic States in 1955. Before that, she had stopped Communist China and the USSR from invading and taking over Vietnam in 1953, while at the same time putting an end to the Indochina War and reestablishing peace in Vietnam.

"I would agree with you on that, General. However, while this Russian attempt at having you killed has failed, I believe that you are still at risk and that further attempts could be done in the future. I would thus counsel you strongly to reinforce the protective measures around you and to be on your guard at all times."

"Oh, I have already been on my guard for a long time, Special Agent Kendrick, but I will heed your advice. Is President Perot aware of this matter?"

"F.B.I. Director Lacey briefed the President just before noon, General. You thus can expect a reaction from the White House sometimes today."

"Which could well mean further political and military tensions with Russia. Frankly, it is becoming high time to put those Russian leaders back in their proper place: they have been causing a lot of unnecessary trouble around the World lately. Well, thank you for warning me about this, Special Agent Kendrick."

With both of them rising from their sofas, Ingrid shook hands again with Kendrick before escorting him on his way out. Once the F.B.I. agent was gone, Ingrid went back to her work desk and thought for a moment about the information he had given her. While she was taking his warning very seriously, that wasn't her priority worry now. What was now bothering her the most was what did this latest Russian move hide? Did the Kremlin leaders want to get rid of her in prevision of some future aggressive move around the World or was this simply accumulated resentment at the multiple times in the past that she had countered their military plans?

Getting up from her work chair again, Ingrid walked out of her office and went to the nearby National Military Command Center, which had been for a couple of years the operations center of her unified military command and had been renamed 'NC4'. There, she stood in front of the giant situation board which showed a detailed World map, with colored symbols on it marking the positions of both American, friendly, neutral and hostile military units or entities known to her forces. Despite studying it in silence for a long moment, she was unable to see or notice anything out of the ordinary. With the large array of space-based reconnaissance and surveillance assets she had built over the years while she was the commander of the Space Corps, any significant buildup or concentrations of conventional military units should have been detected, yet there was nothing in evidence. Either the Russians had not yet started to move significant forces or didn't plan some forceful, aggressive action...or planned something else entirely, but what? Her long military and geopolitical experience then brought an idea to her brain.

"Asymmetric warfare! They may want to hit us with something both unconventional and underhanded, so that they could not be accused by us of being involved. But what will it be exactly?"

There was also of course the possibility that the attempt to have her assassinated did not hide any Russian plan to attack the United States or its allies and was simply a move meant to avenge all the times that she had caused painful defeats and humiliations to Soviet, then Russian forces and leaders. One thing was clear, though: she would have to be extra vigilant during the weeks and months to come.

CHAPTER 3 – TERRORISM BY PROXY



Shirley Slade in 1943, at age 22.



Elizabeth Gardner in 1943, at age 22.

05:30 (Philippines Time)

Friday, November 1, 1996 'C'

Apartment building, City of Pasay (southern suburbs of Metro Manila)

Southern part of the island of Luzon, Philippines Archipelago

The buzzing of her alarm clock woke up Shirley Slade in her third-floor apartment unit, in Pasay. Stretching out a bit in bed in order to fully wake up, the 75-year-old American woman got out of bed and went to her small kitchen, where she started brewing a cup of strong coffee. Anyone seeing her would actually have given her a maximum age of around fifty and would have given her extra points for a body that was apparently still healthy and strong. For that, she could thank a true miracle which happened to her and to eight other women eleven years ago, at the Vandenberg United States Space Corps Base. As old veterans of the 99th Air Wing, also known as the 'Fifinellas', Shirley and the others had been attending the retirement from military service ceremony of their old wartime commander, Ingrid Dows. Then, Ingrid had led the nine women to a deserted office, where Archangel Michael had appeared to them and had rejuvenated all of them by over twenty years, giving the veteran women pilots a brand-

new lease on life. On top of making them look much younger than their actual age, that miracle had also made their various ailments disappear and had given them a strong resistance to diseases, plus a perfect eyesight. Shirley, whose husband had died years before that and whose two children were fully grown up and had left the family home in order to live their own lives, had then found herself able to resume what she had always loved to do: flying. However, the old prejudices in the United States about the so-called 'proper role' of women had made it next to impossible to find a job as a commercial pilot, with the airlines using her official age of 64 at the time to refuse to employ her. Finally, disgusted by that misogyny and pettiness, Shirley and the other rejuvenated female veteran combat pilots had collectively decided to try their luck in a place where the women of the Fifinellas were nearly venerated because of their role in liberating much of the Southeast Pacific from the grip of the Japanese invader during World War 2: the Philippines. There, their requests for employment as pilots had been looked at with much more sympathy than in the United States and they had been quickly hired by a number of the local Filipina airlines, who also fully appreciated their vast flying experience, which numbered in the many thousands of hours flown in a number of wars and at the commands of various high-performance aircraft. With her abilities as a pilot still at their best, Shirley had been working now for over nine years for the Air Philippines airline, which specialized in regional routes around the vast Filipina archipelago and also flew some charter flights on a regular basis. Having been based in the Philippines during World War 2 and the Korean War, Shirley, like her Fifinella comrades, already knew well the lay of the country and the particularities of its tropical climate, making them even more appreciated by their Filipino employers. Besides, Shirley genuinely liked to live and work with the Filipino people. Her original, rough knowledge from wartime of Tagalog, the local language, had now become a fluent one, on top of learning Cebuano, another important local language.

Taking a fresh shower after eating a frugal breakfast and drinking her coffee, Shirley then put on her airline uniform, which consisted of a white long-sleeved shirt with dark blue tie and a dark blue vest and pair of trousers. Normal shoes rather than high-heel shoes and a flight cap completed her uniform. Looking at herself in a long mirror, Shirley smiled with pride while adjusting the four rows of military medal ribbons pinned over her vest's left chest pocket and her pilot's wings. In over thirty years of flying with the United States Air Force, Shirley had fought in a total of six wars, many of them at the

side of Ingrid Dows, earning many valor medals in the process, the highest being the Distinguished Service Cross. When she had finally retired, she had done so with the rank of colonel, having commanded a whole fighter wing. Now, she may be only an ordinary commercial airline pilot, but she could confidently say that her life had been a well-filled one.

Before going to fetch the small suitcase she always kept ready and which contained a spare uniform and some extra clothes and hygiene articles, Shirley put around her ankles the leather holster holding her compact Smith & Wesson snub-nosed, five-shot .38 Special revolver, plus another holster holding five spare rounds, then covered both holsters with the bottom of her trousers. She genuinely liked living in the Philippines but she was not naïve and fully realized the fact that the country was plagued by both high crime rates and widespread corruption of officials and police officers. She however possessed the proper possession and carrying permits for her revolver. Now fully ready for work, Shirley grabbed the handle of her suitcase and left her apartment, carefully locking it before going to the door of the next apartment and knocking lightly on it. Elizabeth Gardner, a Fifinella comrade and long-time friend answered nearly at once, opening her door and revealing the fact that she was in her Air Philippines pilot's uniform.

"Ready to go, Libby?" asked Shirley, using the old nickname her friend had earned decades ago.

"Yup! Time to roll!"

With Elizabeth also dragging a suitcase behind her, the two mature women went down to the ground lobby of their building, coming out of it and into the street, which was already fairly full of vehicle traffic. They both had their own cars but, since the airport was so close to their residence, they instead flagged down a jeepney, a colorful sort of minibus built out of an old jeep frame and which was a very popular means of public transportation in the Philippines. Jumping in it via its open rear and paying the comptroller sitting in the back, Shirley and Elizabeth then sat on one of the bench seats after informing the driver about their intended destination. The other passengers of the jeepney smiled to them, with one old man complimenting them for wearing the ribbon of the Philippines Liberation Medal, to which both women respectfully bowed their heads to him.

Less than fifteen minutes later, the jeepney dropped them and a few more passengers at the entrance of Terminal 4, also called the Old Terminal, of the Ninoy Aquino International Airport. Still dragging their suitcases behind them, Shirley and Elizabeth walked down the main concourse of the terminal and passed a gate reserved for the flying personnel, then proceeded to the operations office of the Air Philippines company, which specialized in domestic and charter flights. Once in the operations office, Shirley addressed in Tagalog a mature Filipino man standing behind the service counter while she approached it.

“Good morning, Manuel! What do you have for us today?”

Manuel Redolo, a slightly overweight man with a jovial face, smiled in return and pointed at the big map fixed to the wall behind him.

“Something that is perfectly suited to your Convair 800, Shirley: our Manila – Davao – Jolo – Sanga Sanga and back route. Since we opened that route with our new Convair 800s, the ridership has augmented nearly exponentially, thanks mostly to how economical to use the Convair 800 is, which has allowed us to offer low airfares.”

Both Shirley and Elizabeth nodded in agreement at that: the Convair 800 was indeed an excellent and economical short to medium haul aircraft which had been evolved from the highly successful Convair C-80 military transport. A 156-seat airliner also able to carry up to twelve tons of cargo in standard pallets or containers, it was a very agile aircraft propelled by three powerful turboprop engines, which gave it some outstanding short takeoff and landing capabilities. Bought some two years ago, the two Convair-800-100 acquired by Air Philippines had quickly proven to be the ideal planes for short routes to airports with short runways and minimal ground support infrastructures. One of those airports, the Bantayan Airport in Cebu, had in fact zero ground support facilities and no fuel, on top of having a measly 1,200-meter-long runway. What was best about the Convair 800 for both Shirley and Elizabeth were its outstanding agility, speed (for a turboprop aircraft) and STOL¹ performances, which reminded them of the combat aircraft they had flown around the Pacific during World War 2. Despite its respectable size, which compared to that of many medium jet airliners, the Convair 800 was a pure joy to fly and could give to its pilots...and passengers, some strong sensations indeed.

“That will be perfect, Manuel. You have the timings and meteorological data for our day’s flight?”

¹ STOL : Short Takeoff and Landing.

"Of course! Here is your flight information for today. Your departure from Manila is scheduled for nine thirty this morning. Nearly all the seats have been reserved already and you will also be carrying some ten tons of supplies and industrial equipment destined for Jolo and Sanga Sanga. Our C-800s have in fact become the main way to quickly transport heavy loads to those two places, with the other alternate mean, ships, being much slower."

"Thanks, Manuel!" said Elizabeth while grabbing the file containing the flight information they needed. The two women then went to a separate table in a corner and studied their flight information for a few minutes while starting to fill together their flight plan for the day. Twenty minutes later, they returned to the service counter and gave their completed flight plan to the operations manager.

"Here you go, Manuel! You can register our flight plan. We will now do a preflight inspection of our aircraft. Is it already on the terminal's tarmac or is it in the company's hangar?"

"It's on the tarmac: tail number 078. It is presently being loaded with the supplies and equipment destined for Jolo and Sanga Sanga. It is due to be towed to Departure Gate 6 at nine."

"Thanks again, Manuel!"

Grabbing again the telescopic handles of their suitcase, Shirley and Elizabeth left the operations office and started walking towards Gate 6, where their passengers were due to board their aircraft in about fifty minutes. As was customary where flight crews were concerned, the airport security agents controlling the access points to the departure section let them go through without searching their belongings or making them pass through a metal detector frame. Once at the Departure Lounge 6, the two women went through a guarded door emerged on the open tarmac. Shirley looked up critically at the partially cloudy sky while walking towards their aircraft.

"Hum, the meteo report predicts only a twenty percent chance of rain for this morning. It would be nice to fly in a blue sky for a change."

Elizabeth could only nod in agreement to that. The Philippines had a tropical climate with abundant precipitations and not infrequent tropical storms which dumped lots of rain on the archipelago during much of the year. That was also accompanied by high temperatures and humidity levels which caused most people to sweat heavily. However, contrary to the typical Americans visiting the Philippines, who were dripping with sweat

the moment they stepped off their planes, both Shirley and Elizabeth were well acclimatized and also knew how to dress to stay relatively fresh. As they were getting close to their assigned aircraft, Elizabeth examined the Convair 800 Series 100 they were about to pilot, looking for any apparent problem about it. It was a big aircraft for a short to medium haul airliner, with a total length of 42 meters and a span of 45 meters. It had as well a wider than normal fuselage section, something that allowed it to carry 156 passengers in a six-seat-abreast arrangement and also permitted it to carry all sizes of standard aircraft load containers in its holds, under the main cabin. However, the most striking feature of the Convair 800 was its three engines. It was equipped with three powerful turboprop engines, each rated at a maximum of 8,079 shaft horsepower and powering pairs of large, contra-rotating propellers with reversible pitch, something that helped a lot to cut their landing run distances when using short runways. More than their size and power, it was the way they were fixed to the plane that made the Convair 800 truly unusual. Two of the engines were fixed to the top of the wings, which were themselves mounted high on the shoulders of the fuselage, and with their propellers acting as 'tractor' propellers. However, the third engine was fixed high at the very end of the fuselage, with its contra-rotating pair of propellers acting as a 'pusher' propeller. While definitely uncommon, that design helped cut significantly on aerodynamic drag, the bulk of the rear engine being inside the fuselage rather than out in the airstream. One last feature not found on many planes was the double, 'H' style rudders and elevators.

"I'm going to do an external visual inspection, Shirley. I will let you check and calculate our fuel load and weight trim."

"Got it!" replied Shirley, who was due to take the role of first officer for this flight, despite being also fully qualified to act as captain. She climbed aboard via the lower forward access airstair door, then stored her suitcase in the small nose compartment containing five bunk beds meant to be used by the crew when stuck by bad weather on some primitive airfield, a far from infrequent occurrence around the Philippines Archipelago. Next, she climbed up the stairs leading to the level of the main cabin and of the cockpit and entered the cockpit, which was designed for a flight crew of two persons. Seeing that the auxiliary power unit of the plane, located in the tail, was not on and not seeing any ground auxiliary power trailer connected to the aircraft, she decided to start the APU in order to start circulating some fresh air inside the plane. However,

she first took care of warning Elizabeth about that, using the small pocket radio they each carried as a matter of routine during their flights.

“Elizabeth, this is Shirley. I intend to start our APU now, so that our air conditioning unit could start pushing some fresh air inside. Are there any mechanics around the tail section?”

“No! Go right ahead!”

In response, Shirley sat in the copilot’s seat and pushed a couple of buttons, making their APU wake up in a long whine. Once it was turning at normal regime and producing enough electricity, she started the air conditioning unit and set it to maximum.

By the time Elizabeth joined her in the cockpit after completing her visual inspection, the temperature inside the aircraft had changed from sauna-like to fairly reasonable.

“Aah, good initiative there, Shirley. It is about time to roll to Gate 6. I will go close our lower forward port side door and will call in a tractor.”

“No need to call a tractor, Libby: I see one coming our way.”

“Excellent! I will however still go close our lower access door.”

As Elizabeth left the cockpit and went down the staircase linking the upper forward lobby to the lower lobby, where their two side airstair doors were, Shirley watched on as the airport aircraft tractor stopped in front of her Convair 800 and started hooking an ‘A’-frame towing bar to the plane’s nose wheel carriage. By the time Elizabeth was back in the cockpit, their plane had started to slowly roll towards Gate 6 of the Old Terminal. Some four minutes later, their Convair 800 stopped in front of the gate. Being an old building with a single level built in 1948, Terminal 4 had no jet bridge², with the passengers having to walk or be bused to their aircraft from the terminal building. The first to enter the aircraft once Shirley opened the left side door were their four assigned flight attendants, all of whom were Filipinas and who were led by Corazon Villacruz, the senior flight attendant. Shirley hugged Corazon and kissed her on the cheek once she stepped inside.

“Nice to see you again, Corazon. We should fly together more often.”

² Jet Bridge: Pivoting and telescopic elevated passageway used to connect upper-level passenger lounges with the access doors of airliners, which are typically located 2-4 meters above the ground.

“Definitely, Shirley.” replied the 39-year-old Filipina, who was much shorter than Shirley, as were in fact most Filipina women. Shirley also hugged and kissed Maria Bonifacio, Francisca Bandong and Aisha Santos as they stepped inside the plane. Contrary to the three other attendants, who wore a wedge cap, Aisha wore a hijab, a Muslim head scarf that covered her hair. While the majority of Filipinos were Christians, there was a sizeable Muslim minority in the south of the Philippines, particularly in the Mindanao Region and the Sulu Archipelago, to the Southwest of Mindanao. A maintenance technician also entered the aircraft some twenty minutes later and went to the cockpit, where he presented a clipboard with forms on it to Elizabeth, who was now sitting in the pilot’s seat, on the left side.



“Good morning, Captain! Here is the fuel and cargo manifest for your flight to Davao. You have 22,000 kilos of fuel on board, plus 16,200 kilos of combined passengers and luggage weight and 10,600 kilos of supplies and equipment destined to Jolo and Sanga Sanga. You should have plenty of fuel for your return trip, without the need to refuel enroute. Please sign here.” Elizabeth looked at the numbers on the manifest, then signed it and ripped off her copy of it, passing it to Shirley as the technician left the cockpit.

“Here you go, Shirley. Please check our center of gravity trim and needed takeoff run length.”

“On it!”

In the lower forward lobby of the plane, where the left side airstair door of the plane was open, Corazon Villacruz and Francisca Bandong were greeting the incoming passengers and checking their boarding passes, while Maria Bonifacio and Aisha Santos stayed on the level of the passenger cabin and directed the passengers to their

seats. The flight proved to be effectively full, with all 156 seats taken, at least for the Manila – Davao leg. Closing the airstair door and locking it, Corazon then picked up the interior telephone situated next to one of the two flight attendant seats located near the airstair doors and facing the staircase leading up to the main deck, calling the cockpit.

“Hello, Elizabeth? All 156 passengers are now aboard and our airstair door is closed and secured.”

“Thank you, Corazon! I will now ask our tractor to push us away from the terminal, so that we can start our engines. Make sure that our passengers are seated and have their seat belts on, then advise me.”

“Will do, Elizabeth.”

Corazon then hooked back the telephone handset and climbed the staircase, ending up in front of the curtain closing off the forward section of the passenger cabin. Going to another communications panel next to the door of the cabin, she pressed the button signaling that seat belts had to be on and spoke in the telephone, set on ‘cabin call’ mode, using Tagalog, the main language spoken in Luzon.

“May I have your attention, ladies and gentlemen: we are about to move away from the gate. Please stay sitting and make sure that your seat belts are fastened. Your flight attendants will soon give you a demonstration about the safety features of this plane. Please listen to them carefully, as much of our flight will be over water.”

She then repeated her announcement in Cebuano, the main language spoken in the Mindanao Region, then in English. Less than a minute after her announcement, the plane started moving backward, as an aircraft tractor was pushing it away from the terminal. Maria and Aisha had time to finish their safety demonstration before Elizabeth started first the tail engine, then the left and right-side engines. Going down the central aisle of the passenger cabin as the Convair 800 was rolling along a taxiway in order to take a waiting position next to one extremity of Runway 31, Corazon made a final check of the passengers’ seat belts while exchanging quick pleasantries in order to help reassure some of the passengers who were obviously either first flyers or were afraid of flying. Not surprisingly, many of the passengers were apparently Muslim, either wearing hijabs or religious symbols. Corazon however noticed four young men who appeared to be particularly nervous, with two of them holding prayer beads. Corazon had no negative feelings as such against Muslims but she knew too well that Islamist extremists and nationalists had been trying for decades to form an independent Islamic entity in the Mindanao Peninsula and the Sulu Archipelago. Those attempts had resulted in many

bloody clashes and even some massacres between Christians and Muslims. Even now, the Filipino armed forces were still fighting Muslim extremists in specific regions, some of which their flight was due to visit. A mature bearded man in his fifties politely stopped her just as she was passing those four young men and spoke to her in Cebuano.

“Excuse me, miss, but I was told by somebody at the terminal that our two pilots are women. Is that true?”

Putting that question on account of the bearded man being simply a conservative type, like most elder Muslim men, Corazon smiled and answered him in a gentle tone.

“Yes, they are, but they are also very experienced and talented pilots, sir. Both flew for decades with the United States Air Force but they have been flying with Air Philippines for more than nine years now and know well the flying conditions of this region.”

“American female military pilots?” said the obviously surprised man. “And do they treat Filipinos with respect? I have met too many Americans who treated us like inferiors and treated our women like prostitutes.”

“Sir, I can assure you that our two pilots are very respecting of everyone and are very decent persons.”

“That is nice to hear, miss. Maybe I will go salute them at the end of this flight.”

“I am sure that they will greatly appreciate that, sir. By the way, both of them can speak both Tagalog and Cebuano.”

The bearded man nodded his head in appreciation as Corazon continued her inspection down the aisle. The sad fact was that very few Americans in the Philippines bothered to learn one of the local languages, expecting instead the Filipinos around them to speak to them in English, something most Filipinos could actually do.

With the control tower giving them the authorization to take off and with their preflight checklist completed, Elizabeth lined up her aircraft with the centerline of the runway, which was the shortest of the two runways of the airport but still measured a good 2,258 meters-long. For the Convair 800, which could take off in as little as 600 meters in STOL conditions or a maximum of 900 meters in overload conditions, that was more than plenty. She thus pushed her engines to only their maximum continuous power of 7,300 horsepower each, instead of pushing them to their maximum intermittent power of 8,079 horsepower, and this in order to economize on her fuel, an important factor for Air Philippines, which prided itself in offering low-cost airfares to Filipinos

around the archipelago. Still, she was able to raise the nose of her aircraft and fly cleanly off the runway after a mere 850 meters, then climbed at a fairly steep angle while accelerating. As with her other flights in the Convair 800, she felt pure joy at the sensation of power brought by her plane's performances. Less than seven minutes later, she leveled her aircraft at their cruise altitude of 7,000 meters and grabbed her intercom's microphone to make an announcement, using Tagalog first before repeating herself in Cebuano, then in English.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. We are now at our cruising altitude of 7,000 meters and are flying at a cruising speed of 650 kilometers per hour. We should be landing in Davao in approximately one hour and twenty minutes. Your flight attendants will now start serving you a light snack and drinks. Enjoy your flight and thank you for flying with Air Philippines."

As she hooked back her intercom microphone, Shirley grinned to her from her copilot's seat.

"You are now quite a linguist, Libby. Are you planning to learn another language on top of Tagalog and Cebuano?"

"Actually, I have been learning Spanish in my spare time for over a year now. Many Filipinos, especially of the older generations, frequently speak Spanish or use Spanish words. Also, Spanish is becoming more and more important in the United States. And you, Shirley?"

"Uh, don't laugh but I have been trying lately to learn Arabic. 'Trying' is the operative word here: it is such a hard language to learn."

"Why would I laugh at that, Shirley? Arabic is an important, widely used language and we have seen more and more Middle Eastern people visit or establish themselves in the Philippines in order to do business here. Good for you for trying to learn it."

The two of them then mostly fell silent, in order to concentrate on they flying and their instruments monitoring.

Just after eleven o'clock, the Convair 800 landed at the Francisco Bangoy International Airport in Davao, the main city in the island of Mindanao. There, its 3,000-meter-long paved runway made it a cinch for Shirley, who had taken the commands from Elizabeth for the landing, to put down her airliner smoothly. Rolling her plane to the airport's terminal, she stopped it in front of the gate assigned by the airport's ground

traffic controller before shutting down her engines, so that their passengers could disembark safely. Most of the 156 passengers on board then left, leaving only 39 of them to stay for the next two legs to Jolo and Sanga-Sanga. However, a fresh batch of 106 passengers then boarded the plane, nearly filling it back to capacity. From their clothes, it was evident to Shirley, who had temporarily left the cockpit to help greet the new passengers, that they were a more rural-type crowd. Corazon Villacruz, who was also greeting them and checking their boarding passes, smiled to Shirley as the last passengers were climbing the staircase to the main deck.

"This is a good passenger turnout for our Jolo destination, Shirley. A year ago, before our Convair 800 was put into service on this route, the average daily passenger movement to Jolo was less than half of today's number. The low fares we are offering and our capacity to use short airstrips has boosted a lot the air traffic to Jolo."

"Yes, and it also has boosted the air cargo traffic to and from Jolo, which is the sole airport for the Province of Sulu. We now represent a vital economic link for that province, mostly thanks to the STOL capabilities and large payload capacity of our Convair 800. As for me and Elizabeth, we love flying to Jolo: its short airstrip represents a welcome challenge for us and makes our job even more interesting."

"Yet, you always manage to perform smooth landings, even on the worst and shortest airfields served by Air Philippines. You and Elizabeth are truly top pros as pilots."

Shirley smiled at that compliment.

"Well, over 55 years of flying has done a lot to practice my piloting skills, Corazon."

The Filipina then gave her an envious look.

"You are 75-years-old, yet look as if you are merely fifty. I am jealous! That rejuvenation by an angel must have been an incredible experience."

"Oh, it was, Corazon. It also didn't hurt that Archangel Michael was truly handsome."

That left Corazon dreaming for a moment before she returned herself to reality and closed and locked the airstair door, all the expected passengers now being aboard. On her part, Shirley returned to the cockpit and sat in her copilot's seat, with Elizabeth smiling to her.

"How about we switch roles for this leg? You do the takeoff and I do the landing?"

“Deal! This leg may be a short one but landing and taking off from Jolo is always interesting.”

“As long as it doesn’t become TOO interesting... A tropical storm would sure do that. Thankfully, the weather is predicted to stay fair to good for the rest of the day. Well, time to start our pre-flight checklist.”

Fifteen minutes later, Shirley was making their Convair 800 take off towards Jolo. With only 530 kilometers between Davao and Jolo, that leg took only 55 minutes from takeoff to landing, with Elizabeth needing to put her engines in reverse pitch in order to safely slow down on the short, World War 2-era runway. The so-called air terminal there was only a low, unassuming building flanked by one hangar and a wooden control tower. Still, there was a fair amount of activity at the airfield, with an old DC-3 twin-engine transport parked in front of the hangar and being loaded with crates. The moment that the Convair rolled to a stop in front of the terminal, a small army of baggage and cargo handlers rushed in with a couple of cargo pallet elevators and four old jeeps equipped with towing bars. Most of the industrial equipment they had been carrying, which were parts for a new fish processing plant to be built in Jolo, was unloaded, along with the luggage of half of the passengers. This time, only 22 new passengers came onboard. However, Shirley and Elizabeth knew that many passengers were waiting for their aircraft in Sanga-Sanga. This being a Friday afternoon, many people in Sanga-Sanga would be getting on their flight in order to go spend the weekend in either Davao or Manila. The crew quickly ate a hot lunch in the plane as some luggage and cargo was being loaded inside the belly cargo holds of the Convair 800. They then took off again at around two in the afternoon for the short, 179-kilometer-long leg to Sanga-Sanga.

With their last passengers from Manila and Davao disembarking at the small airport of Sanga-Sanga, with its lone concrete runway next to the sea, the plane ended up empty for the first time that day. However, that didn’t last long, with a horde of passengers waiting to board the plane for the return trip towards Jolo, Davao and Manila. Many of those waiting passengers were actually non-Filipino expatriates who were faculty members of the Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography, a department of the Mindanao State University. Recognizing one of them as he was about to board her plane, Elizabeth exchanged kisses on the cheeks with Robert McClure, a

professor of oceanography and a native from her own state of Illinois whom she knew well.

"Welcome aboard, Bob! It is nice to see you and your family again. How are things for you here?"

"Me? It is all well and I still love my job. However, my sweet Jennifer is in dire need of some serious shopping in Manila, while our Carolyn suffers from cabin fever." Elizabeth grinned to the cute nine-year-old daughter of the couple, who wore spectacles and had freckles on her face.

"Manila has enough to offer for her to get over that. Maybe we could go out together to a good restaurant tomorrow evening?"

"That is a fine idea, Elizabeth." replied Robert McClure. "I will call you tomorrow before noon to arrange that with you."

"I will wait for your call, Bob."

Elizabeth then followed the McClure up the staircase in order to return to the cockpit. She barely had time to sit back in her pilot's seat when she heard a female scream, followed by some sort of commotion at the level of the forward lower lobby. Getting out of her seat, she was exiting the cockpit when a man armed with a revolver confronted her and shouted at her while pointing his weapon.

"RETURN IN THE COCKPIT! NOW!"

Elizabeth slowly raised her hands while speaking to the man in as calm a voice as she could, using Cebuano, all the while trying discretely to see what was going on in the passenger cabin.

"Please calm down, mister. Nobody needs to get hurt."

As she walked backward to reenter the cockpit while holding her hands up, Elizabeth was able to see at least two other armed men inside the passenger cabin, busy forcing the passengers to sit down in their seats. Yet another man was pointing his handgun at the terrified flight attendants, who had been made to sit down on the deck, next to the forward kitchenette. Her mind working as fast as she could, Elizabeth decided to take a risk and warn Shirley.

"Shirley, stay in your seat and raise your hands high: we have armed men aboard."

She had expected to get a slap or worst for speaking up like that but the gunman facing her, a small and thin man in his early forties, instead nodded his head in approval.

“That was a wise counsel to give to your comrade. Now, get back in the pilot’s seat.”

In the cockpit, Shirley had been about to pull her revolver from its ankle holster but stopped and covered back her weapon with the bottom of her trousers’ right leg, then raised her hands up on hearing that there was more than one armed man aboard. With the plane full of passengers and with more than one gunman aboard, the danger of having passengers or flight attendants being either hit by flying bullets or being used as human shields by the hijackers was just too high. She had fought on the ground in World War 2 in order to defend her group’s airfield from Japanese soldiers and considered herself more than a fair shot with a handgun but she thought that it would be better to keep her ace hidden for the moment. She looked at Elizabeth as she sat back in the pilot’s seat, then at the hijacker, who now stood behind Elizabeth’s seat and was pointing his revolver at her neck.

“What do you want, mister?” she asked in Cebuano. The man seemed to appreciate the fact that she didn’t use English.

“So, both of you can speak Cebuano, eh? Good! That will simplify things. What I want is for this plane to lift off from this airport as quickly as possible, before the police can react.”

“First, we will need to confirm that all the doors are closed and secured, mister.” replied Elizabeth. “Let at least one flight attendant do that, then I will be able to start our engines.”

The gunman, who didn’t seem to be the hysterical fanatic kind, nodded his head once, then twisted his head to shout towards the forward lobby.

“Omar, escort around one of the flight attendants, so that she could close all the doors for departure.”

“Understood, Amin!” replied the man guarding the four flight attendants, who then gestured with his pistol at young Aisha Santos. “You! Get up and go close the doors.”

Aisha, shaking with fear, cautiously got up from the deck and went down the stairs to the lower lobby, closely followed by the gunman. As she was going down, Corazon Villacruz shouted out instructions to her.

“Aisha, before closing the airstair, make sure that the cargo hold doors are closed, but don’t step out: just pop your head out the door.”

As the junior flight attendant was about to do just that, the hijacker pressed the muzzle of his colt .45 pistol against the back of her head.

"You try to run out of the plane and I will blow your brains out."

"O...okay!" could only reply the terrified young woman. Taking hold of one side of the airstair door frame, she leaned forward and looked aft, where the cargo holds doors used to load the passengers' luggage were. They were closed, with one airport employee giving her a thumbs up signal to signify that those doors were closed and secured. She gave back a timid thumbs up signal, then pushed a button, making the left side airstair door rise up and close, then fully lowered its locking handle.

"This was our only access door that was open." she explained to the gunman, who nodded once.

"Good! Now, go back up and sit on the deck with your three colleagues."

"Wait! I must tell our pilot that our doors are now closed."

"Very well! Do that but only that."

Nearly paralyzed by fear, Aisha grabbed the intercom telephone next to the frame of the airstair door and called the cockpit.

"Hello, this is Aisha. All the doors are closed and secured."

"Thanks, Aisha." replied Elizabeth. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, but I am afraid."

"That's understandable, Aisha. Just obey those men and stay calm and everything will be fine."

The hijacker in the cockpit, who seemed to be the leader of his group, nodded with satisfaction as Elizabeth hooked back her intercom microphone.

"You are reasonable, miss: I like that. You are also quite composed. You are an ex-military pilot, are you? I saw the medal ribbons pinned on your shirt."

"Me and my copilot fought together in a couple of past wars, decades ago."

"Then, you will understand the risks of not obeying us of or trying to play a trick on us, miss. Now, start your engines."

"Wait! We first have to be pushed away from the terminal by a tractor before I can do that. If I start my engines next to the terminal and put them in reverse in order to back away, the control tower will go bonkers on us."

The small gunman thought that over for a short moment, then nodded once.

"Very well! Get that tractor to push us away."

"I have to warn you first that I will have to call the ground traffic control for that, mister."

"That's alright with me, but be careful what you say and how you say it, miss." Elizabeth nodded in acknowledgement, then spoke in her headset's microphone.

"Sanga Sanga Ground Control, this is Air Philippines 305: we are ready to leave. Request tractor to push us away from terminal."

"Understood, Air Philippines 305. The tractor is going to move you within a minute."

As promised, the aircraft tractor attached to their nose landing gear started to push them shortly after that until the Convair 800 was a good fifty meters away from the terminal, with its nose pointed towards the entrance to the taxiway. The tractor operator then disconnected his towing bar and drove away. Elizabeth then looked sideways at the hijacker standing next to her seat.

"We are now going to start our engines. Shirley, start with our tail engine."

"Starting Engine Number 2 now!"

A long whine was soon heard, turning into a steady roar after a few seconds. Shirley and Elizabeth then started in succession their two other engines, then did a short pre-flight instrument check before starting to roll on the taxiway. As they were rolling towards one end of the runway, Elizabeth looked again at the hijacker.

"To where do you want us to fly once we are airborne, mister?"

"Head for Kuala Lumpur, in Malaysia."

Elizabeth and Shirley exchanged looks before the former looked at an air chart and checked their fuel gauges.

"That's a 1,260-mile flight. We do have enough fuel for that trip, but we will be nearly dry by then. If we have to fly further than that, then we will need to refuel in Kuala Lumpur."

"I understand that, miss. We planned for that."

"And may I ask what your plan is, mister?" asked Elizabeth. That didn't seem to anger the head hijacker, who answered her in an even voice.

"What I can tell you is that we will effectively fly further after getting to Kuala Lumpur. I will however keep the rest to myself for the moment."

"And what about my passengers and flight attendants? They are innocent people. Could you please let them go once we land in Kuala Lumpur?"

That was when the voice of the hijacker hardened a bit.

“Some will be let go in Kuala Lumpur, but others will have to stay onboard for the time being. Now, take off and stop asking questions.”

Elizabeth tightened her jaws as what the hijackers were trying to accomplish became somewhat clearer to her. Those hijackers were going to select certain passengers as hostages for the trip to wherever the hijackers wanted to go, which meant in turn that there was some political point to this. She could already bet that either non-Filipinos or non-Muslims, or both, would be selected as hostages. With both of the hijackers who had spoken having Muslim first names, this could possibly mark them as members of one of the Muslim movements which had been fighting for decades for the creation of an independent Muslim state in this part of the Philippines. While the apparent head of the hijackers had proved to be both calm and relatively reasonable, Elizabeth figured that there would be clear limits to this reasonableness. She and Shirley would have to play it tight indeed in order to avoid any blood being spilled. Focusing back on her plane, she called the control tower and, getting the authorization to take off, pushed her three engines to maximum power while releasing the brakes. The Convair 800 quickly took on speed and lifted off from the runway after a 750-meter run. As they were climbing at a moderate angle, Shirley spoke up.

“Heading to Kuala Lumpur is 259.”

“Heading 259, understood!” replied Elizabeth while starting to turn her aircraft towards the West. However, she soon got a call from the air traffic controller in Sanga-Sanga as she was flying away over the ocean.

“Air Philippines 305, from Sanga-Sanga: you were supposed to fly to the Northeast after departure. Why are you flying westward?”

Instead of answering that call, she looked at the head hijacker.

“What should I say to them? If I don’t answer at all, they may be liable to alert the Filipino Air Force.”

“Don’t answer!” replied without hesitation the gunman. “We will soon enter Malaysian airspace, where Filipino fighter aircraft won’t be able to follow us.”

“As you wish, but expect in turn that Malaysian air controllers will then contact us to ask us why we are entering their airspace.”

“I realize that, miss. If and when they call, then I will answer them myself.”

A couple minutes after that, Elizabeth started hearing some kind of altercation in the passenger cabin. The head hijacker also heard that and left the cockpit after firmly telling Elizabeth to stick to her present heading. She soon heard some angry exchange between the head hijacker and one male passenger speaking in Cebuano. That exchange did not go for long, however, and the head hijacker quickly returned to the cockpit, a mean smile on his face.

"Some big shot businessman full of himself tried to protest the fact that we were flying in the wrong direction. He will keep his mouth shut from now on."

What he didn't say was that the businessman in question now had a broken jaw after being pistol-whipped. Elizabeth threw him a jaundiced look.

"Know that the air traffic controller in Sanga-Sanga is getting quite agitated by now, mister. He is liable to give the alert any time now."

"Let him!"

"We are now on automatic pilot mode towards Kuala Lumpur. I would like to be able to go to the passenger cabin and try to reassure my passengers as much as I can while checking on their health."

"That sounds reasonable enough, miss. Omar will escort you. OMAR, PLEASE ESCORT THE PILOT INTO THE PASSENGER CABIN AND LET HER SPEAK A BIT WITH THE PASSENGERS: SHE WANTS TO REASSURE THEM."

The head hijacker then took one step back and sideways to allow Elizabeth to leave her seat.

"You may now go see the passengers, but careful about what you say. You can however tell them that we will land in Kuala Lumpur but no more than that."

"I understand."

Mentally wondering how all this would end, Elizabeth slipped past the head hijacker and walked to the entrance of the passenger cabin, where the gunman watching the flight attendants was waiting for her. She however looked at her four attendants before entering the cabin.

"Are you alright, girls?"

"We are afraid but we are physically okay, Elizabeth." answered Corazon.
"Where are we going?"

"Kuala Lumpur. I can't say more than that right now. Stay calm and obey those men and we should be alright."

Elizabeth then entered the passenger cabin and looked left and right down the aisle before starting to walk slowly, speaking calmly to her passengers and doing her best to reassure them. In the process, she was able to ascertain that three more hijackers, all armed with either revolvers or pistols, were aboard, making for a total of five armed men in her Convair 800. With so many people at risk of being used as human shields, any attempt by Shirley to use her hidden revolver would quickly turn ugly. However, that little .38 Special snub-nosed revolver could well become a big ace card for them later on...if it was not discovered by the hijackers. She looked critically at the man who had tried to argue with the hijackers and who was spitting some blood through his mouth. Elizabeth then turned to face the one named 'Omar', who was following her closely.

"Could you please let one of my flight attendants give first aid to this man, mister?"

The gunman thought that over for a short moment before nodding his head.

"That loudmouth got his lesson. Go ahead!"

"Thank you! CORAZON, GRAB OUR FIRST AID KIT AND COME HERE: WE HAVE A WOUNDED PASSENGER."

Elizabeth then patiently waited until Corazon came to her, a first aid kit in one hand, and squeezed past the gunman, who had sidestepped between two rows of seats.

"Do your best for that man, Corazon. I will now continue my tour of the cabin."

With the gunman still following her, Elizabeth then resumed her slow walk down the central aisle. She couldn't help feel a pang of her heart when she got to the seats occupied by the McClure family: young Carolyn was obviously terrified and was clinging tightly to her mother. Crouching in the aisle next to their row of seats, she gently smiled to the nine-year-old girl.

"Don't worry, Carolyn: this will only be a temporary inconvenient. We will land in a bit more than three hours in Kuala Lumpur."

"Do you know what are the intentions of those hijackers, Elizabeth?" asked Jennifer, making Elizabeth shake her head.

"No, but don't worry about that for the moment. Just comfort and reassure Carolyn in the meantime."

Elizabeth then got back up and completed her tour of the passengers. At the rear end of the cabin, she looked at the gunman still closely following her.

"Could I use one of the rear lavatories before returning to the cockpit, mister?"

"Go ahead, but no tricks! Understood?"

"I understand." replied Elizabeth before entering one of the tiny toilet stalls situated in the tail section, behind the passenger cabin. She actually could use such a toilet break but mainly wanted to be fully ready for a possible long period of stress and tension. When she emerged from the toilet stall after two minutes, she looked in the eyes the man called 'Omar' and spoke in a low voice to him in Cebuano.

"You look old enough to be the father of a child of about the same age as that of the redhead girl I spoke to. Do you have young children?"

The gunman hesitated a bit but finally answered her.

"Yes! I have two boys and one girl."

"Then, please think about them while dealing with that redhead girl, mister. She is completely innocent and never hurt anyone."

"I can't say how things will go for her or for the other passengers, woman: Amin will decide that. Now, go back to your cockpit."

Realizing that pushing harder on that point could well bring negative results, Elizabeth returned at a measured pace to the cockpit, arriving there as the one named 'Amin' was forcefully speaking in the microphone of her radio headset, using English and apparently talking with some air traffic controller.

"Listen up, Kuala Lumpur Control, and listen well, because I won't repeat myself. The Air Philippines plane I am in will land in Kuala Lumpur for refueling, whether you like it or not. If you or anyone at your airport give me any trouble, then I will start executing one passenger every minute until you become reasonable. And don't think that I am bluffing. I will not answer any call from anyone from now on until we are on approach for a landing at Kuala Lumpur. Do you understand me?"

"We understand, Air Philippines 305." answered the air controller in a reluctant tone before cutting the conversation. Elizabeth, who had heard the threat to start shooting passengers, gave a black look at the head hijacker.

"You really would be ready to execute innocent people like that, mister?"

Amin in turn stared hard at her, some irritation showing in his voice.

"If I am forced to do that, yes, I would do it. If you want to avoid that, then make those idiots in Kuala Lumpur understand they need to take me seriously and to do what I am asking them to do."

"Alright, I will do my best about that. We have about three hours of flying to do before arriving in Kuala Lumpur. Could you let my flight attendants serve drinks and snack to the passengers? That would help lower the tension aboard, I believe."

"I don't see a problem with that, miss, but no alcohol: I am a good Muslim and I won't encourage the drinking of alcohol."

Elizabeth didn't tell Amin what a truly good Muslim would do in the present circumstances, instead nodding once before going to see Corazon and the three other attendants, who were still guarded by Omar.

"Corazon, I gained permission from the hijackers for you four to serve drinks and snacks to the passengers, in order to help them relax a bit. However, no alcohol will be served: only sodas, water, milk, fruit juices, coffee or tea. You may also serve the five gunmen aboard: no need to antagonize them right now."

"I understand, Elizabeth. Alright, girls: let's get to work."

When Elizabeth returned again in the cockpit, Amin, who had taken the spare jump seat situated behind the pilot's seat, gave her a serious look.

"You are indeed a cool woman, I must give you that, miss. Tell me: in which wars did you and your friend fight?"

Elizabeth hesitated for a moment about telling the gunman her full story, uncertain about the effect some of the details would have on him, but ended up being totally frank with him: maybe that would smooth up a bit the rapport between the two of them.

"Well, our first war was the Second World War, when we fought the Japanese in the Pacific, then we fought the North Koreans in the First Korean War. Next, we fought the Chinese and Russians in and around Indochina before going on a peace mission in Palestine. From there, we served in Germany for a few years before returning to the United States, where we served until our retirement."

Amin, now looking intrigued, then asked her another question.

"You said that you fought the Japanese in the Pacific, but you look too young for that."

"That's because we look younger than we are, mister. My friend and I are 75-years-old. If you don't believe me, then look at my passport."

Taking out of a breast pocket of her jacket a small plastic bag in which she kept her passport and main identification cards, she took out of it her passport and handed it to Amin, who quickly sifted through it. When he looked again at her, it was with clear incredulity and confusion.

"You were really born in 1921? But you look about fifty! How could that be?"

"Call it a miracle, if you will, mister. You must have heard about General Ingrid Dows, who started her career as a fighter pilot by defending the Philippines against the Japanese, right?"

"Of course!" replied the gunman, a smile coming to his face. "Everybody in the Philippines know about Ingrid Dows. What about her?"

"Then, you must know that she still looks to be about twenty-years-old, even though she is in reality 71-years-old. You must also know that she possesses a number of supernatural powers, given to her by a powerful entity. Well, she rejuvenated us some fourteen years ago, which is why Shirley and I look so young for our age."

"And why did she grace you with such a miracle, miss? Did you know her?"
It was the turn of Elizabeth to smile.

"Know her? We flew with her. Shirley was even her wingman during the war in the Pacific."

Amin looked at Shirley, then at Elizabeth again, a conflicted expression on his face. After a few seconds of reflection, he spoke in a much softer tone than before.

"Look, ladies, I truly have no wish to hurt anyone on this flight unless I am forced to by someone's stupidity, but know this: someone else will decide the final outcome of all this. I am only in charge of this initial hijacking. Once at our final destination, I will have no say about what will happen next. So, enjoy this flight while you can. And please don't ask more about what will happen."

Amin then got up from his jump seat.

"Well, since your flight attendants are presently working, I will go get myself a cup of tea."

Once alone in the cockpit, Elizabeth and Shirley exchanged worried looks before Elizabeth approached close to Shirley and interposed her body so that the hijackers outside of the cockpit could not see their faces, then whispered to her friend.

"I believe what that man just said to us and it doesn't reassure me at all, on the contrary. If I understood well the message he was trying to pass us, he is just a simple pawn in charge of this part of whatever operation we are stuck in the middle of, while someone else will eventually take charge. From the way he said it, that someone is not a very nice person."

"And what could be the final goal of all this? A ransom demand for our release? A demand to free some political prisoner somewhere, possibly in the Philippines?"

“That last hypothesis is a definite possibility, Shirley, but I also see another, uglier possibility: that this may turn into an act of pure terror against the non-Filipinos aboard this aircraft. Why would we be flying westward if not for that? I suspect that we will understand better what is going on once we will have landed at our final destination.”

“Which would then be probably too late for us to do anything to avoid a bloodshed or lots of abuse. We Americans have plenty of enemies around the World, starting in the Caucasus and Russia. I was lucky enough in being able to keep my revolver on me but, if we wait too long before reacting, we may lose our chances to use it.”

“I know but, as long as the plane is full of passengers, it will be impossible to act forcefully without putting at risk many lives. Hopefully, the hijackers will let go part or all of our passengers once in Kuala Lumpur.”

“Hopefully...” said Elizabeth before she heard footsteps approaching behind her and stopped talking, turning around to look at Amin, who had a Styrofoam cup full of hot tea in one hand and his revolver in the other hand. In turn, Amin, who was no idiot, threw them a suspicious look.

“I hope that you were not cooking up some desperate, heroic action to retake your plane by yourselves, ladies?”

“No, we just were planning to thwart your plans by performing a suicide dive into the ocean.” quipped Shirley. After an initial reaction of shock, Amin then grinned at her declaration.

“You still have a sense of humor after all this, miss? You really are a cool customer. Well, let’s all sit down and enjoy this flight together.”

18:41 (Philippines Time) / 17:41 (Malaysia Time)

Subang International Airport, Subang (near Kuala Lumpur)

Malaysia

Elizabeth made a sarcastic smile when a powerful lightning bolt flashed down the dark, rainy sky over the Subang International Airport, which they were now approaching for a landing.

“Well, it seems that the local weather agrees with the mood of the moment.”

“Hey, Subang is classified as the airport with the most thunderstorms in the World.” added Shirley, who was watching their instruments while Elizabeth was doing

the flying. As for Amin, he was looking a bit scared as the Convair flew down while being shaken by air turbulences and while visibility ahead was nearly zero.

“You can really land safely in such conditions?”

Shirley smiled to him while patting the transparent screen of her heads-up display, which gave her the view seen by one of the plane’s fixed low light level cameras.

“We have landed in much worse conditions before, mister. We once had to land as a typhoon was sweeping over the Philippines. Thankfully, Manila was at that time at the edge of the typhoon. Besides, we have our heads-up displays, which are connected to night vision cameras, and the plane is following the airport’s Instruments Landing System, or ILS.”

She then looked at their radar altimeter and glide path indicator, announcing their indications to Elizabeth.

“We are smack on the glide path. Altitude: 500 feet... Speed: 150 knots... Altitude: 400 feet... 300 feet, speed still 150 knots... 200 feet... 100 feet... 50 feet... 30 feet... 15 feet...”

Elizabeth then raised a bit the nose of her aircraft, with the wheels of their main landing gear touching the runway a few seconds later.

“Reverse pitch, Shirley!”

“Props on reverse pitch, Libby. Putting on full power!”

The noise from the engines, which had lowered to a simple whine during the approach, then turned into a roar for maybe ten seconds as the aircraft slowed down quickly while rolling down the runway. Once their ground speed was low enough, Elizabeth put the propellers back into normal pitch and lowered the engines’ power before turning onto a taxiway, where an airport vehicle bearing a lit signal saying ‘Follow Me’ was waiting on one side. While starting to follow that vehicle, Elizabeth saw what was waiting on the section of tarmac towards which she was being guided to and felt worry, although she was expecting it: dozens of police vehicles with gyro lights on nearly surrounded that area. She could even see at least two wheeled armored vehicles.

“It looks like the local welcome wagon came in force, mister.”

“Well, I would be lying if I said that I was not expecting that. However, unless those people out there are complete idiots, I would be surprised if they tried anything here: there are too many people in this plane to risk an assault.”

Shirley twisted her head to look at Amin, deep concern in her eyes.

“Mister Amin, right now I have only one thing to ask of you: that you will do what you can to prevent any of the children aboard this plane from being forced to continue to live through this.”

While Amin did not reply to that, Shirley was able to see that her words had struck something inside the man. She however did not insist further, instead helping Elizabeth to drive their plane to the tarmac area designated by the signal vehicle, where she stopped her aircraft on the spot indicated by a man wearing a high visibility vest and holding light sticks. Shutting down her three engines, Elizabeth then twisted her neck to look at Amin while offering him her radio microphone.

“It’s your move now, Mister Amin.”

Very conscious that about anything could happen now, with dozens of armed policemen and even soldiers surrounding the Convair 800, Amin took the microphone but shouted a number of orders to his men first.

“We are surrounded by the Malaysian police. Omar, take a flight attendant with you and stand behind her when she will open the forward left side door. Bashir, you stay in the middle of the passenger cabin. Walid, Ibrahim, you watch the rear exits. Once the door will be opened, I will shout our demands to these policemen.”

Before leaving the cockpit, Amin looked at Elizabeth.

“You and your friend will stay in your seats while I go parlay with those cops. If someone calls your plane on the radio, tell him that I am busy.”

Once down to the lower forward lobby and standing next to the left side airstair, Amin gave a nod to Corazon Villacruz, who had her hand close to the opening mechanism of the door and who had Omar’s pistol next to her head.

“Open the door, miss.”

Corazon, her heart beating furiously, obeyed and made the airstair open and go down. She was blinded for a moment by the lit headlights of the police vehicles surrounding the plane, like Amin and Omar were but, thankfully, nothing happened until Amin stepped forward and shouted in English while standing in the door frame.

“I NEED ONE PERSON OF AUTHORITY TO COME TO THIS DOOR. ONLY ONE!”

After a few seconds, a dark silhouette came at a walk towards the plane. Once near the airstair door, the lights from the aircraft revealed him to be a Malaysian police officer of

high rank, who stopped at the foot of the airstair and looked at Amin, who was holding his revolver in a visible manner.

"I am Commander Balikanang, of the Malaysian Constabulary. I presume that you are the leader of these armed men?"

"You presume right. My demands are simple: to fully fuel this plane, so that we could take off again for another destination, and the complete emptying of the cargo holds. In exchange for fueling this plane, I promise to let go safely over half of the passengers who are aboard this plane. I want an answer to that in less than thirty minutes. After thirty minutes, I will start killing one passenger per minute until I will see a fuel truck arrive. And don't even think about attempting to take by assault this plane: the cabin is full of people and many innocents would then die. Can you give me an answer right now, Commander Balikanang?"

"Just give me a minute, mister." said the police officer before taking a few steps away from the plane and starting to talk in Malay on a pocket radio. An exchange in Malay followed, mixed in with some long delays while somebody at the other end either took time to answer or passed on the message to someone. After about four tense minutes for Corazon, who was watching all that, the police commander returned to the foot of the airstair.

"We are ready to accept your demands and a fuel truck will soon show up, but it will not start refueling until you release at least half of the passengers, which would be a minimum of 78 people according to the manifest we got from the Filipino authorities."

"That sounds reasonable to me, Commander. I will now have this door closed again while I go have the passengers to be released readied for the transfer. I will then let go the first of them, then will release the rest after I see your fuel truck start to refuel the plane."

"And in whose name are you doing this hijacking, mister? You must have some statement or list of demands you have, other than refueling this plane, no?"

"You will get those once this plane will be at a safe location for me and my men, not before, Commander."

Amin then signaled to Corazon to close and lock the airstair door. Once the door was closed, he escorted the flight attendant back up to the main deck, then grabbed the intercom handset near the forward kitchenette and spoke in it, speaking in Cebuano, then in English.

“Your attention, please! I now want all the passengers, including the children, to get their passports or identity cards and to be ready to show them to me when I will go down the aisle. Those I will select will then leave their seats and go forward to where the exits are, where they will await my instructions. The others not selected by me will stay in their seats and will keep their mouths shut. Those who will not obey my directives will regret it. You now have one minute to get your passports or identity cards ready for my inspection.”

With a mix of near panic and crazy hope sweeping through the passenger cabin after that announcement, there was near pandemonium as passengers jostled or even pushed each other in order to search their bags contained in the overhead bins. As he was waiting for the passengers to get their papers, Amin saw that Shirley was now standing inside the door frame of the cockpit and was looking at him gravely. She didn't have to speak in order for Amin to understand the message she wanted to pass to him.

Once a relative calm came back in the passenger cabin, Amin entered it and stopped at once at the level of the first row of seats. He then looked down at the three passengers occupying the right-side seats: they were obviously Filipinos.

“Show me your papers.”

The man and two women then presented identity cards stamped by the Filipino government. He took only a cursory look at them before pointing towards the forward lobby of the aircraft.

“You three can get up and take your bags, then go wait near the left-side lower access door.”

The three Filipino peasants did not have to be told twice and quickly left their seats and went to the forward lobby and down its staircase. Amin then looked at the papers of the three passengers in the left-side seats. Seeing that they were also Filipinos, he told them to leave before stepping up to the second row of seats. Those who were Filipino citizens got systematically released by Amin. However, when he encountered the first non-Filipino passenger, a Spanish man who was a member of the faculty of the Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography, he threw the man's passport back at him and looked hard into his eyes.

“You stay! Keep quiet, or you will regret it.”

Continuing with his pattern of releasing Filipino citizens and keeping foreigners, Amin soon had a good two-thirds of the passenger seats emptied. He then came to the row

where the McClure family was seated. He could see right away that they were holding American passports but he saw also that Jennifer McClure was crying nearly hysterically while holding tight to her young daughter: she had probably understood what criteria Amin used to decide who stayed and who left. Sifting quickly through the family's passports and seeing the pure terror visible in the eyes of nine-year-old Carolyn, Amin felt something break inside him. Giving back the passports to the father of the girl, he then pointed at the forward door of the cabin.

"Take your bags and leave!"

Unable at first to believe their luck, the McClure finally got up from their seats and grabbed the three small travel bags contained inside the overhead bin, then nearly ran to the forward door.

In the doorway of the cockpit, Shirley was able to quickly enough understand what was happening and felt a heavy weight on her heart as she guessed the real goal of the hijackers: it was a politically-motivated terror operation targeted against foreigners, with a probable emphasis on American citizens. She was thus surprised when she saw that the McClure family was allowed to leave the plane. She however didn't delay their departure by trying to ask them questions and watched them step out of the plane, along other passengers. Shortly after that, the outgoing flow of passengers came to a end and Amin reappeared at the door of the passenger cabin.

"Miss Slade, have they refilled your fuel tanks yet?"

"They are in the process of pumping fuel in, but it will take another ten minutes before our tanks are full."

"And what is the range of your plane when its fuel tanks are full?"

"Uh, I would need to know how many passengers are left aboard, then add the weight of the cargo and luggage in our holds before I can calculate that."

"I ordered the cargo holds to be completely emptied, so you won't have to worry about that factor, miss. As for the number of passengers still aboard, feel free to go count them yourself."

"Then, I will go do that count now." said Shirley, who then passed by Amin and entered the cabin. Her relief at seeing that most of the seats were now empty was however tempered on seeing who was left in the cabin: basically Americans and Europeans. Thankfully, no children below the age of sixteen were present. Counting

them quickly, she got a total of 47 passengers still aboard. Returning to Amin, she bowed her head to him.

"First, I must thank you for having let all the children leave, Mister Amin. Second, I would have one more request for you: to allow at least two of my flight attendants to leave the plane as well. With only 47 passengers left aboard, I won't need more than two attendants to help serve my remaining passengers. As you may know, all four of my attendants are Filipinas."

"Feel free to let go up to three of them, miss."

"Thank you!"

Shirley then returned into the cockpit, where she briefed Elizabeth about the number of passengers still remaining and about the permission to allow up to three attendants leave as well. Elizabeth mulled that information for a moment, then left her seat and went with Shirley to see their attendants, still under guard in the upper lobby. She looked at the four Filipinas before speaking to them in Tagalog.

"Girls, the hijackers gave us the permission to allow up to three of you to leave this plane here, in Kuala Lumpur. With only 47 passengers left aboard, I certainly won't need all four of you to assist and serve our remaining passengers. Don't feel shame at asking to go now: The next hours and days could well become very tough. Besides, I will feel better knowing that at least some of you will be safe. So, I only need one volunteer among you to stay aboard and continue on with this trip."

"I will stay!" said without hesitation Corazon Villacruz, something that didn't surprise Elizabeth. Maria Bonifacio, the second most senior attendant, then also volunteered, prompting Elizabeth in staring at her.

"Are you sure that you want to stay, Maria? You have young children at home and Corazon will be enough to serve the 47 remaining passengers. I still could order you to leave if need be."

That made the 26-year-old Filipina hesitate, prompting Shirley to jump in as well in the discussion.

"Please, Maria, go! You have your little Manolo and Isabella waiting for you at home."

"Go, Maria!" said Corazon. "Our passengers staying here will need someone like you to guide and comfort them until they could be returned to the Philippines."

Tears appeared on Maria's cheeks and she lowered her head, close to sobbing.

"Alright, I will leave with Francisca and Aisha."

The whole group then exchanged tearful hugs and kisses before Maria, Francisca and Aisha stepped out of the aircraft. Elizabeth then looked at Amin, who had been observing that scene.

“I will need to personally go check that our holds have been effectively emptied, so that I can calculate with precision our maximum range. Any error could leave us high and dry over the ocean, in which case we will all be fucked.”

“Alright, miss. Go inspect the holds. I am confident that you know the consequences if you do anything stupid.”

“Right!”

Taking her raincoat, which had been suspended in the narrow closet near the access airstair, Elizabeth put it on and also put her pilot’s cap on her head before going down the airstair’s steps and into the rain which poured over Subang. Very conscious that dozens of policemen, including at least a couple of police snipers, were watching her, she went to the forward left side cargo door of her plane, where a half-dozen airport employees were busy unloading a standard LD2 container full of suitcases and passengers’ bags, using a container elevator. Elizabeth could bet that at least one of those ‘employees’ was in reality an armed policeman in disguise but she acted as if all this was a routine operation.

“Hi guys! Do you mind if I get up and check if the holds have been fully emptied?”

One of the employees looked at her with both concern and surprise.

“You are the pilot, miss?”

“I am! How many ULDs³ are left inside right now?”

“This is the last one, miss.”

“Good! I will still need to check the holds after you’re done, though.”

“As you wish, miss.”

Waiting until the last container was out, Elizabeth then climbed the side ladder of the container elevator and walked inside the forward cargo hold of her Convair 800, which proved to be effectively empty. Going out of the hold and climbing back down on the ground, she enlisted the help of one of the employees, so that he could carry a ladder for

³ ULD: Unit Load Device. Acronym given to the baggage and cargo containers used aboard commercial airliners. ULDs come in various standard sizes and shapes, nearly all of which have a height of 162.6 centimeters and a depth of 153.4 centimeters.

her to allow her to go look inside the aft cargo hold. That hold also proved to be empty. Next, she went to the big fuel bowser truck which was about to be disconnected from her plane and went to see the man sitting in the driver's cab.

"Hello! Could you tell me how much fuel you just pumped into my aircraft?"

"Uh, of course, miss! Here is the fuel manifest form we just filled. You only need to sign it and then rip off your own copy."

Taking the writing pad offered by the employee, Elizabeth quickly signed it and ripped off one carbon copy, then gave the pad back to the man, who hesitated a bit before asking her a question as she was about to walk away.

"Where are you flying to next, miss?"

Elizabeth could only give him a sardonic smile.

"You tell me, mister."

She then returned inside her aircraft, where Amin was waiting for her in the lower lobby section.

"So?"

"The holds are empty and closed and I have the manifest for the fuel just pumped in. Give me a few minutes and I will then be able to tell you how far we can fly. I suppose that you can't tell me right now where you want to go, right?"

"I would effectively prefer to wait until we are in the air, miss. Your answer will decide if we will need to land and refuel again in order to get to our final destination. How much range does your aircraft have in theory when full of fuel and with no cargo and a limited number of passengers?"

"The theoretical range with maximum fuel and zero payload for the Convair 800 is 4,250 miles, but that could vary with the strength and direction of the winds we will encounter."

"Wow! That is more than I had expected, miss."

"That's because airlines are in the business of transporting things, not of flying around empty. The range figures they post are always for loaded aircraft."

"That makes sense!" replied Amin while nodding his head. "Well, in that case, I believe that we can now leave. Miss Villacruz, please close and lock this door."

Elizabeth nodded in appreciation at the polite tone used by the head hijacker.

"Thank you for being polite with my crew, Mister Amin. I truly appreciate that."

In return, Amin looked at her soberly for a long moment before replying to her.

"Miss, I can't promise you that I will be able to stay polite with you or your crew. Now, let's go back to the cockpit. You go first."

Once back in her pilot's seat, Elizabeth took out of a pocket the fuel manifest form she had signed and gave it to Shirley.

"Here is our fuel manifest, Shirley. Our holds are empty and we have 47 passengers, uh, sorry, 52 passengers and three crew members. Please do our trim and weight calculation for takeoff and also calculate how far we can go with our present load of fuel. In the meantime, I will do our pre-flight checklist and start our engines."

"Got it!"

By the time that their three engines were started and running at idle, Shirley had finished her calculations and adjusted their trim. The maximum range she had calculated, 4,100 miles, pleased Amin, who was again sitting in the jump seat located behind Elizabeth's seat.

"That will be plenty to get to where we want to go, miss. We will thus be able to avoid having to land again enroute."

"What's that 'we' stuff, mister?" shot back Shirley in a sarcastic tone, making Amin grin with amusement.

"Well, aren't we in this together, for the better and for the worse?"

"A shotgun marriage! Great!"

Elizabeth couldn't help smile at Shirley's morbid attempt at humor. If the hijackers felt relaxed and in a good mood, then that could only be good for the crew and passengers and could possibly prevent some unnecessary violence. She then contacted the airport's tower and asked for the authorization to roll to the runway and then take off. As expected, the air controller immediately gave her the go ahead, so she was able to start rolling towards one end of the runway. Some nine minutes later, the Convair 800 was airborne and climbing in the rainy night sky. As they were climbing to their cruising altitude on a general West heading, Elizabeth twisted her head and asked a question to Amin.

"So, Mister Amin, are you now ready to tell us where we are going, so that I could set a proper heading on my autopilot?"

"You may, miss: we are going to Somalia. Steer towards Mogadishu for the moment: I will give you our final destination once over the Somali coast."

Both Shirley and Elizabeth both grimaced on hearing the word 'Somalia': the place was synonym with 'anarchy', with no central government in existence and with a number of warlords and Islamic fundamentalist groups doing whatever they wished there.

CHAPTER 4 – REACTIONS



08:31 (Washington D.C. Time) / 20:31 (Malaysia Time)

Friday, November 1, 1996 'C'

**National Combined Combat Command Center (NC4), the Pentagon
Arlington, Virginia, U.S.A.**

Ingrid, sitting at her open area desk in the NC4 and watching a television set tuned to the CNN channel, tighten her jaws when the reporter describing the hijacking of Air Philippines 305 showed the pictures of her two old comrades while naming them as the pilots of the Convair 800. What had been a serious incident of concern to the U.S.A., which was a close ally of the Philippines, was now turning into a personal cause of anxiety. She however reminded herself that she could not allow her personal feelings to cloud her judgment as the top American military commander. Still, something clearly had to be done, fast.

“Major Cusack, do we know where they are going now?”

The duty intelligence officer, sitting a few steps from her, shook his head.

“Not officially, general. However, the Malaysian Air Force followed the Convair 800 until it left Malaysian airspace and reported that it was flying steady on a heading of 271, straight West. It is now over the open ocean and the next piece of land ahead of it is the northeast coast of Africa, Somalia to be more exact...if it doesn't alter its course.”

"Somalia..." said Ingrid to herself. "A failed state controlled by warlords and Islamist extremists. You can hardly find a more chaotic and anarchic place on Earth right now."

Looking at the big World situation board facing her desk, Ingrid looked at what assets she presently had in the Indian Ocean. One symbol marking the position of a ship just outside the mouth of the Gulf of Aden, close to the coasts of both Yemen and Somalia, immediately attracted her attention and she shouted an order to the duty Navy senior officer.

"Captain Merrick, have the U.S.S. NEPTUNE head South at top speed to take position off the eastern coast of Somalia. I want it to launch one of its early warning birds, so that it could locate and identify positively the hijacked Convair 800 of Air Philippines while staying out of visual sight from the cockpit of the Convair. It is then to discreetly follow Air Philippines 305 in order to confirm where it is going to land. Also, alert the NEPTUNE to have its embarked Marine battalion ready to execute a mass hostage rescue operation."

"Understood, General!"

With officers in the NMCC starting to implement her orders, Ingrid gave a bitter look at the big situation board.

"This happens only four days before our presidential elections. It can't be a simple coincidence. Whoever arranged this hijacking is probably counting that the elections will distract us from reacting properly to this."

A mere minute after that, the duty intelligence officer got a phone call that seemed to agitate him. He then looked at Ingrid with a somber expression.

"General, we have another airliner reported as possibly hijacked. An Alitalia Boeing 717 that left Cairo for Rome stopped responding to air traffic control once over the Mediterranean and then turned Southeast. It is now flying over the Red Sea, heading in the general direction of the Gulf of Aden. The Israelis scrambled a pair of fighters in response and are now following the airliner from a distance."

"Damn! Do we know how many persons are aboard that flight?"

"Yes, General! It took off from Cairo with 323 passengers, most of them American and European tourists, plus ten crewmembers."

"This can't be a coincidence, happening at the same time that we have another hijacked airliner heading towards Somalia. This must be a coordinated mass hijacking event. Keep an eye and ear out for more possible airliners or even cruise ships being

hijacked, Major. Captain Merrick, pass that information to the U.S.S. NEPTUNE. I want it to track that Alitalia flight, on top of tracking Air Philippines 305. If those two hijacked airliners end up landing at the same location, then we can expect to find a strong hostile force at that said location. We may need to involve more of our assets in order to deal properly with this double situation. What do we have in Djibouti right now, Colonel Reed?”

The duty Air Force senior officer looked quickly at his latest reports before answering her.

“We have nothing right now in Djibouti, or in the Northeast tip of Africa. However, the French do have a few helicopters in Djibouti, along with about 200 troops.”

“Hum, contacting them and getting them to accept to launch a joint rescue operation would take way too long. However... Colonel, get in contact with the French and ask them to have their base in Djibouti ready to act as a reception point for any hostages we may end up rescuing. I will now call the White House to advise the President about all this.”

Ingrid shook her head as she grabbed the handset of the encrypted telephone linking the Pentagon with the White House: whoever was arranging those hijackings would need to be dealt with firmly, once found out.

18:03 (Somalia Time) / 09:03 (Washington D.C. Time)

Combat Information Center (CIC) of the battle carrier U.S.S. NEPTUNE

Indian Ocean, near the Gulf of Aden

Rear Admiral Mack ‘Big Mack’ Benson nodded once his head at the arrival at a near run of Lieutenant Colonel Paul Wilkinson, the commander of the marine battalion embarked on his battle carrier. He then looked around the electronic



tactical situation display table at his senior officers and squadron commanders.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have a new and most urgent mission given to us by Washington. First, to put everybody in the picture, two airliners have recently been hijacked and are now headed towards Somalia: an Air Philippines Convair 800 that was hijacked in Tawi-Tawi and an Alitalia Boeing 717 that had left Cairo and was heading to Rome. There are 47 passengers and three crewmembers aboard the Convair 800, which is presently over the Indian Ocean and heading towards Mogadishu, while there are 323 passengers and ten crewmembers on the Alitalia flight, which is now over the Red Sea and approaching the Gulf of Aden. The numbers and affiliations of the hijackers on those two planes are still unknown, except for the fact that the hijackers on the Air Philippines plane are probably Filipino Muslims and that there are at least four of them. On receipt of the warning order from Washington, I scrambled two of our MP-21 early warning patrol aircraft, so that they could locate, positively identify and then trail discretely both of the hijacked airliners. The Air Philippines Convair 800 has now been confirmed to be here, some 3,200 miles due east of Mogadishu and is flying westward over the Indian Ocean at a constant speed of 360 knots. As for the Alitalia Boeing 717, its last reported position was 110 miles northwest of Djibouti. Our MP-21s will continue to track them in order to find out where they will land, which will probably be somewhere in Somalia. The Convair 800, while it topped up its fuel tanks in Kuala Lumpur, doesn't have enough range anyway to fly much further past Somalia. Once we will know where those two hijacked airliners will have landed, we will then launch a snap hostage rescue mission, with Colonel Wilkinson's battalion effecting an air assault aboard our PELICAN VTOL⁴ assault transports. First on the objective however will be our embarked SEAL team, which will land as discretely as possible near the objective and will then do a covert reconnaissance of it. Our SEALs will then guide in and assist our marines when they will close in on the objective. Unfortunately, we can't make a more detailed plan until we know where these hijacked aircraft will land in Somalia. Our main goal is to rescue as quickly as possible those hostages before they could be moved or dispersed, hopefully without casualties occurring to them, but we will also eliminate the terrorists who will be guarding them. The freed hostages will then be flown to the NEPTUNE. Our attack squadrons will also be in the air, ready to provide close air support to our Marines. Any questions at this point?”

⁴ VTOL: Vertical Takeoff and Landing.

Wilkinson was the first to raise one hand.

“Admiral, have those hijackers made any demands yet? What are their goals?”

“According to Washington, they have not made any demands yet, which is effectively a bit surprising, so we know nothing about that. Maybe they are waiting until all their hostages will have arrived before announcing their demands. Our game will be to strike them as early as possible, in order to maximize the effect of surprise. Your marines will thus have to go in light and move fast. Any delay or slowness on our part may end up costing dozens of innocent lives.”

“I understand, Admiral. My marines will do their very best.”

“Then, go right away to start preparing your marines, Colonel.”

“Yes, sir!”

As Wilkinson walked away, Benson looked at Lieutenant (Navy) Mike Durban, the commanding officer of 3rd Platoon, SEAL Team 10.

“Will you prefer to be parachuted in HALO⁵ mode once we know where these airliners will land; be landed by a PELICAN ‘A’; or use your SUPERCARs, Lieutenant?”

“I definitely prefer to use our SUPERCARs for this, Admiral, as long as you can approach the Somali coast a bit in order to give us more range once we launch. With our SUPERCARs, we will be able to travel fast, both in the air and on the ground, and we can also do a completely silent final ground approach on battery power.”

“No problem, Lieutenant: we can get within a hundred nautical miles of the coast during the night with very little risks of being detected. You may go prepare your men now: I will advise you the minute that we will know where those airliners landed.”

18:32 (Somalia Time)

3rd Rifle Platoon/Bravo Company quarters

Stern section, Upper Deck, U.S.S. NEPTUNE

“MAKE SURE THAT YOUR WATER BOTTLES ARE FULL: IT’S HOT AND DRY OUT THERE IN SOMALIA!”

The marines of the 2nd Squad/3rd Rifle Platoon replied as one to their squad leader, Sergeant Jeffrey Brown.

⁵ HALO mode : High Altitude jump, Low Opening of parachute. A parachuting method used by many military special forces units when absolute silence and discretion is required.

“YES, SERGEANT!”

One of the twelve marines under the command of Sergeant Brown was Private First-Class Greta Visby, a tall and athletic blonde who had just celebrated her 21st birthday. Since she had already filled her two water bottles mere minutes ago, she continued filling her rifle magazines with loose .243 Winchester cartridges. The magazines for her Winchester M1986A2 assault rifle were of the 25-round box type and were customarily used in pairs fixed together with a spacer between them. That gave a total of fifty rounds which could be fired quickly, with the change between left and right-side magazines taking only a couple of seconds. Greta's Colt M1986A2 also included an integral 60mm RGL95 single shot grenade launcher, which added a very significant punch to it and was fixed under the rifle barrel. With a pneumatic long recoil buffer to soak up the punishing recoil from the firing of a 60mm rifle grenade, that allowed a maximum range of 700 meters against fixed targets, or 200 meters against moving targets, with the HEAT⁶ grenade able to defeat up to 300mm of steel armor, more than enough to destroy light and medium armored vehicles. In fact, Greta had already been able to use her RGL95 to good effect only a few months ago, while on a combat mission inside Armenia. The single 60mm rifle grenade she had fired then had stopped cold an enemy BTR-70 wheeled armored personnel carrier.

Once Greta was finished loading her magazines and preparing her combat equipment, she took out of its scabbard her rifle's bayonet, which had a long, twelve-inch blade with serrations along its top edge, and started sharpening it with a small sharpening stone. One of her fire team comrades, PFC Thomas Finch, smiled with amusement on seeing her do that.

“You're planning to bring a knife to a gunfight, Greta?”

“What I am doing is to make sure that I have an effective backup weapon if my rifle ever jams, Thom. A dull knife isn't worth much in a fight.”

“And did you ever kill anything with a knife, or use one in a fight?” insisted the African-American marine light machine gunner, making Greta nod her head.

“Once, when I was still living in Northern Sweden as a young teenager, my father was attacked by a pair of wolves when he went out of our cabin at night. I then used my hunting knife to help him chase away those wolves. I was also quite skilled at skinning

⁶ HEAT round : High Explosive Anti-Tank.

catches with it. Too many of our men think that the bayonet is a next-to-useless relic of the past. I would say otherwise. For one, it is perfect to silently kill sentries or to guard prisoners.”

Thomas Finch nodded his head slowly, impressed by her coolness, then returned his attention to his own kit.

In the CIC, Rear Admiral Benson got a few minutes later a report from one of his air situation officers.

“Admiral, our MP-21 tracking the Alitalia flight signaled that the airliner has just landed.”

“Good! Tell our aircraft to overfly that landing site at high altitude and to take pictures of it. Then, mark electronically that landing site on our tactical plot display table.”

A few seconds later, a bright red symbol appeared on his tactical plot, which also showed a map of Somalia. The location of that symbol made him let out a disbelieving remark.

“Hell, that’s literally in the middle of nowhere!”

CHAPTER 5 – A HOLE IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE



Cadaado 'Airport', Central Somalia.

02:48 (Somalia Time) / 18:48 (Washington Time)

Saturday, November 2 (Somalia) / Friday, November 1 (Washington) 1996 'C'

Cockpit of Air Philippines Convair 800

Arriving over Cadaado Airport, Central Somalia

"We are supposed to land in that hole? I don't see any runway lights or even a paved surface." said Elizabeth in a shocked tone of voice as she tried to examine the darkened desert 'airport' from her side window. Amin, who was sitting in the jump seat behind the pilot's seat, actually appeared nearly as surprised as her.

"We are over the coordinates for Cadaado Airport, no?"

"Our GPS does say so but that thing down there is no proper airport. I can't see much with the obscurity, but there is only a half-dozen buildings visible to one side of that dirt strip, none of them big enough to qualify as a true commercial aircraft hangar or airport terminal. Landing at night without any runway lights will be quite risky and we may well end up doing a runway excursion."

“Well, I was told to bring this plane to Cadaado Airport and that’s where we are going to land, miss. You have shown yourself to be an excellent pilot and I am confident that you will be able to land here.”

“Thanks for the compliment, mister.” replied Elizabeth in a sarcastic tone. Earlier on, she and Shirley had quickly whispered to each other while Amin was out of the cockpit and using one of the lavatories in the forward lobby. They had time to hurriedly discuss their situation and form a desperate plan of action. From what Amin had told them earlier about him not having the authority to decide what would happen to them and the passengers once at their destination, Elizabeth and Shirley had concluded that, once landed and with whoever was truly controlling this hijacking operation taking over the Convair 800 from Amin and his men, their chances of survival would then become quite grim and they could well suffer a lot before dying. The two of them had thus decided to do everything to avoid stopping at that final destination and had decided on a risky and desperate plan to escape that trap. While the risks were huge and they would need some luck to succeed, that was still better than let themselves fall in the hands of fanatical religious thugs who probably planned to kill them and the passengers anyway. Giving a silent nod and a wink to Shirley, Elizabeth then started performing a wide turn while losing altitude.

“Well, wish me luck, Mister Amin: we will need it. Did your ‘employers’ give you a radio frequency to use once over Cadaado?”

“Uh, no! We were only told to hijack your plane and then fly it to here.” Elizabeth shook her head at that: Amin and his men were obviously mere pawns in this game and she wasn’t sure that they would not be simply eliminated once on the ground for being potential witnesses in case they were later arrested. That only convinced Elizabeth that her plan formed with Shirley, while still a desperate one, was still their best option.

Acting as if this was a routine landing at a legitimate, fully equipped airport, Elizabeth completed a full circle in order to line up with the long dirt strip visible through her FLIR HUD⁷. With Shirley reading aloud for her the indications from their radar altimeter and of their rate of descent indicator, Elizabeth slowed down her Convair 800 to its usual landing speed and extended fully their wing flaps, then lowered their landing

⁷ FLIR HUD: Forward-Looking InfraRed Head’s Up Display.

gear. As she was doing her final approach, she saw new details about the 'airport' through her front-view FLIR camera.

"Hey, I see another airliner, a Boeing 717. It seemed to have crashed to one side of the runway while trying to land. It is apparently mostly intact but is lying on its belly some hundred feet from the runway. There are also numerous trucks and other vehicles waiting near the largest building of this airfield."

Amin, not able to see well forward while sitting in his jump seat, unbuckled his safety belt and stood up in order to look over Elizabeth's shoulder through her HUD.

"You're right, miss. I didn't know that another airliner would be involved in this."

'You're a simple pawn alright!' thought Elizabeth to herself. As more details around the airfield became visible as they approached one end of the dirt strip, she mentally finalized her plan of action. All those trucks and vehicles parked next to what appeared to be a hangar for small planes had to mean that there were plenty of gunmen present at this airfield, which meant that, if they were allowed to board the Convair 800, then Elizabeth's chances of escaping this trap would drop to zero. She and Shirley definitely needed to act...soon.

After another minute, their plane overflowed the southwestern end of the dirt strip, its wheels down and locked. Elizabeth, carefully calculating her landing distance, finally touched down one kilometer from that end of the runway and settled her Convair 800 down on the ground. She however delayed a bit her next order to Shirley, waiting for the best time and position possible for her plan.

"Reverse pitch! Full power!"

The moment Shirley pushed the engine throttles back to full power after reversing the pitch of their propellers, both Elizabeth and Shirley pressed as hard as they could on their brakes. Amin, still standing between their two seats, was taken by surprise by the brutal deceleration and lost his balance, crashing face first on top of the central command console between the two pilots' seats. Shirley, who had not donned her seat safety harness, contrary to normal landing rules, reacted at once. Grabbing quickly her small revolver, which she had hidden between her legs, she pressed the muzzle of her snub-nosed .38 Special against the top of Amin's skull, pointing her weapon at an angle so that the soft lead hollow-point bullet would travel down along Amin's spine and thus avoid going fully through him and then possibly damage the flight controls. She fired once only, killing instantly the hijacker and then jumping out of her seat, grabbing the

Smith & Wesson .45 revolver he had been holding and giving in exchange her revolver to Elizabeth. Both women had killed men on the ground before, during World War 2, when they had to defend their airfield against marauding Japanese soldiers. Now, with their survival and that of their 47 passengers in play, Shirley coldly stepped on Amin's body and rushed out of the cockpit. As she had expected, the four remaining hijackers on the plane were sitting and strapped for landing in the four folding seats normally reserved for the flight attendants, with two seats on the level of the upper lobby and the two others on the level of the lower lobby, next to the two side airstair doors. The powerful roar of their propellers going in reverse at full power had all but covered the noise of her single shot and, on rushing out of the cockpit and then turning around to face the two hijackers occupying the upper seats, she was able to catch those two men by surprise. Firing twice in quick succession while aiming for their hearts, Shirley was able to kill both men in less than two seconds, then ran down the stairs leading to the lower forward lobby. The two hijackers there were still undoing their seat belts when she appeared in the staircase and opened fire. The hijacker in the left seat, hit in the head, died instantly, while the one in the right seat received two bullets, one in the chest and one in his right shoulder, before collapsing and dropping his pistol.

"CORAZON, GRAB A WEAPON, QUICK!"

The Filipina senior flight attendant reacted at once, allowing Shirley to run back to the cockpit after grabbing a high-capacity 9mm pistol from a dead hijacker.

"THEY'RE ALL DEAD, LIBBY! TAKE OFF NOW!"

Elizabeth, who had pushed Amin's body off the central console and had partially powered down her engines in order to continue her landing run and get out of rifle range of the assembled vehicles next to the airfield's hangar, then pushed her three engines back to full power. With the end of the long dirt strip still one kilometer ahead, she was easily able to raise her aircraft off the ground within 700 meters, well before attaining the end of the strip. After sitting back in her seat, Shirley grabbed her intercom microphone and gave an urgent message to her passengers.

"TO ALL: STAY IN YOUR SEATS AND KEEP YOUR BELTS ON! ALL FIVE HIJACKERS ARE NOW DEAD BUT WE ARE STILL NOT OUT OF TROUBLE. WE WILL NOW TRY TO REACH A SAFE AIRPORT IN THIS REGION. PLEASE DO NOT COME TO THE COCKPIT! THANK YOU FOR YOUR COMPREHENSION."

She then looked at Elizabeth, who was performing a fast climb in order to escape any possible ground fire coming from Cadaado.

"You're still going to try for Djibouti, Libby?"

"Yes!" replied Elizabeth, her teeth nearly clenched together with tension. "It will however be a close call at best: we may be running out of fuel just as we are about to land there. You better call Djibouti in advance, so that they are prepared for us."

"Right!" said Shirley, putting down her confiscated pistol before switching her radio to the international distress frequency.

"Mayday, mayday, mayday! This is Air Philippines 305. We were hijacked in the Philippines and forced to fly to Cadaado Airfield, in Somalia. However, we have been able to regain control of our plane there and take off from it after killing the five hijackers on board. We are now enroute to Djibouti but may run out of fuel on the way. We request urgent assistance, over."

She had to repeat her message a second time before a man speaking with an obvious French accent answered her.

"Air Philippines 305, this is Djibouti Control. Are your passengers still aboard, over?"

"Affirmative, Djibouti! The 47 passengers who had to stay aboard after our stop in Kuala Lumpur are still on the plane and safe. However, we are short of fuel and may be empty by the time we reach Djibouti, over."

"Air Philippines 305, you will have absolute priority for approach and landing once close to us. Take Heading 325 and adopt an altitude of 4,000 meters. Be advised that American fighter jets were already flying over Somalia. We will now have two of them rerouted, so that they could escort you to Djibouti."

Both Shirley and Elizabeth felt their hearts jump in their chests on hearing the last sentence.

"Thank God for that! Be advised that we saw in Cadaado a Boeing 717 that had crash-landed there and was lying on its belly. However, it appeared to be still mostly intact. We also saw a large number of trucks and vehicles parked next to the main building of the airfield. I thus suspect that there is a large number of gunmen at that location and that they probably are holding the occupants of that Boeing 717, over."

"Uh, we know about them, Air Philippines 305. For the moment, fly as economically as you can and concentrate on reaching us. Djibouti, out!"

Shirley couldn't help exchange a knowing look with Elizabeth.

"There is probably something afoot concerning Cadaado, Libby. The fact that American fighter jets were already over Somalia points to a rescue operation underway."

"I hope so for these poor people from the Alitalia Boeing. God knows what is happening to them right now."

03:03 (Somalia Time)

Cadaado Airport, Central Somalia

On the dirt surface of the tarmac at Cadaado Airport, Osman Akmadov could only swear violently in Russian as he saw the Convair 800 fly away into the night. Because of both the surprise and the distance between the plane and the hangar Akmadov stood in front of, his men had been unable to fire at the airliner before it had disappeared into the night sky.

"WHAT KIND OF GAME ARE THOSE FUCKING FILIPINO REBELS PLAYING? WE CAN NOW EXPECT THEM TO ALERT THE AMERICANS ABOUT US."

Turning around to face the leader of the Somali Islamists who had come to support his operation, he switched to Arabic while pointing an index at him.

"Ahmed, that plane is going to attract a lot of trouble on us if we stay here much longer. We have to evacuate the airfield, now."

"What do we do about the hostages from the Italian airliner?"

"We do as previously planned: execute the male passengers, then drive away with the women and the girls. Some of the local warlords may well be ready to pay good money in order to acquire some infidel sex slaves."

The said Ahmed had a mean smile at those words.

"I have already a couple of the prettiest ones reserved for myself. One of the airliners may unfortunately have been able to escape us but we still have enough hostages to be able to thoroughly humiliate their governments and send them into a wild goose chase around Somalia. I will go and have the male passengers and pilots segregated and then executed."

While still furious about the Air Philippines airliner escaping him, Akmadov concluded that Ahmed had been right: the governments of the 336 people now in his hands would have no choice but to chase around for their citizens, forcing them to clash with the numerous warlords now in control of Somalia and promising a long, bloody and humiliating effort on the parts of those governments. With the United States about to run their presidential election, that could only complicate any effort by the Americans to find and free their 94 citizens who had been aboard the Alitalia flight.

03:04 (Somali Time)**Desert area 800 meters southeast of Cadaado Airport**

"NEPTUNE, from Seagull: I confirm that the Air Philippines Convair 800 has just taken off without fully stopping at the objective. It is now flying away towards the Northwest, over."

"Seagull, what is the situation on the ground, over?"

Lieutenant (Navy) Mike Durban looked again into the eyepiece of the large, powerful low light level night scope mounted on the roof of his Hiller SUPERCAR and observed for a couple of seconds before answering the battle carrier.

"NEPTUNE, I see dozens of armed men now running towards the airport's hangar. I suspect that the hostages are inside it: it is the only building large enough to contain over 300 people, over."

"Seagull, can you get near enough to allow your snipers to be within effective range, over?"

"We certainly can try, NEPTUNE. In the meantime, I would recommend that the assault force starts its final approach now: the situation could worsen for the hostages in the next few minutes, over."

"We concur, Seagull. Start your move forward now, out!"

Satisfied, Durban switched to the radio frequency used by his team.

"To all Seagull callsigns: start a covert vehicle approach towards the storage building to the left of the main hangar. We will try to get within rifle range of the enemy force. Move out now!"

Durban's driver/pilot then switched on the electric motors integrated inside the four small wheels of their Hiller SUPERCAR, an incredible machine designed as the main assault vehicle for SEAL teams. Being a militarized and highly specialized variant of the civilian Hiller AIRCAR, the SUPERCAR could fly and take off or land at the vertical thanks to its four ducted rotors, powered by a powerful Machen Twin-Merlyn six-cylinder inline diesel rated at 1,300 horsepower. On top of being able to fly, the SUPERCAR could also navigate at the surface of the ocean, thanks to its retractable and inflatable floats, and could also dive under water to a depth of two meters via the use of a telescopic snorkel system. While the vehicle's cabin then filled with water, the six

occupants could breathe air from a large central air tank during their underwater transit. Finally, four small retractable wheels allowed the SUPERCAR to roll on the ground, either connected directly to the engine or on battery power, which allowed for completely silent approach. The Hiller SUPERCAR had been designed a few years ago by General Ingrid Dows while she was a retired officer employed by the Hiller Corporation and the members of the U.S. Navy SEALs had then fallen at once in love with the vehicle.

The three SUPERCARs of Durban's team, leaving the protection of a low sand dune, started rolling silently towards the isolated storage building, careful not to raise a dust cloud behind them and keeping their speed to a maximum of 40 kilometers-per-hour. If there were still enemy sentries around the hangar, they apparently didn't detect the three gray-painted vehicles. Still, Durban made his vehicles stop once within a hundred meters from the storage building and gave a short order on the radio.

"Walker, Strickland, advance on foot to the storage shed and make sure that there are no hostiles on watch there."

Two men from his First Squad then dismounted and ran at a crouch to the building, which was surrounded by a low wall forming a compound on its north side. Some six minutes later, Durban received a radio report from his two men.

"Seagull, the building is deserted. It contains drums of aviation fuel and of gasoline. The way is clear, over."

"Excellent! All vehicles, advance to the storage building and park along its southwest side. All the men except the drivers will then dismount and deploy, facing East."

Two more minutes and his vehicles were parked out of sight, while Durban's men were now crouching behind the low wall of the compound and observing the hangar through their night vision scopes mounted on their rifles and light machine guns. Then, the situation became more complicated, with the platoon chief NCO, Senior Chief Petty Officer Richard Gillespie speaking up.

"Lieutenant, I see a file of civilians starting to come out of the hangar. They are escorted out by gunmen. I don't like the look of it."

Pointing his own night scope in that direction, Durban soon clenched his teeth together: the civilian men coming out of the hangar were being marched in single file towards the dirt runway, in the open.

“Fuck! I believe that those poor bastards are about to be executed. Snipers, be ready to engage the gunmen escorting them from this position. The rest, follow me at a run towards the hangar.”

His four snipers, who had long silencers on top of night scopes on their Winchester M1986A3 sniper variants, then concentrated their attention on the 26 gunmen escorting the long file of civilian men, with SCPO Gillespie, also armed with a sniper rifle, left in command of them. Taking the lead and jumping over the low wall, Durban then started running at a crouch towards the hangar, followed by ten SEALs. Thankfully, a couple of trucks parked next to the hangar had just started their engines and the noise they produced was more than enough to cover the little noise the SEALs made while running. While still some fifty meters from the hangar, Durban suddenly saw a file of women and girls also come out, escorted by more gunmen, who directed their captives towards the parked trucks.

“Shit! They are about to move out with the female hostages. Second Squad, divert towards the south side of the hangar and do your best to eliminate the gunmen escorting out the women.”

“Second Squad on the way!” replied on the radio Petty Officer First Class James Meredith. Now hoping that the marines of 1st Battalion would arrive very soon and stop a possible bloodbath, Durban finally arrived next to the western side of the hangar and crouched, looking left and right and trying to see any entrance door. He had to cautiously look past the corner with the northern side of the building to see one. It was however guarded by a gunman holding an automatic rifle. Taking a quick decision, Durban raised his silencer-equipped rifle and, aiming carefully, fired once. The gunman jerked once, then collapsed on the ground. Durban immediately ran towards that door and waited next to it while his five remaining SEALs following him took positions on either side of the door.

“Alright, men, here is what we will do. At my command, we will enter the hangar and then split in two and advance along the walls while eliminating any gunman inside. Be careful with your shooting, though: the place can still be full of hostages. If one gunman tries to use a hostage as a human shield, then don’t let him get away with it and aim for his head. We can’t afford to waste a second or to lose the initiative, as one gunman will still be enough to kill many hostages. Understood?”

“Yes sir!” replied in near whispers the Navy SEALs.

“Then, go!”

Opening the door and entering at a crouch, Durban found himself near face to face with a Somali gunman who was about to go out. The man barely had time to open wide eyes and start opening his mouth to shout an alarm before the SEAL officer shot him in the head, killing him instantly. He then shot again, killing a second gunman following a few steps behind the first one. His rifle raised and his eyes scanning quickly the inside of the hangar, Durban saw that a good 150 civilian women and children were sitting and cowering in the middle of the hangar, surrounded at some distance by about twelve gunmen watching them closely. Another group of civilians, all men, were in the process of leaving by the southern main doors of the hangar, escorted by more gunmen. The situation was definitely a difficult one, to say the least. Still, Durban started firing his rifle at the gunmen guarding the women and children, imitated by his men. Totally taken by surprise, the gunmen took a couple of seconds to react, seconds which cost them dearly. Only two of the gunmen guarding the women had time to fire their rifles before crumbling down to the concrete floor like the rest of the guards. That however still left the gunmen escorting out the male hostages. Durban and his men were then forced to take cover behind piles of crates and drums as an intense firefight started between his SEALs and the gunmen. What saved the situation was the intervention of his second squad and that of his snipers, who started engaging the hijackers outside the hangar. Finding themselves under a murderous crossfire, most of the gunmen then turned around and fled in near panic. Those who kept their ground were all shot down in the next few seconds. Unfortunately, one of them decided to take his revenge on the male hostages and started emptying his automatic rifle in their group, shooting at least eight of them before being shot down himself. Swearing to himself, Durban charged down the hangar while shouting in English.

“EVERYBODY, STAY DOWN AND DON’T MOVE!”

Just after he said that, an ear-splitting roar came down from the sky, with 24 PELICAN ‘A’ then landing at the vertical and disgorging hundreds of marines, while the heavy machine guns in the chin turrets of the VTOL assault aircraft started spitting thick streams of .50 caliber tracer bullets at the fleeing gunmen and at the other buildings to the East of the hangar. Every truck or car that then tried to flee was also peppered by the heavy bullets and turned into flaming wrecks. Running to the group of male hostages hit by the gunman’s fire, Durban was able to see that, while three men and a teenage boy were now dead, four other hostages were wounded and screaming in pain.

“MEDICS! MEDICS!”

A half-dozen Navy corpsmen accompanying the marines quickly responded to his screams and started treating the wounded hostages, allowing Durban to go around and check with his SEALs the downed gunmen, some of whom were merely wounded. His experienced eyes then made him stop next to a man who was moaning in pain. The wounded gunman had a pocket radio hooked to his tactical vest and also wore a Soviet paratrooper-style white and blue striped T-shirt under his tactical vest. That same man, who was apparently semi-conscious and delirious, then spoke weakly a few words...in Russian! Immediately calling one of his SEALs who was a qualified medic, he pointed to him the gunman on the ground.

"Cantor, I want this man to be kept alive at all cost: he may be able to provide us some vital information, either voluntarily or involuntarily. Get Higgins to assist you and evacuate him to the NEPTUNE under strong escort as a top priority."

"I will do my best, sir!"

04:36 (Somalia Time)

Apron of the Djibouti-Ambouli International Airport Djibouti, on the southern coast of the Gulf of Aden

Both Elizabeth and Shirley let out big sighs of relief when their Convair 800 stopped rolling after pivoting in position on the parking spot indicated to them by an airport employee using flashlights capped by transparent orange cones. One of their three engines was already coughing from lack of fuel, while all their fuel gauges indicated 'zero'. Shutting down her engines, Elizabeth then grabbed her intercom microphone and called Corazon Villacruz, who was sitting in one of the flight attendants' seats on the upper forward lobby.

"Corazon, you may now open our left side airstair door: I believe that we have a bunch of French customers who are eager to enter our aircraft."

Corazon giggled at her choice of words.

"I hope that these customers will be more polite than some of our past customers."

"With us and our passengers, certainly! With others, maybe not!"

Going down the stairs to the lower lobby, Corazon stopped for a second to eye the dead bodies of the five hijackers who had taken control of their plane in Sanga-Sanga. Some of the male passengers with past military service had helped her by carrying the bodies

of the hijackers and piling them up next to the right side forward door, then covering them with wool blankets. As for the weapons which had belonged to the hijackers, they were now safely stored inside the cockpit. Going to the left side door, Corazon unlocked it and activated its opening mechanism, making the airstair pivot down. The moment that the airstair was fully down, a dozen heavily armed soldiers in camouflage combat uniforms climbed inside, their rifles at the ready. Corazon was able to see at once the miniature French flags on their shoulders but, unfortunately, didn't know how to speak French. The leader of the soldiers then saved the situation by speaking to her in a heavily accented English after glancing at the covered dead men.

"Good morning, miss. Does anybody aboard need medical treatment?"

"No! We are all fine, except of course for those five hijackers. There are two pilots inside the cockpit and 47 passengers in the main cabin. The weapons taken from the hijackers have been stored inside the cockpit."

"And may I ask who killed those hijackers and how, miss?"

"The copilot, Shirley Slade, did, mister. As for how, she had a small revolver that she hides on her during flights: the situation at some of our stops around the Philippines can get a bit rough at times."

"I see!" said the French soldier, a smile appearing on his face. "Well, my men will take care of getting you rid of those bodies, while I will go visit your two pilots."

After giving a few orders to his men, the French leader climbed the stairs to the upper lobby and went to the entrance door of the cockpit, in which stood Elizabeth. The French soldier hesitated a bit at the sight of the multiple rows of military medal ribbons pinned on Elizabeth's shirt, above her pilot's wings.

"Mon Dieu, miss! You have more medal ribbons pinned on your chest than my colonel does!"

Elizabeth grinned with pride before replying.

"That's probably because I fought in more wars than your colonel did, Captain."

"Uh, in what wars did you fight, miss?" asked the French Foreign Legion officer, a bit taken aback and surprised at her reply.

"World War 2, First Korean War, Indochina Conflict, Palestine Partition Conflict, East Europe War, the China-Taiwan-U.S.A. War and the Second Korean War. I retired for military service in 1976, with the rank of colonel and a total of 294 combat missions

flown on bombers. My friend Shirley flew in the same wars as me, but as a fighter pilot. She has a total of 59 registered air victories to her credit.”

“Plus five hijackers, if I can believe your flight attendant.”

“That is correct, Lieutenant. Now, I have 47 passengers who are both tired and quite shaken by our misadventure. Would it be possible to accommodate them in a local hotel, so that they can sleep a bit and recuperate before we can fly back to the Philippines? My crew will also need some serious sleep time: we have been flying straight for well over fourteen hours, with five brief stops enroute.”

“Consider yourselves as guests of France, miss.” replied the French officer before giving her a military salute.

CHAPTER 6 – MISTER PRESIDENT



Ross Perot.

14:06 (Washington Time) / 22:06 (Somalia Time)

Sunday, November 3, 1996 'C'

White House Situation Room

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

Ingrid found herself to be the first member of the National Security Council to arrive in the underground Situation Room of the White House. She thus used that opportunity to start setting up her documents and upload on the computer system of the Situation Room the electronic files she was going to show and share. The next member of the NSC to arrive, CIA Director James Woolsey, did so some four minutes later. Woolsey came to her and shook her hand, a sober expression on his face.

"I must thank you for the quick way your people transmitted to the CIA the preliminary results of the tactical interrogations of the prisoners taken in Somalia, Ingrid. That allowed my own people to start connecting dots with the support of the NSA⁸."

"Well, intelligence that is not passed on in a timely basis is worthless, Jim."

⁸ NSA: National Security Agency. American intelligence agency specialized in the listening, interception and decoding of electronic signals of all types around the World.

“True, but God knows how often in history that lesson was either ignored or forgotten. I must say that the way you truly unified our various military services into one well-integrated and coordinated force made wonders for the quick and efficient treatment of intelligence. Thanks to you, interservice rivalry is next to dead.”

“But it took a lot of head bashing before arriving at this point, Jim. Hopefully, I will be able to continue welding our services together after the coming Tuesday’s presidential elections.”

James Woolsey didn’t have to ask her what she meant by that: some political factions in the Congress hated Ingrid’s guts for various reasons and would love nothing better to see her sacked as strategic commander of the American armed forces. The issue of who was going to win the presidential elections could thus decide if she stayed in her present post or if she would be sidetracked.

“Well, with the great work that you have been doing for decades now and with your popularity among the population at large, anyone wanting to fire you would have to contend with a severe popular backlash.”

A group of seven other NSC members then arrived in the Situation Room, led by the President’s National Security Advisor, Brent Scowcroft. From there, the remaining members of the NSC walked in, with President Ross Perot arriving last. Perot, a small, thin, 66-year-old man with a balding head, spoke as he was about to sit down in his chair.

“Please sit down, ladies and gentlemen.”

After a bit of shuffling and with everyone now sitting around the long conference table, Perot looked at Ingrid from across the table.

“You may present your report on the events of the last two days, General.”

“Thank you, Mister President! As all the Americans now know from TV reporting, two airliners, one belonging to Air Philippines and the other to Alitalia, were hijacked Friday by Islamist extremists, then rerouted to a small airfield in Somalia. You will find in your copies of the report the Pentagon prepared the details about those hijackings and what happened after in Somalia. Thankfully, the battle carrier USS NEPTUNE was cruising at that time in the Indian Ocean, close to the Somali coast, and was able to react quickly, first by locating and trailing the two hijacked planes, then by launching quickly a hostage rescue mission. While the Air Philippines Convair 800 was able to escape by itself and landed safely in Djibouti, thanks to some heroic action by its crew,

the Alitalia Boeing 717 was not as lucky and actually crash-landed in Cadaado, ending on its belly. The 336 people from the Alitalia flight were then held for a few hours before our SEAL team and our marines embarked on the NEPTUNE arrived and freed them in a short but intense firefight. Unfortunately, four of the passengers were killed and four others wounded before all the hijackers and gunmen present in Cadaado could be either killed, wounded or taken prisoner. One American citizen was part of the dead, while another one was seriously wounded. As for the hijackers and Somali gunmen present at the airfield, 23 of them were captured, some being also wounded, and are now detained and interrogated by us. We got an early lucky break when we wounded and captured the apparent head of that hijacking operation. A skillful interrogation conducted while that man was under the effect of painkillers and was being medically treated revealed a number of important things. First, that man was an officer of the secret services of the Caucasus Independent Republic, which apparently planned and coordinated the hijacking of the two airlines. Second, the Somali gunmen present in Cadaado belonged to a number of Somali warlords known to be Muslim extremists who hate Westerners in general and Americans in particular. Those warlords participated in that operation because they had been promised to be given the women and girls from the hijacked airliners, who would then have become in essence their sex slaves. Third, those warlords were also paid to participate in that operation. I believe that the CIA and NSA have been able to find some details and to trace some of those payments. Fourth, the hijackers who actually seized and rerouted the two airliners were members of Islamic extremist groups in respectively Egypt and the Philippines and were only mere pawns in the operation. Finally, the head hijacker captured in Somalia alluded to this being only the start of a widespread and prolonged terrorist campaign, the main goal being to humiliate the United States and take revenge for the pounding we gave to the C.I.R. after it invaded Armenia a few months ago.”

Ingrid then paused as her revelations caused a wave of indignation and anger around the table. State Secretary Daniel Inouye in particular appeared quite angered.

“The Caucasus Islamic Republic, again! When will those fanatics understand their lesson?”

“Well, they will be served another lesson, soon.” replied Ross Perot, his own expression hard. “Do you have any other information to pass on from your side, General Dows?”

"Only that I have started to pass warning orders and redeployment taskings in order to prepare for, prevent and counter any other terrorist attack or hijacking which could be in the making and would threaten American lives and interests, Mister President. I however do believe that Director Woolsey has more info on his side."

That made Perot look at James Woolsey, sitting next to Ingrid.

"What do you have, James?"

"Mister President, thanks to the quick sharing of the results of the interrogations of prisoners made on the NEPTUNE, the NSA was able to concentrate its electronic monitoring capabilities in the right direction and was thus able to intercept a number of transmissions and conversations of significance to us. My own agents were also able to follow up on the information collected by the NSA and the Pentagon. I am now going to distribute copies of the combined preliminary intelligence report we prepared as a result. I must warn you that those copies contain highly sensitive sources and methods and are classified Top Secret Codeword, Nofor⁹."

Woolsey then stayed silent as the other NSC members got their copies and started reading them. President Perot raised his nose after a minute of reading, a flash of anger in his eyes.

"The money those Somali warlords received came from secret Russian GRU bank accounts in Switzerland?"

"It did, Mister President. While the GRU and the Russian government still doesn't know it, we have been able for a few years already to identify and then monitor a number of Swiss bank accounts secretly set up by the Russian GRU and used by it to fund various clandestine operations and pay criminals who execute contracts on behalf of Russia. By the way, those same GRU secret bank accounts were used in last September to try to hire a professional assassin for the purpose of killing General Dows. We now believe that the Russians tried to have General Dows killed in order to help their future plans for terrorist attacks against the United States, by eliminating our top strategist and military commander."

From angry, Perot became furious but managed not to explode, instead speaking in an icy tone at the men and women sitting around the table.

"That's it! I have had enough of this Russian duplicity and hypocrisy! I believe that it is high time to put them and those C.I.R. bastards back in their proper place.

⁹ Nofor: No Foreign Nationals. Caveat added to American classified documents that are to be seen only by American citizens holding the proper clearance and access.

Director Woolsey, I want you to provide to me some information on those Russian and C.I.R. actions which I could then communicate to members of the Congress and, if possible, to the American public. Once I have that information, I will then use it to justify severe measures to be taken against Russia and the C.I.R., going to and possibly including retaliatory military actions.”

That last sentence was enough to make the President’s political advisor, Jack Gargan, nearly jump out of his seat.

“Mister President, such military actions could be painted by your opponents in Congress as an attempt by you to appear tough in order to help your reelection bid. Representative Dellum¹⁰ will most probably paint you again as a warmonger who is simply looking for excuses to use our military and promote more defense spending.”

“Screw Dellum!” replied Perot in a forceful tone. “My job is to serve and protect the United States and its people, not to appease pacifists-at-all-cost like him. I intend to teach a serious lesson to those Russian and C.I.R. bastards: they used terrorism by proxy against us and they will pay for it. General Dows, could all this hide some other threat to us?”

“Definitely, Mister President. This all smells like a coordinated plan by the Russians and the Caucasus Islamist Republic leaders to weaken us and make us lose our focus. The fact that those hijackings happened just before our presidential elections probably mean that they were hoping to catch us while we are distracted by our elections. They are also hoping that you will lose your reelection, which would then make you a lame duck president with a diminished ability to initiate military action around the World. I would recommend that our forces go up to DEFCON 3 and prepare for possible hostilities, including the possibility of an enemy Russian nuclear strike on us. While I doubt that they would go that far, the present Russian leaders have proved that they don’t always act in a rational manner. Better be safe than sorry.”

“I concur! You have my permission to go to DEFCON 3. Make sure in particular that the Russians can’t launch a surprise nuclear strike on us. I believe that their missile submarines would then be the biggest potential threat to us, right?”

“Correct, Mister President! If they could approach really close to our coasts, they would then be able to launch their ballistic missiles on flat trajectories which would give

¹⁰ Robert Dellum: Member of the Democratic Party and Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee during the mid-nineties. Known for his strong anti-war and anti-defense spending views.

us very little warning time to react. I will have the Navy reinforce its anti-submarine patrols along our coastal areas.”

“Excellent! Well, ladies and gentlemen, it seems that we will have more to preoccupy us than mere elections. For the moment, I will let our armed forces and intelligence agencies deal with this threat and liaise as needed with our allies, but I want all of you to keep it in the back of your minds and to be ready to react to it in your respective capacities. That will be all for today, ladies and gentlemen.”

As the NSC members started to file out of the Situation Room, Perot signaled to Ingrid that he wanted her to stay for a moment more. He waited until everyone else was gone before speaking to her in a low voice.

“Ingrid, your hindsight and prescience are legendary, partly thanks to those old ATHENA files which describe future events and technical advances. What do they say about my chances of reelection?”

Ingrid made a gentle smile then and shook her head.

“I’m sorry, Mister President, but I cannot tell you anything about that, for the good reason that the history as described by the ATHENA files does not correspond anymore to our own history, by a far shot. Since World War 2, this timeline has been steadily diverting from the historical timeline as known by Nancy Laplante and our World today bears little resemblance to that of the historical timeline, which I call ‘Timeline ‘A’’. For one, in Timeline ‘A’, you did run for President in 1992 but didn’t win, while you became President in our timeline. You again tried your luck in 1996 ‘A’ after founding your Reform Party, but ended up with less results than in 1992 ‘A’. If I would have to assess your chances of reelection, then I would need to focus strictly on the present situation and conditions in our own timeline.”

“And...how would you rate my chances of reelection in your opinion, Ingrid?” asked Perot after a short hesitation, making her smile.

“I am sorry, Mister President, but I would prefer to keep my opinions on this to myself. As strategic commander of the United States combined armed forces, I have to stay apolitical.”

That answer made Perot nod his head slowly.

“I appreciate that, Ingrid. Thank you for your frankness.”

“Thank you, Mister President, and the best of luck for the elections.”

Ingrid then walked out of the Situation Room, followed by Perot's eyes. Once she was gone, the President sighed to himself, then grabbed the classified files in front of him and tucked them inside his own briefcase before returning upstairs to his Oval Office.

22:20 (Washington Time)

Tuesday, November 5, 1996 'C'

Apartment # 4, 607 West 51st Street, Hell's Kitchen District

Manhattan, New York City

"Can't they count the votes faster than this?"

The complaint by Lucy prompted a quick retort from Erika, who was sitting like her four friends and band members in front of the television set in her apartment, which she shared with Nancy and Lucy.

"Don't forget that they were legally obliged to wait until all the polls closed before starting to count the votes and announce the results, Lucy. Right now, most of what we got were simple exit polls, which are neither accurate nor complete."

"Maybe, but the suspense is killing me."

There was a silent pause for a few minutes as the five girls watched and listened to the CNN reporting on the presidential elections, which opposed the Democratic candidate, Bill Clinton, and the Republican candidate, Bob Dole, to Ross Perot, the incumbent President, and his recently formed Reform Party. A remark by one of the CNN analysts then made Sarah Weissman comment about it.

"Dole and the Republicans really seem to get quite a beating up to now. They are faring much worse than the polls predicted."

"That's because Perot has been sucking up many ex-Republican voters, Sarah." replied Lucy. "The same could be said about the Democrats, but to a lesser degree."

"Why so?" asked Carmen Estrada, who had never shown much interest in politics.

"Because Perot and the platform of his Reform Party have hit the sweet political middle spot for the American public. Perot has proved to be a moderate centrist politician who is financially and administratively competent, while also proving to be tough and resolved in terms of foreign affairs. He was able to attract to him many people who objected to either democratic policies seen as too liberal or to conservatives' policies considered too rigid or even intolerant. This business of a third main political

party in American politics is a big novelty and the Americans seem to like it and, as that commentator just said, seem to think that it is one way to break away from rigid partisan politics in the Congress.”

“Oh! Okay! And for whom did you vote today, Lucy?”

“I voted for Perot, for a number of reasons. First, he did a good job during his four years in the White House and has proved to be both competent and moderate. Second, I didn’t want to support the Republicans, who still have way too many racists in their ranks, while this Bill Clinton is tainted by a number of extra-marital affairs. Why vote for a man who cheats on his wife and drops his pants every time that he sees a nice-looking woman?”

“You certainly got that right, Lucy.” said Nancy in support of her sister by adoption. “His vice-presidential candidate is also spouting too many anti-gay comments to my taste.”

Nancy’s last comment drew approving nods from her four friends. Erika Lang then glanced at Nancy to ask her a question.

“And for whom did you vote, Nancy?”

Nancy’s response was an amused smile.

“I didn’t vote, for the simple reason that I couldn’t legally vote. I may look to be nineteen, but I am still legally fourteen-years-old. You celebrated my birthday yesterday, remember?”

“But you should be considered as an adult, Nancy.” protested Carmen Estrada. “You don’t only have the looks but you also have the maturity given by your 2,000 years of past incarnations’ souvenirs.”

“Er, flash news, Carmen: my claims to my incarnations’ souvenirs have no legal value in the United States, or anywhere else, as a matter of fact. My mother is now 71 years old, yet she still is asked for an I.D. card when trying to go into a night club or bar she has not visited before.”

“Maybe you should try to obtain a special legal status because you are a half-angel, Nancy?” suggested Sarah. Nancy showed less than enthusiasm for that idea.

“Yeah! A great way to waste years in legal disputes and to make a few lawyers rich. I will stick to Coca-Cola instead of beer for the time being...except when in private with you girls. Talking of beer, who wants a refill?”

A concert of giggles greeted her declaration, with all four asking for more beer. Nancy then got up from her sofa and went for the refrigerator sitting in the small kitchen corner

of her apartment, opening its door and extracting from it five fresh bottles of German imported beer. In that, she agreed with her mother, who said that, compared to German beer, American beer mostly tasted like colored water. On second thoughts, Nancy exchanged one of the German beer bottles for one from a Canadian micro-brewery which she and Ingrid appreciated a lot, then went back to the lounge to distribute her bottles and also collect the empty ones. Technically, none of them were old enough to drink but they all thought that being considered too young to drink while being old enough to vote, drive or even enlist in the Army was ridiculous and a typical holdover from American conservative social thinking.

Around midnight, the lounge erupted into happy cheers when CNN analysts declared Perot as the winner of the elections, having sucked away voters from both the Democrats and the Republicans. The girls' enthusiasm redoubled when the preliminary results from the various elections around the country for congressional seats were announced as well, making Lucy look at the television screen with disbelieving eyes.

"MY GOD! THE REFORM PARTY WON ENOUGH SEATS IN BOTH THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES AND IN THE SENATE TO CONTROL THE BALANCE OF POWER! The Republicans may have won the most seats for one party in the congress but they will now have to kiss the Reform Party's ass if they want to stop the Democrats from blocking their law proposals. The same will go in the Senate, while the Democrats will have to gain the support of the Reformists in order to stop the GOP or present their own law proposals. This is huge!"

"It certainly will send seismic tremors through Congress." agreed Nancy, smiling while eyeing the statistics shown on television. "I believe that the days of the so-called 'Do Nothing Congress' are now over. Hell, this calls for more beer, girls!"

Wild cheers greeted those last words.

CHAPTER 7 – IN THE NEPTUNE SYSTEM



Artist rendering of the surface of Triton, with Neptune and the Sun visible

16:09 (Universal Time)

Friday, November 8, 1996 'C'

Surface of Triton, Neptune System

Lilya Litvak was standing on the frozen nitrogen surface of Triton, at the foot of the personnel access ramp of the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS, and was having a last look at the moon's landscape when she heard a voice in the headset of her spacesuit.

"I'm sorry to cut your contemplation of Triton's scenery, Colonel, but we will have to retract soon the access ramp in order to depart and start our journey back to Earth."

"That's alright: I was about to climb back aboard anyway."



Lilya Litvak, as she appeared in 1942

While she was in some measure regretful about leaving Triton after weeks of mapping, analyzing and exploring it, Lilya, like the rest of the crew of the interplanetary spaceship U.S.S. PROMETHEUS, felt that it was time to start the journey back to Earth. They had

already spent four years in deep Space, having left Earth for Uranus and Neptune in October of 1992, while their return trip to Earth would take a full three years. Seven years in Space was a very long time for anyone and it would also tax to the limits the autonomy of the spaceship in terms of food and medical supplies. However, what they had accomplished during this epic Space voyage more than justified its costs and hardships. Both the Uranus and the Neptune Systems had by now been explored and mapped in detail and they had also launched from Triton's orbit a heavy interplanetary exploration probe that was now on its way to Pluto, at the confine of the Solar System. They unfortunately had not found any traces of life in those two systems, contrary to what the first voyage of the PROMETHEUS over a decade ago to both the Jupiter and Saturn Systems had found. There, on the moons Europa, Enceladus and Titan, lifeforms had been found, including a race of primitive, non-technological medusa-like creatures able to communicate telepathically, which lived on Titan. The video recordings of those medusas by Ingrid Dows, who had filmed them in the ice cavern they used as a communal nest had then basically exploded every previously believed theories about life away from Earth, theories which had already been severely shaken when living fish had been found in the subterranean lakes and rivers on Mars.

Climbing back the access ramp, Lilya entered the personnel airlock and closed firmly the outer door before initiating the pressurization of the airlock. Once the pressure was equalized with the interior of the ship, she entered the locker room next to the airlock and removed her spacesuit, replacing it in its designated storage rack and plugging it to the power and air supply feeds. Now wearing her internal ship two-piece work suit and a pair of shoes with magnetized soles, she made her way to her cabin, situated in one of the carousel modules of the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS which provided Earth-level felt gravity to the ship's crew. There, she took a quick shower and put on a fresh set of clothes before going out of her cabin and walking down the wide tunnel forming a rotating ring on which habitat and machinery modules were skewered like pieces of meat on a stick. Six minutes later, she arrived at the main crew cafeteria, where she intended to have an early supper. However, the sight of someone sitting alone at a table while sipping on a cup of coffee made her divert that way. The man in his early thirties sitting at the table smiled to her as she approached him, making Lilya's heart accelerate: Jean Latour was a French planetary scientist with whom she had started to be intimate with for over three months already. Jean, apart from being highly

intelligent, was also a kind, caring and handsome man who was also a poet in his spare time, all things that had attracted her to him. Right now, she really felt the need for companionship. In turn, Jean Latour admired the small but svelte blonde and her smooth oval face as she sat down at his table. He knew that Lilya, while looking to be in her mid-twenties, was in reality 74-years-old and had been rejuvenated some seven years ago by General Ingrid Dows, along with an ex-Russian couple of astronomers. That couple, like Lilya, were now considered to be legal American residents, having been granted political asylum after fleeing Russia in 1989.

“Hi, Lilya! How was your last walk on Triton?”

“Memorable! It also helped me to make an important decision, a personal decision.”

“Oh?! It can’t be about becoming an American citizen: I know that you already got your citizenship some two years ago. So, what is that decision, Lilya?”

In response, Lilya gently pressed her hands into his hands and smiled while fixing the Frenchman with her deep blue eyes.

“Jean, you already asked me once if I would accept to live with you once back on Earth and I then answered that I would need more time to decide. Well, I have now decided. Furthermore, I would like to have a baby with you.”

Lilya then completed her declaration by getting up and bend forward to kiss Jean on the lips, watched by the amused other users of the cafeteria. Jean eagerly returned her kiss and hugged her as well for long seconds. He then looked down into her eyes, near tears.

“Lilya, you can’t know how much this makes me happy. We should get officially married right away. Then we could work on that baby.”

“With our return trip to Earth due to take three years, we should have plenty of time to score on that, Jean.”

“Quite true! Maybe we should go to the ship’s bar-lounge to celebrate this.”

“A nice idea! We will then return here to have supper together. Come!”

Jean took the time to go bring his unfinished coffee cup to the cafeteria’s dishwashing area, then walked with Lilya to the nearby bar-lounge, where he ordered two cocktails for the both of them. When they went to sit in one of the alcoves of the bar-lounge, they sat side-by-side and snuggled close to each other before knocking their glasses together.

“To our future together, Lilya!”

“To our future, Jean!”

After they each took a sip of their drinks, Jean gently caressed Lilya's curly blond hair, cut short in order not to interfere with the wearing of a spacesuit's helmet.

"What decided you, Lilya?"

"Many things, to be frank. First, I genuinely love you and think that you are one of the nicest men I ever encountered before. Also, this long trip in Space made me realize how lonely I really was. I already lost my country when I was forced to flee it and ask for political asylum, while many Americans still show some suspicions about me as an ex-Russian officer. The true friends I still have are few and far between, something that this long Space mission only made worse. Finally, your openness, tolerance and genuine caring towards me convinced me that you are the man I want to live with."

Jean had to wipe a couple of tears forming in his eyes then before he could reply to her.

"Lilya, I promise you to make you as happy as I can."

He then sealed his own declaration with a long kiss.

CHAPTER 8 – NUCLEAR MADNESS



Nuclear-tipped Russian drone torpedo approaching an American coastal city.

14:46 (Washington Time)

Sunday, November 10, 1996 'C'

United States National Combined Combat Command Center (NC4)

The Pentagon, Arlington, Virginia, U.S.A.

The U.S. Army brigadier general who was in charge of the Sunday afternoon shift at the NC4 was somewhat surprised to see Ingrid Dows walk into the National Combined Combat Command Center, or NC4 in short, wearing a set of civilian clothes.

"General?! You are not enjoying some time off this Sunday?"

Ingrid responded with a sober expression and a thin smile while approaching him.

"Well, it is hard to have my mind at peace with all the recent past indications that the C.I.R. and Russia are possibly cooking up trouble. I just came to see if anything unusual or new popped up today. How is the situation around the World to date, General Conway?"

"Mostly unchanged and quiet, General. I will get you the latest intelligence and operational reports we received since yesterday evening. I suppose that you will want to study them at your NC4 open work desk, General?"

"I will but I will look at the big board first." answered Ingrid before walking to the work desk reserved for her, situated a few meters from the World situation electronic board covering over half of a wall and facing it. She was still studying it when a staff officer brought a few thick files to her desk and put them down on it.

"Here you go, General: the latest reports from yesterday evening and today."

"Thanks, Major! Anything worthwhile in them?"

The Air Force major hesitated for a second before replying, instantly putting Ingrid in full attention mode.

"Er, there were some questions raised during the night shift about a set of reconnaissance photos taken of the Russian Navy's Northern Fleet bases in and around the Kola Peninsula but the night shift supervisor, Rear Admiral Stoneman, decided that there was nothing untoward about them."

"Oh? Tell me more about those photos, Major."

"Well, one intelligence analyst at the NRO¹¹ thought that there was something fishy about a few pictures taken of a number of submarine bases in the region, but Admiral Stoneman and other analysts finally decided that there was nothing worth getting excited about them. However, Admiral Stoneman decided to play it safe and asked for new reconnaissance coverage to be done, just in case. We are still waiting for the results of those newer photo-reconnaissance missions but they should be in at any time now, General."

"And do you know what exactly that NRO analyst found fishy, Major?"

"Uh, don't laugh, General, but she said that, quote, many Russian submarines at quayside looked too clean, unquote."

While the major had expected Ingrid to shake her head at that, she instead stared hard at him while pointing her right index finger.

"I want to see those photo prints, Major. Are they stereoscopic pairs¹²?"

"Yes, General! I will get that file right away."

¹¹ NRO: National Reconnaissance Office. The American intelligence department in charge of analyzing all strategic-level photo-reconnaissance pictures taken by either spy planes or satellites.

¹² Stereoscopic photo pairs: aerial reconnaissance photos taken from the vertical and with at least 40% overlap in their coverage, so that three-dimensional relief could become visible, using a stereoscope.

While the staff officer was fetching the requested file, Ingrid sat down at her work desk and grabbed first the latest intelligence reports to read through them. A minute later, the Air Force major came back with a thick file and a small folding stereoscope in his hands.

"Here you go, General."

"Thanks! Show me the photos which concerned that NRO analyst."

The major nodded his head and opened the photo binder he had brought, turning the plastic protector pages until he came to a particular pair of photos showing an overhead view of a Russian naval base, with over twenty Russian submarines at quay.

"This is the first pair of photos that attracted her attention, General. This is the Gremikha submarine base, in the Kola Peninsula."

"Alright, let's see what they say." said Ingrid, who then took the photos out of their transparent plastic holders and put them side by side, then unfolded the small stereoscope, which looked like a pair of metal-rimmed spectacles, putting it astride the two photos. She studied the photos for a good minute before speaking up, her eyes still over the stereoscope lenses.

"Hum, that analyst was right: there is something different between some of the submarines at quay and the other submarines. Their decks and hulls look impeccably clean, compared to the decks of the other submarines, which show patches of rust and incrustated barnacles on their hulls. From experience, dirty hulls would be more typical of Russian submarines and ships than immaculate ones, unless they were cleaned up prior to some inspection visit by a bigwig. But then, why clean only some of the submarines and not all of them? This doesn't make sense!"

Taking more time to study the photos, she then notices something else that was unusual and looked at the major.

"Major, are you experienced at looking at overhead reconnaissance photos?"

"Uh, yes, General: I once was part of a reconnaissance squadron based in Europe."

"Then, look at this particular submarine on that photo and tell me if its hull looks flatter than the others to you."

Intrigued, the staff officer bent over the stereoscope and looked through it for a moment before straightening up and giving Ingrid a puzzled look.

"You're right, General: that submarine's deck shows less relief than the submarine next to it, which is of the same class. I don't understand."

"Me neither." replied Ingrid, who then thought over that in silence for half a minute before she had a sudden mental flash and swore to herself, prompting a questioning look from the major.

"What? What is it, General?"

"Those dark lines along the waterline around the hull of this submarine and of the other submarines with clean hulls. I thought at first that they were done by floating layers of oil on the surface of the water but I now realize that only the clean submarines have them. If they were oil stain lines, then all the submarines in this base would show them, but they don't."

"And what could be the cause of that, General?"

"Something that was used by us during World War 2 in order to fool the Germans about where our big landings in France would occur. Do you remember the story of how General Patton was put in charge of running a fictitious American invasion force facing the Pas-de-Calais area?"

"Uh, I must confess that I don't, General. Sorry about that."

"Well, you weren't there, while I was, so you are excused, Major. Basically, General Patton had fake army camps created and false radio networks activated, in order to create the illusion of a huge army being assembled in Southeast England, facing the Pas-de-Calais. Those fake camps included dummy tanks, vehicles and planes made from inflatable, full-size replicas. That deception actually worked very well and our true landing sites in Southern France completely surprised the Germans. What I believe is that those 'clean' submarines are actually fake inflatable boats. If I am right, then a sizeable portion of the Russian submarine nuclear fleet, which we thought was in port, is in reality at sea, something that can't mean good news for us."

"Damn! You may well be right about that, General. What should we do now?"

"First, we wait to see what the NRO will find from that new run of photo-reconnaissance ordered last night. Second, I want you to review all the recent photos we have of Russian submarine bases and count how many 'clean' submarines are docked at quay in those bases and since when. This task is to be considered as our top priority right now."

"Understood, General. I will get our people here on it right away."

The staff officer had walked away some four minutes earlier when one of the encrypted telephones on Ingrid's work desk rang, prompting her to pick up the receiver.

"General Dows speaking!"

"General Dows, this is Colonel Welsh, at the NRO. We received a new batch of satellite pictures of the Russian naval bases in both the Kola Peninsula region and the Russian Pacific coast bases about one hour ago and have just finished our preliminary analysis of them. I am afraid that my night shift analyst was right: all those 'clean hull' submarines at quay show absolutely no internal thermal signatures and they must thus be considered as dummy submarines."

Ingrid straightened up in her chair, while her heart accelerated noticeably.

"And how many of those dummy subs did you count in port, Colonel?"

"We counted a total of 131 such dummy subs in port, General, all of them replicas of nuclear submarines able to fire nuclear-tipped missiles via either their torpedo tubes or via dedicated launch tubes. Right now, the Russians have put to sea the totality of their ballistic missile-launching submarines and of their cruise missile-launching boats. This represents a total first salvo capability of over 900 nuclear-tipped missiles, some of them armed with multiple re-entry warheads."

Ingrid's blood froze in her veins on hearing that and she needed a couple of seconds before she could speak again.

"And what if that submarine force approaches close to the continental United States before launching its missiles? Would we then have the time to react properly to them, Colonel?"

"No, General! Our bases and command installations along our coasts would go up in smoke before Washington could order a retaliatory strike via our own ballistic missiles and our strategic bombers and submarines. Even our ICBM¹³ complexes in the Midwest would be erased from the map before they would have time to launch their birds. In essence, such a Russian surprise nuclear strike mounted by submarines close to our coasts would result in a resounding defeat for us and in the near-total destruction of our country."

Ingrid had again to pause before replying to that chilling assessment.

"Colonel, I want your people to review all the recent overhead photos taken of Russian naval bases and find out for how long those dummy submarines have been in position in port. Also, do a detailed count of how many submarines and of which type have been replaced at quay, plus the list of the nuclear weapons, with their ranges and

¹³ ICBM: Intercontinental Ballistic Missile.

yields, they could carry. This is now your top priority. I am now going to request the President's permission to go to DEFCON 2 right now."

Putting down that telephone receiver, Ingrid let out a deep sigh before grabbing the receiver of the encrypted direct line linking the Pentagon with the White House. The first person to pick up at the other end was a military liaison officer on duty in the White House.

"White House, Captain Leavenworth speaking!"

"Captain Leavenworth, this is General Ingrid Dows speaking from the Pentagon. I need to speak with the President right away. This is a case of national security emergency."

"One moment, General. I am going to trace the President right now."

After a few seconds wait which felt like an hour for Ingrid, the voice of President Perot came on the line.

"This is the President! What's up, General?"

"Mister President, I have reasons to suspect that the Russians are planning a surprise nuclear strike against us, using their nuclear submarine fleet with the goal of launching hundreds of ballistic missiles and cruise missiles at us from positions close to our coasts, something that would basically prevent us from reacting in time to them. We are talking here about a warning time of only a few minutes at best, instead of the twenty minutes or more a conventional ground-based ballistic missile attack would normally give us. I am thus requesting your authorization to immediately go to DEFCON 2 and to order an intensive anti-submarine sweep along our coasts."

There was some delay on the line before Perot responded, his voice hesitant.

"How sure are you about this, General?"

"Quite sure, Mister President. Analysis of our latest satellite photos of Russian Navy ports show that 131 of their nuclear submarines able to fire nuclear-tipped weapons have been replaced at quay by inflatable dummy submarines. And that does not count the nuclear boats which were already known to have gone to sea in the past few weeks. In essence, this means that the Russians are trying to hide from us that the totality of their nuclear submarine force has left port at a date still undetermined and may be now either on their way towards the continental United States or are already in position along our coasts. If those submarines are allowed to launch a surprise close-in strike against us, then our country will be destroyed, with little chances for us to reply or defend ourselves. We have to act now and be ready to thwart the Russians' plan.

However, I promise you that we will do the utmost in keeping our response to a use of conventional weapons only.”

There was again a pause at the other end of the line before Perot answered Ingrid.

“I have full confidence in your abilities, General. You have my authorization to place our forces on DEFCON 2 and to do whatever you deem necessary to protect the United States.”

“Thank you, Mister President. I will keep you apprised of any new development as it materializes. One last thing, Mister President: the Vice-President should leave Washington right now and move to the Strategic Air Command Headquarters in Omaha, which is one of the best protected installations we have and which has as well extensive strategic communications capabilities.”

“A judicious counsel, General. I will tell John Glenn to leave for Omaha as soon as I hang up. Anything else?”

“Now that I think of it, yes, Mister President: this must be kept strictly secret for now. If the Russians learn that we are reacting to them, they may decide to launch their missiles earlier than planned. Also, that could put their submarines on their guard and make them more difficult to find and destroy. Lastly, Mister President, I would strongly urge you to get on Air Force One as soon as possible and start flying around the country in the company of a tanker aircraft and a couple of fighter jets: if the Russians do launch a nuclear strike against us, then the whole of Washington D.C. area may soon look like the surface of the Moon.”

“Another judicious counsel, General. I will heed it. Good luck to you and to our serving men and women.”

“Thank you, Mister President.”

Ingrid then hung up and immediately got on her feet to shout orders at the duty personnel in the NC4.

“ATTENTION TO ALL! WE ARE NOW UPGRADING TO DEFCON 2 AGAINST RUSSIA. WARN ALL COMMANDS AND UNITS THAT WE ARE EXPECTING A POSSIBLE SURPRISE NUCLEAR STRIKE AGAINST US BY RUSSIAN SUBMARINES LAUNCHING MISSILES FROM CLOSE TO OUR COASTS. DEFENSIVE PLAN ‘MEGIDDO FOUR’ IS TO BE ACTIVATED IMMEDIATELY. I WANT AS SOON AS POSSIBLE THE CHAIRMAN OF THE JOINT CHIEFS AND ALL THE SERVICE CHIEFS

ONLINE WITH ME, PLUS CINCLANT¹⁴ AND CINCPAC¹⁵. HOWEVER, I ALSO WANT THIS TO STAY CLASSIFIED. NONE OF THIS IS TO FILTER TO THE PUBLIC MEDIAS.”

Her orders had the NC4 turn into what would look like an ants’ nest that had just been kicked hard. Grabbing a message form and a clipboard, Ingrid then started writing a number of short, concise and direct messages to the various commands in charge of defending the coastal areas and waters of the continental United States. Two minutes later, one of her telephones rang. Picking it up quickly, she heard the voice of the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral David Jackson.

“General Dows? Admiral Jackson here! What’s up?”

“Admiral, we are now going to DEFCON 2 against Russia, with Defensive Plan MEGIDDO FOUR ordered activated. We just discovered that the whole Russian nuclear submarine force left in secret its ports, leaving behind 131 inflatable decoy submarines. I suspect that the Russians plan to deliver a surprise nuclear strike on us from very short range, in order to prevent us from being able to react in time to it. I will need all our ships to start a quick but thorough anti-submarine sweep along our coasts, as per Plan MEGIDDO FOUR, from our coastline to up to 200 nautical miles at large. All Russian submarines found within those limits are to be attacked and sunk without warning. However, we will use only conventional warheads: no nuclear-tipped torpedoes or anti-submarine missiles are to be used without my express authorization. For your information, I will relay those same directives myself to CINCLANT and CINCPAC. We don’t have the time now for any red tape: Russian subs may already be in position along our coasts.”

“My God! Have the Russians gone mad to try something like this? Even if their plan works, they will still have to deal with our remaining forces around the World and with our own ballistic missile submarines presently on sea patrol.”

“Unfortunately, the Russians have shown themselves to be less than logical or reasonable lately, Admiral Jackson. I will now have to leave you on this. I am confident that your sailors will do their usual best in this new task. The sheer survival of the United States is now in their hands.”

¹⁴ CINCLANT: Commander In Chief Atlantic. The commander of all American naval forces in the Atlantic Ocean.

¹⁵ CINCPAC: Commander-In-Chief Pacific. The commander of all American naval forces in the Pacific Ocean.

“You can count on the Navy, General.” replied Jackson, sounding shaken. Both Jackson and Ingrid then hung up at the same time, seconds before the commander of the Atlantic Fleet called. Ingrid then repeated what she had said to Jackson, doing the same three minutes later with the commander of the Pacific Fleet. From then on, time went on like a blur for Ingrid, with questions, reports and directives flying around the NC4 in a near-continuous basis. At one time, Ingrid couldn’t help imagine what kind of chaos and critical delays the present situation would have caused if the old inter-service rivalry among the American forces would have still reigned.

15:53 (Washington Time)

Bridge of the escort frigate U.S.S. NANTUCKET

Leaving Portsmouth Harbor, New Hampshire.

Northeast Atlantic coast area of the United States

“Captain, we just got an immediate priority secret message from CINCLANT.” Commander Helen Prior, standing a few paces behind the wheelman of her frigate, took the clipboard presented to her by her signals officer and quickly read the message clipped to it. That single page message made her stiffen at once, something noticed by some of the other bridge crewmembers. Then, Prior surprised them by quickly walking to the control box of the bridge announcement system and hitting a large red button, starting the loud blare of the ‘Action Stations’ horn. Next, she spoke in the ship-wide intercom.

“Attention all hands, this is your Captain! We are now at DEFCON 2 against Russia. Action Stations! Action Stations! All department heads are to join me in the C.I.C.¹⁶ for a quick command meeting.”

Prior was about to walk out of the bridge when a thought caught her mind and she returned instead to the P.A. box.

“Sonar Department, this is the Captain. Go to maximum anti-submarine alert right away and advise me immediately about any unusual underwater contact. Weapons Department: I want one of the two eighteen-round ready ammunition drums of our five-

¹⁶ C.I.C. : Combat Information Center. The C.I.C., where all the tactical information is assembled and analyzed and from where weapons are armed and activated, is the brain of a warship in combat.

inch gun to be reloaded at once and exclusively with anti-submarine depth shells. The other eighteen-round drum is to be loaded with anti-aircraft proximity shells if it is not yet so. The four-round ready drum will be filled with semi-armor-piercing high explosive shells. As well, I want live fish to be loaded into our torpedo tubes. Get to it right away!” Only then did Prior run out of the small bridge of the escort frigate, leaving behind sailors wondering what the hell was happening.

Nearly running down the stairs of the ship’s central communications staircase, Helen Prior first stopped at her cabin, situated two decks below the bridge, and opened her safe, which contained copies of the various military plans prepared by the Pentagon concerning possible enemy attacks or American offensive operations. Sifting through the large, sealed envelopes, she grabbed the one marked ‘MEGIDDO FOUR’ and took it out of her safe, closing and locking its steel door before ripping open the classified envelope and extracting a file marked ‘Top Secret’. Her heart, already beating fast because of the anticipation and stress from going to DEFCON 2, accelerated further as she started reading the executive summary on the top page of the document she was holding: it concerned the American military preparations and response to a possible Russian nuclear strike against the continental United States, using missile-carrying submarines launching their weapons from positions very close to the American coasts, this with the goal of achieving surprise hits on their intended targets and of cutting the response time available to the American forces. Next, she read the two-page attached annex clipped to the file which stated the role of the U.S.S. NANTUCKET in the plan. That annex included a map of the American northeast coastline and its surrounding waters, on which rectangular boxes delimited the patrol zones assigned to American warships. The one assigned to her escort frigate covered the coastal waters around Portsmouth, from the coastline to 200 nautical miles out. What truly shocked Helen was the fact that the patrol box started right at the coastline and the entrance to Portsmouth Harbor, implying that Russian submarines could come that close to the American coast. Reading quickly through the rest of the file, Helen then put it back in its envelope and left her cabin with it, going down four decks to the C.I.C. and entering the semi-dark compartment filled with work stations with glowing sensors display screens and tactical display tables. There, she found her eight most senior officers, along with the senior NCO of the ship, Senior Chief Petty Officer Fred Lomax, waiting for her around the main

tactical display table. They came to attention at once at her entrance, prompting her to give a brief order.

"At ease, people! To make it short and sweet, we are now at DEFCON 2 against Russia and are expecting the Russians to try a close-in nuclear strike against the continental United States, using both ballistic and cruise missiles fired from close to our coasts in order to achieve surprise. They may also use heavy, nuclear-tipped torpedoes against our ports. We are to operate according to Defense Plan MEGIDDO FOUR, which I have the file for here in my hands. That plan specifies that, even if we are not yet at DEFCON1, the actual war condition, we are to fire without warning and destroy any Russian submarine found within our 200 nautical miles exclusive economic zone. That is why I already gave the order for our crew to load and arm all our antisubmarine weapons and to man our sonars to maximum alert levels. Here is the map showing the patrol boxes to be manned along our Northeast coast area. Our patrol box is here, in front of Portsmouth, and extends from the coastline to 200 nautical miles out. Commander Simmons, you will enter the coordinates of that patrol box at once in our tactical computer, while Commander Corelli and Lieutenant Hansen will review and study the ocean floor relief found inside our patrol box, to determine possible waiting or launch positions that the Russians could use if they truly plan to attack us. I don't have to underline the fact that, while most Americans believe Portsmouth is not of much importance militarily, it does contain the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, which is one of our seven yards which builds Navy submarines. As such, it does represent a valuable target for the Russians so, if they attack us, we can expect at least one Russian submarine to come into our patrol box. If the Russians do come, then don't expect them to officially declare war to us before they start shooting. So, I will reiterate this again: if we find a Russian submarine or ship within our EEZ, then we will attack and sink it immediately, without warning. Questions?"

"One question, Captain." said at once Lieutenant Commander Nick Corelli, the ship's sensors officer. "Do we go passive or active for our sonar sweeps?"

"Both! Our bow, mine-hunting and sidescan sonars will operate in active mode, while our towed array sonar will operate in passive mode. I also want our electronic warfare suite to keep an ear out for any communications between Russia and Russian subs and for Russian radar signals. Hopefully, our active sonar pinging will panic a Russian sub commander into either moving away or to try to launch prematurely its

weapons. Commander Gore, please advise me the moment that the reloading of our weapons will be completed.”

Her weapons officer, Lieutenant Commander James Gore, nodded his head at that.

“Will do, Captain!”

“Good! Any other question? Then, let’s get to work!”

16:18 (Washington Time)

Five-inch ammunition handling room, U.S.S. NANTUCKET

“I hate those depth shells!” pronounced Seaman Roman Horowitz as he strained and sweated while carrying with another sailor a 100-kilo 127mm antisubmarine depth shell between one of the ammunition hoists and the reload shell drums situated under the single multi-purpose five-inch gun turret of the frigate. His partner, a big sailor named Fernando Aguilar, smiled in response.

“Come on, Roman, don’t be a wimp! Think instead about the reaction of a Russian submarine captain when he will start receiving this baby on his head. Since they supposedly still don’t know about those new antisubmarine shells, this should come as a nasty surprise to them.”

“But will this be powerful enough to truly hurt a Russian sub?”

“A 220-pound shell packed with RDX explosive and fused with a triple proximity, hydrostatic and contact fuse? You can bet your ass that it will! Each of these babies are as powerful or more than our old depth charges we used against German submarines in World War 2. At a firing rate of one shell every two seconds, we should be able to make the Russians’ ears ring quite hard.”

“Maybe, but I still hate them!” replied Horowitz, honoring his reputation as a chronic whiner, which was the main reason he still had not achieved the rank of Petty Officer Third Class despite his years of service.

16:33 (Washington Time)

C.I.C. of U.S.S. NANTUCKET

Twenty-five kilometers east of Portsmouth Harbor

“SIR, I HAVE AN UNIDENTIFIED BOTTOM TARGET!”

Lieutenant Commander Nick Corelli nearly ran to the row of sonar watch stations and looked over the shoulder of the operator of the mine-hunting sonar, Petty Officer Second Class Abraham Kirshbaum. His eyes fixed at once on the large sonar echo displayed on the screen, dead ahead of the ship and about three kilometers away.

"That's a biggie and it is also a solid object. This could definitely be a submarine lying on the bottom. What is its depth?"

"About 250 feet, sir. Couldn't it be simply a wreck? We lost a lot of merchant ships in this area during World War 2."

"It is possible but I will not take any risk with this thing, especially with the present alert state. We have anyway a way to confirm its nature. Let me talk with Commander Rubineck."

Going to the main tactical plot table, Corelli stopped next to the executive officer of the frigate, Lieutenant Commander Saul Rubineck.

"Sir, we have a big bottom object some two miles ahead of us, at a depth of 250 feet. I believe that it could well be a submarine but I would like to use our bottom observation ports to confirm visually its nature while we pass overhead with our weapons ready to fire."

"I like your idea: do it! I will get our five-inch gun and our torpedo tubes ready to react if this object indeed turns out to be a Russian submarine. Still, having an enemy sub lying in wait only twelve nautical miles from the entrance of Portsmouth Harbor..."

As Corelli enlisted the help of one of the chief petty officers present in the C.I.C. and ordered him to go aft to the bottom observation lounge, Rubineck grabbed an intercom microphone and spoke in it.

"Captain to the C.I.C.! Captain to the C.I.C.!"

Chief Petty Officer Second Class Henry Sturgis ran out of the C.I.C. and climbed up two decks before running aft, passing by the main turbine room and the diesel generator room before going down a ladder and ending in the bottom observation lounge, at the level of the Hold. That observation lounge was a recent concept for the U.S. Navy and only a few new ships, including the U.S.S. NANTUCKET, had one such lounges. While it partly served to distract the crew in their off time, the lounge's three large armored glass ports were also used to visually inspect the sea bottom when in shallow waters, in order to do things like locate wrecks or aircraft debris lying on the bottom. The observation ports were also supplemented by powerful downward-pointed

floodlights combined with still and video cameras. To Sturgis' satisfaction, the water was still clear enough and the depth shallow enough for him to be able to see the bottom, made mostly of silt in this area. Grabbing a communications headset and putting it on his head, he anxiously started observing the bottom. His heart suddenly raced in his chest when a big elongated object started to appear on one side, lying on the bottom. He immediately keyed at once his headset microphone while also switching on the bottom-viewing cameras.

"C.I.C., this is CPO2 Sturgis, in the bottom observation lounge. We have a VICTOR-Class nuclear submarine on the bottom, about 200 yards to the starboard of us! It appears to be lying in ambush on the seafloor. You should be able to see it on Camera Number Two."

"We see it! Good Job, Sturgis! Stay in the observation lounge for the moment, so that you could observe the effect of our depth shells."

"Acknowledged, C.I.C.!" said Sturgis while still looking at the sinister gray shape on the bottom.

In the C.I.C., Commander Prior, who had just run down from the bridge, examined carefully the gray submarine visible on a video screen and nodded her head.

"It's a VICTOR II-Class nuclear submarine alright. COMMS, SEND THE FOLLOWING IN ENCRYPTED VOICE TO CINCLANT: VICTOR II-CLASS SSN LOCATED LYING ON THE BOTTOM THIRTEEN NAUTICAL MILES DUE EAST OF PORTSMOUTH HARBOR. AM ENGAGING. SEND AS IMMEDIATE PRIORITY!"

"AYE, CAPTAIN!"

"HELM: START A WIDE TURN TO STARBOARD TO HEADING 140 AND KEEP OUR SPEED AT TEN KNOTS! WEAPONS OFFICER: ENGAGE TARGET WITH FIVE-INCH DEPTH SHELLS AS SOON AS OUR FORWARD TURRET WILL BE UNMASKED. SET THEIR HYDROSTATIC FUSES TO 250 FEET, PLUS CONTACT AND PROXIMITY. FIRE UNTIL THE TARGET IS DESTROYED. BE PREPARED TO LAUNCH TORPEDOES IF THAT SUB TRIES TO RISE FROM THE BOTTOM."

"UNDERSTOOD, CAPTAIN!"

Everybody in the C.I.C. waited anxiously while holding on to fixed objects as the frigate rolled while it made a starboard turn. However, the trimaran hull design of the NANTUCKET helped dampen that roll considerably, compared to a conventional single

hull design of the same size and displacement. Some ten seconds later, a muffled 'BOOM' announced the firing of the first five-inch depth shell.

In the aft bottom observation lounge, CPO2 Sturgis grinned with satisfaction and closed his right fist tight when he saw the first five-inch depth shell explode less than three meters from the stern of the VICTOR SSN¹⁷, with the blast visibly moving the submarine's stern by at least a couple of feet.

"YEAH! That should shake these Russians awake!"

Less than three seconds later, he yelled in triumph when the second depth shell achieved a direct hit on top of the rear deck of the submarine, exploding and sending a thick stream of air bubbles upwards. He then keyed again his headset microphone.

"C.I.C., this is the bottom observation lounge. Our second shell performed a direct hit on the submarine's aft deck. I now see a steady stream of air bubbles escape from the submarine. OW! SECOND DIRECT HIT ON THE SUBMARINE, JUST AFT OF ITS SAIL!"

More shells quickly followed at two to three seconds intervals, with two-thirds exploding near the submarine and the other third hitting squarely the submarine. The VICTOR then started to rise from the seafloor after the eight shell, prompting a warning from Sturgis.

"C.I.C., THE VICTOR IS NOW STARTING TO RISE FROM THE BOTTOM!"

The attempt by the Russian submarine to escape its grim fate however failed when a fourth depth shell hit the forward deck and exploded, creating a visible hole in the pressure hull. With a thick stream of air bubbles now coming from two separate hull locations, the VICTOR then slowly fell back to the seafloor, with its propeller stopping to turn by the time it hit the silt layer of the bottom. Sturgis' joy was then tempered by the realization that he was now watching around eighty men die. They may have been Russians but those sailors had nothing to do with their government's actions.

16:43 (Washington Time)

NC4 Operations Center, The Pentagon

Arlington, Virginia

¹⁷ SSN : Nuclear attack submarine.

“General, the NANTUCKET signaled that they have sunk the VICTOR II found off Portsmouth.”

Ingrid nodded in acknowledgement at that but didn't show joy then: this was only the first shot in a war that could turn catastrophic for the United States in mere minutes. She barely had time to return her attention to the big situation board of the operations center before a Navy staff officer shouted a warning to her.

“GENERAL, THE FRIGATE U.S.S. CLARK JUST SIGNALLED THAT SHE ENCOUNTERED AN AKULA-CLASS SSN OFF BOSTON AND ENGAGED IT, BUT THAT THE AKULA THEN FIRED BACK. THE AKULA IS SINKING, BUT THE CLARK WAS HIT BY A TORPEDO AND IS LISTING SEVERELY.”

“Damn! We can't afford to lose many ships at this game: it would take only one submarine armed with cruise missiles or ballistic missiles to evade our net and then cause some horrific damage to us. The Russian threat against the continental United States is now confirmed and we can't afford to pussyfoot around anymore. Signal to all of our warships and bases worldwide: all Russian submarines and warships detected anywhere near our ships or bases are to be attacked and sunk without warning. Send that in top priority to our carrier groups at sea: I am sure that all of them must have at least one Russian submarine sniffing them.”

“Aye, General!”

As her order was transmitted worldwide, Ingrid grabbed her direct telephone line to the White House, quickly getting President Perot on the line.

“Mister President, this is General Dows, at the Pentagon. This is now a shooting war. Two of our ships have already encountered Russian submarines, just outside of Portsmouth and Boston Harbors. Both Russian submarines have been sunk but one of our frigates was torpedoed and heavily damaged. I have just given the order to our ships and bases overseas to sink any Russian submarine or warship found near them but I would still counsel that we hold on to our own nuclear forces for the moment, at least until the Russians actually fire against American territory. I know that this may sound like a very risky gamble, which it actually is, but I want to do everything to avoid as much as possible a nuclear exchange. If triggered, such an exchange would cause millions of deaths on our side, irrespective of who starts it.”

"I want as well as you to avoid such an exchange, but we are responsible for the safety of close to 300 million Americans. Don't give the Russians a free hand, Ingrid. You now have my authorization to go to DEFCON ONE."

"Understood, Mister President. When will you leave the White House to go take Air Force One in Andrews Air Force Base?"

"My close staff and I are about to leave by helicopter in about ten minutes, General."

"Then, Godspeed to you, Mister President."

"Thank you, General. I wish the same to you and to our brave men and women defending our country."

Perot then hung up, with Ingrid also putting down her receiver before shouting an order at her personnel manning the NC4.

"ATTENTION ALL HANDS! WE ARE NOW GOING TO DEFCON ONE! HOWEVER, PLAN MEGIDDO FOUR IS STILL IN EFFECT. NO NUCLEAR WEAPONS ARE TO BE FIRED BY US UNLESS I SAY SO."

Next, she sat down at her work desk and grabbed her direct encrypted telephone line with the Space Corps Headquarters, in Vandenberg, California: her space planes were going to get very busy during the next few hours.

16:50 (Washington Time)/:50 (Indian Ocean Time, Monday, November 11)

C.I.C. of the battle carrier U.S.S. NEPTUNE

Navigating 600 nautical miles south of the Strait of Hormuz

Indian Ocean

Rear Admiral Mack 'Big Mac' Benson was rubbing his tired eyes when a signals messenger came to him in the C.I.C. and handed him a message on a clipboard.

"Immediate priority message from the Pentagon, sir: we are now at DEFCON ONE."

"Thank you!" said Benson while grabbing the message and signing for his receipt, then dismissing the messenger. Reading the text of the message was enough to fully wake him up.

"At last! We will finally be able to get rid of these pesky Russians trailing us." He then hit the ship wide alarm horn button of his station, starting its sinister blare, then spoke in his ship wide intercom.

“Attention all hands: this is the Admiral speaking! All United States forces are now at DEFCON ONE against Russia. However, we are to avoid the use of nuclear weapons until told otherwise from the Pentagon. We are now going to engage and sink the Russian destroyer and the three submarines which had been trailing us for over a day. Go to Battle Stations!”

As sailors and marines started running all around the ship, Benson spoke to his operations officer, Commander John ‘Do It’ Carpenter, who was also standing around the main tactical display table.

“John, you will be able to make our gunners happy tonight: they will get to fire their guns at last.”

01:54 (Indian Ocean Time)

Bridge of the Russian SOVREMENNY-Class destroyer BOEVOY

Trailing 3,000 meters behind and to port of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE

Indian Ocean



SOVREMENNY-Class destroyer.

Captain Sergei Chernenko, standing in his darkened bridge, looked nervously at his watch for maybe the tenth time in the last hour.

“Still a bit over seven hours before ‘H-Hour’. This waiting is killing me!”

He then raised his binocular to his eyes, trying to see the American carrier which was by now widely called ‘The Devil’s Ship’ around the Russian Navy. Even while following it at such a close distance, the radars of the BOEVOY could barely get any radar signal returns from it. This was indeed a devilish ship by any measure. Unfortunately for Chernenko, the night was quite dark, with only a quarter moon in the sky, and the only

thing he could see now was a huge black silhouette trailing a white wake behind it. Suddenly, four bright flashes coming from the deck of the carrier both surprised and half-blinded him. Chernenko thought at first that some sort of accident must have happened on the flight deck of the NEPTUNE, causing explosions. Before he could revise his opinion, his destroyer was shaken by four powerful explosions that made him stagger on his feet. His surprise then turned into anger.

“THOSE BASTARDS ARE FIRING ON...”

Before he could finish his short sentence, a second salvo of four 127mm shells hit his ship. This time, Chernenko didn't have the time to say anything more, as one of the shells hit the destroyer's bridge, penetrating inside it before exploding and killing instantly Chernenko and all the other men on the bridge. He was thus unable to see the bright vertical flares of three missiles emerging from the carrier's Mark 95 Vertical Launch System's modules, nor the salvo of three 533mm heavy wire-guided torpedoes being launched at the BOEVOY from a mere 3,000 meters. The flight of the three NSAS-1 KRAKEN antisubmarine missiles was short and they splashed into the water some eleven kilometers away at three different locations after letting go their military payloads, 533mm guided heavy anti-submarine torpedoes. The three CHARLIE-Class SSGNs¹⁸ trailing the NEPTUNE had only seconds to detect the entry of the torpedoes in the water and to react to them but those seconds proved too short for them. The three CHARLIE-Class submarines, each armed with eight heavy anti-ship missiles, never had a chance to fire their weapons before the American heavy torpedoes hit them and exploded, breaking them in two and sinking them. On the NEPTUNE, Rear Admiral Benson made a mean smile when the Russian destroyer and the three submarines were confirmed sunk.

“Yes! Nobody fucks with my NEPTUNE!”

17:11 (Washington Time)
NC4 Operations Center, The Pentagon
Arlington, Virginia, U.S.A.

Ingrid didn't smile or shout in joy when she was told of the success of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE in sinking the Russian vessels trailing it: things were now becoming truly

¹⁸ SSGN : Guided missile-carrying nuclear submarine.

hectic, as dozens of widely separate naval battles were happening along the coasts of the continental United States and around the World's oceans, with American ships and planes engaging the Russian submarines and ships found around them. The saving grace of the American forces was that the Russian submarines found and attacked were all dived at depth and were not in immediate radio contact with their bases in Russia, thus had no chance to alert Moscow about having been found before being destroyed. That 'small detail' was actually preventing the Russian High Command from ordering an immediate mass missile strike against the continental United States and was limiting any Russian response to the firing of weapons by individual Russian submarines being under attack. Obviously, the Russian attack plan had called for an 'H-Hour' for a mass coordinated launch of missiles, but the faster-than-expected American reaction was now starting to unravel what could have been a devastating mass nuclear strike against the United States. Still, Ingrid was dreading in advance the moment when the first nuclear-tipped Russian missiles would be launched against the U.S.A.

The first blow against American forces happened some twelve minutes later, when a report came from the destroyer U.S.S. BROOKE, on patrol off Los Angeles.

"GENERAL, THE U.S.S. BROOKE HAS JUST BEEN TORPEDOED SOME TWENTY NAUTICAL MILES WEST OF LOS ANGELES. IT WAS ABOUT TO ATTACK AN OSCAR-CLASS SUBMARINE WHEN ANOTHER RUSSIAN SUBMARINE LYING IN AMBUSH CAUGHT IT BY SURPRISE."

"Shit! Some of those missile submarines are being escorted by Russian nuclear attack submarines. Pass a fleet-wide warning about the possibility of such escort submarines protecting missile-launching boats. What else do we have close to the BROOKE to help it and deal with those Russian subs?"

"We have two maritime patrol aircraft flying over the area that are now reacting to this, General. Another two patrol aircraft are also about to fly out of Long Beach Naval Station, along with four anti-submarine helicopters."

"That's a start! Advise our anti-missile defense batteries in Camp Pendleton and Point Mugu to be ready for possible Russian missile launches from close to Los Angeles. They are to fire the moment they will detect missiles in the air."

"Aye, General!"

14:38 (California Time) / 17:38 (Washington Time)
Russian Navy OSCAR-Class SSGN ANTEIY
Fifteen kilometers west of Catalina Island, California
Pacific Ocean

“Captain, I am detecting hull breakup noises coming from the location of the NAKOMOV. It is now sinking but it had time to torpedo that approaching American destroyer.”

“What is that destroyer doing now?” asked Captain Piotr Godunov in response to the report from his sonar operator.

“It has slowed down to a speed of five knots and is clearly in trouble, Captain.” Godunov thought for a few seconds as he weighed what to do now. His own submarine was still intact and fully operational, but he had just lost one of the two VICTOR-Class attack submarines acting as his escorts. The Americans certainly would go on full alert now and he would risk being sunk before H-Hour would arrive in six and a half hours. Contacting his base and getting fresh instructions would take time, time that could result in his sinking. Walking quickly to the missile firing station of his submarine control room, he spoke to his weapons officer while taking out the missile launch key hanging from his neck by a chain.

“Insert your launch key, Comrade Mikhailov: we are going to launch our missiles before the Americans could find us and sink us.”

“But, Captain, it would ruin the coordination of our strike plan.”

“Yes, but I believe that the element of surprise has just been lost. Insert your key!”

While still reticent, Mikhailov did obey and inserted his own launch key in the firing pad controlling their 24 SS-N-19 GRANIT missiles. Designed originally as a heavy anti-ship missile, the SS-N-19 had been recently modified with a new command guidance program that allowed it to also be used against fixed land targets. Such guidance program modifications had in fact been done on nearly all the missiles and heavy torpedoes used by the Russian Navy. With a range of 555 kilometers, a speed of Mach 2.5 and a nuclear warhead yield of 500 kilotons, that made the GRANIT an extremely potent and versatile weapon. Godunov also inserted his key and spoke.

“On my count of three, turn your key! One...Two...Three!”

Both men turned their keys at the same time, unlocking and activating the missile launch computer. Godunov then spoke again in a firm tone.

“Fire all missiles in sequence, now!”

“Firing all missiles in sequence now!” repeated Mikhailov, his heart beating fast from both excitement and dread as he pushed his launch button. Excitement from this ultimate act, which he had trained many years for; dread from the knowledge of the tens of million lives this would snuff out in a nuclear storm. Two seconds later, the first SS-N-19 was launched from its silo and climbed to the surface, where the missile flew out of its protective canister and climbed in the sky under rocket booster power, soon switching to ramjet propulsion while flying at low altitude north towards its assigned target: one of the missile silos of the Vandenberg ICBM Complex. The second GRANIT followed some five seconds later, with the rest launched at similar intervals.

14:41 (California Time) 17:41 (Washington Time)

Vandenberg Strategic Air Defense Unit command center

Vandenberg Space Corps base, California

“MISSILE LAUNCH DETECTED FROM WEST OF CATALINA ISLAND! MISSILE IS SUPERSONIC AND HEADING OUR WAY AT LOW ALTITUDE!”

Major Charles Weintraub, the commander of the Vandenberg Strategic Air Defense Unit, tensed up immediately on hearing the warning from one of his radar operators but didn't waste one second before shouting out a string of orders.

“TO OUR UNIT LAUNCH BATTERY: ENGAGE INCOMING MISSILES AT ONCE! COMMS, ALERT OUR AIR DEFENSE UNITS IN POINT MUGU, CAMP PENDLETON AND MONTEREY THAT WE WILL HANDLE THE FIRST TEN MISSILES BUT THAT THEY SHOULD BE PREPARED TO HANDLE ANY ADDITIONAL MISSILES FIRED TOWARDS THEM. BETTER TO BE SAFE THAN SORRY! IF THIS IS AN OSCAR FIRING AT US, THEN WE CAN EXPECT TO FACE UP TO 24 MISSILES.”

“YES SIR!”

The missile officer of the unit then turned his launch key, which had already been inserted by him when they had gone to DEFCON ONE, and selected one of the NIKE SPRINT anti-missile missiles of their launch battery, designating electronically the incoming Russian missile as its target before pressing his 'Fire' button.

With its armored launch canister first rising up by 45 degrees, the selected NIKE SPRINT missile then flew out in a mighty roar, accelerating at a dizzying rate under solid rocket power and attaining quickly a speed of Mach 3 before switching to ramjet power and accelerating further to its top speed of Mach 5. By the time it was on ramjet power, the NIKE SPRINT was already on a collision course with the incoming SS-N-19, only thirty kilometers away and approaching fast. The American missile then switched from inertial guidance, which had guided it on an initial intercept course, to active radar guidance, using the small phased array radar in its nose to detect and then head towards the incoming Russian missile. Part of a secret program initiated years ago by Ingrid Dows, the NIKE SPRINT was still known by the Russians to simply be an area air defense weapon designed to intercept Russian bombers. However, the NIKE SPRINT was in reality a lot more than that, but its performances had been intentionally downplayed in order to trick the Russians about its real role and capabilities. Its true primary role was actually as a strategic defense against supersonic cruise missiles and hypersonic intercontinental ballistic missiles targeting the continental United States. While such a type of interception represented a very difficult feat by itself in view of the high speed of the incoming missiles and short response time available, Ingrid had directed the program to be kept as simple as possible while still being highly effective. The solution had been to use a low-yield nuclear warhead rather than the more typical conventional explosive warhead of other air defense missiles. With a yield of five kilotons, the NIKE SPRINT could destroy any missile within a bit more than one kilometer of it while representing a relatively low hazard to ships or land installations and habitations in the target region. This time, the first NIKE SPRINT fired from Vandenberg intercepted its target at a point over sixty kilometers away from the California coast, detonating its nuclear warhead a mere 200 meters away from the incoming SS-N-19 and vaporizing it. The only collateral damage were five fishermen who were fishing in their boat and who were temporarily blinded by the flash of the nuclear explosion and also suffered some first degree burns on their exposed portions of skin. That nuclear explosion also managed to damage the second incoming Russian missile, which was following behind the first GRANIT missile, via its blast wave, making it crash into the sea, where it sank with its own nuclear warhead still intact but unexploded. All five SS-N-19s fired towards Vandenberg, plus the four missiles fired respectively towards the Point Mugu Missile Test Center, the South and North Bases of Muroc Air Force Test Center and the China Lake Naval Weapons Center, were similarly destroyed by NIKE SPRINTs

fired from Vandenberg. However, things got really tense when a swarm of SS-N-19s flew out of the sea and headed towards the Greater Los Angeles area, whose beaches were a mere 105 kilometers from the launch point. Without the pre-warning already given and if the Russians would have achieved true surprise, then Los Angeles and the military installations around it would have suffered utter devastation from the explosions of nine GRANIT missiles, each armed with a 500-kiloton yield warhead with over 33 times the power of the Hiroshima bomb. Operating as fast as they could, the NIKE SPRINT launch units at Camp Pendleton and Point Mugu fired off interceptor missiles in quick salvos which managed to destroy in flight the nine incoming Russian missiles. Because of the proximity with the OSCAR's launch site and the time needed to react, some of the SS-N-19s were destroyed at distances from the coast of a mere twenty kilometers or less, with the flashes and blasts of the interceptors' warheads clearly visible to the population of the Los Angeles area. Similarly, the seven GRANIT missiles fired towards the San Diego area were all intercepted and destroyed, but one Russian missile was intercepted a mere eight kilometers west of the Miramar Naval Air Station, just as it was passing the coastline. The five-kiloton blast from that NIKE SPRINT actually caused some material damage on the ground, on top of killing or wounding dozens of American civilians. However, the alternative of letting the Russian missile reach its target would have been tremendously more costly in lives.

Bare minutes after these multiple nuclear air bursts over the sea and along the California coast, panic started to spread among the civilian population, which still didn't know that the United States was now at war with Russia. The various local radio and television stations also started broadcasting alarming flash news bulletins, which only helped spread panic and public confusion along the West Coast. Unfortunately, the White House Press Office was much slower than the NIKE SPRINT batteries in reacting to this crisis, taking over half an hour before releasing its first vague message. By that time, a number of other Russian submarines apart from the OSCAR sailing off Los Angeles had also fired their missiles after coming under attack by American ships or aircraft. While all of those missiles were successfully intercepted and destroyed, public panic spread to the whole of the United States, creating chaos all over the country.

18:55 (Washington Time) / 00:55 (Mediterranean Time, November 11)
NC4 Operations Center, The Pentagon
Arlington, Virginia, U.S.A.

The Navy's senior duty officer had a long face when he approached Ingrid and presented her with a printed message.

"Bad news from the Mediterranean, General: the carrier U.S.S. CONSTELLATION was hit and severely damaged by at least two heavy anti-ship missiles fired from an OSCAR-Class submarine. It is now on fire, with its escort ships doing their best to help her."

Ingrid couldn't help look a bit crossly at the navy commander as she took the message and read it quickly. She then looked back at the Navy senior officer.

"Two cruisers and seven destroyers and frigates were not enough to protect the CONSTELLATION from a single Russian submarine, Commander? What went wrong?" Embarrassment showed on the commander's face as he searched for his words.

"To be totally frank, General, I personally know Rear Admiral Lyman, who commands the CONSTELLATION group, and he has often shown in the past disdain about the Russian Navy, saying that its ships are inferior to ours and their crews to be mostly composed of poorly trained conscripts. This may well be a case of the wrong man for the job, General. Admiral Lyman probably underestimated the threat from the OSCAR."

Ingrid lowered her head while sighing with frustration.

"Too many people in wars keep underestimating the human factor and it always ends up badly. Thank you for your frankness, Commander, I will keep your words strictly to myself: I know how some admirals could try to make you pay for that frankness. Did those escort ships at least get the OSCAR?"

"Uh, they are not sure about that, General. There is more that was not included in that message from the CONSTELLATION. We also intercepted a British naval communication in clear from that same area of the Mediterranean. Apparently, one of the missiles fired at our carrier and its escort ships missed its intended target and continued on, to finally hit a British Type 42 destroyer sailing close-by. That destroyer, the HMS GLASGOW caught fire and sent an urgent message to London, asking for help."

While that information shocked a bit Ingrid, she saw at once some helpful potential in it.

“Send the following to the CONSTELLATION: send at once one ship to go help the GLASGOW. We may yet gain the support of Great Britain in this war, or at least some sympathy, by helping one of their ships. It is also the humane thing to do.”

“I will take care of that right away, General.” promised the commander before turning around and returning to his work station. Now left alone, Ingrid thought bitterly about how this incident was proving her right about the past American carrier doctrine: building big carriers with little self-defense capacities and tying them down to a large escort group that hindered its movements had been a recipe for potential disaster. Aircraft carriers were not called ‘bomb magnets’ for nothing. On its part, the U.S.S. NEPTUNE had more than validated her thoughts on that subject and she couldn’t wait for the second ship of that class to be completed. Shaking her head, she then returned her attention to the mortal battle playing along the coasts of the United States. She was also expecting some good news soon from her Space Corps and its spaceplanes.

19:00 (Washington Time)

Air Force One presidential aircraft

Flying over the Midwest of the United States

Ross Perot felt both anger and bitterness as he was about to make a televised declaration to the American public from his work office on Air Force One. Anger at the duplicity and monstrous disregard to human life shown by the Kremlin leaders; bitterness at seeing his renewed presidential term being marked by such a tragic event a mere five days after the presidential elections. On the signal of his head of public relations, Perot took a presidential look and started reading from the teleprompter facing him.

“To my fellow Americans, I have a grave announcement to make to you. This afternoon, the Russian government initiated what was meant to be a surprise mass nuclear attack against the United States, using nuclear submarines stationed very close to our coasts in order to give us too little time to react to these submarines launching nuclear-tipped missiles at us. Thankfully, our ever-vigilant armed forces detected those submarines near our coasts and reacted swiftly to them, thwarting what could have resulted into the utter destruction of our country. As I speak, our forces and particularly our navy are battling those Russian submarines and hunting them down. While we presently have the upper hand in that fight, we did incur some casualties in the process but, in exchange, we have already sunk to date ten Russian missile-carrying submarines

which had been lying in ambush along our coasts. Some of those submarines were able to launch their missiles before being sunk but our air defense systems have succeeded in intercepting and destroying them. While some of those missiles exploded near our coasts, no Russian missile was actually able to hit its intended target on American soil. All our air defense systems are still fully operational and ready to intercept any extra Russian missiles fired at our country, so you can have full confidence in their capabilities. With a state of war now in effect between our country and Russia, I am now forced to issue the following presidential directives to you. First, do not, I say again do not try to leave your homes in order to seek shelter in some rural areas and stay home until further notice. Do not go out of your homes for any reasons until the all clear is given by me and avoid clogging our highways by trying to leave our cities. Only police officers, emergency services and military personnel will be allowed to circulate on the roads until further notice. As of this moment, I declare martial law to be in effect country-wide and call to duty all military reservists and national guardsmen, who are to report to their respective units and barracks at once. We are now in a fight for sheer national survival and we will have to engage all the resources of our nation in order to prevail in this war. To our allies around the World, I say this: be on alert and guard against possible Russian attacks against you. In turn, American forces will do their best to support and help you during the coming days. I will end this address by asking you to pray for our brave men and women presently fighting and to wish them the best of luck. Thank you for your attention.”

The teleprompter was then switched off, signaling to Perot that he was now off the air. Sitting back in his chair, he took a deep breath in order to regain his calm.

“God! Why did those idiots in the Kremlin do this?”

His secretary of state, Daniel Inouye, who was traveling with the presidential staff on Air Force One and had been watching his address from a seat behind the camera, then spoke up.

“Shall we try to call President Yurchenko, Mister President?”

“What would be the point, Daniel? By attacking us the way he did, he proved to us that his word is worth absolutely nothing. I will answer him the same way that the Governor of Quebec answered the demands of the British fleet besieging his city in 1690.”

“Oh, and what was this governor’s answer then, Mister President?”

“Governor Frontenac’s answer to the British commander, Sir William Phips, was that he would answer his request for surrender through the muzzles of his guns.”

19:14 (Washington Time)

United States Space Corps interceptor spaceplane VALLEY FORGE In orbit over Russia

“We are approaching our calculated missile launch point, Steve. We should be there in less than a minute.”

“Then, arm our missiles and open our missile bay doors.” replied Major Steve McClure, the commander of the space interceptor VALLEY FORGE, to his weapons officer, Captain Rhonda Sweeney. Sweeney did so, preparing their two OGM-5 orbital strike missiles for launch and loading their target data on their onboard computers. This would be the first operational use of the OGM-5 in combat, and for very good reasons. The OGM-5 missile had been designed for one single purpose: to destroy from orbit enemy ICBMs in their silos, before they could launch. The VALLEY FORGE was not alone on this combat mission today: five more space interceptors, constituting the whole of the U.S. Space Corps strategic orbital strike force, were in orbits overflying Russia. All six spaceplanes had been launched separately at intervals timed so that they would end up forming a kind of space train able to launch all its missiles at approximately the same time but against different targets in Russia. They would not be enough by themselves to eliminate completely the Russian silo-based ICBM force, but supersonic bombers were in flight and were going to take care of the remaining ICBMs. Ingrid had wished that she would be able to counter the Russian attack without using nuclear weapons but she still had ordered the launch in orbit of the space interceptors, armed with nuclear-tipped missiles, when the extent of the Russian attack had become clear. Even then, the American response would end up being a lot more restrained than the Russian plan of attack had been.

“Launch point approaching! Launch in three...two...one, launching missiles!”
Two big OGM-5 missiles left in quick succession the missile bay of the space interceptor and started down on their reentry trajectory under inertial guidance, their main rocket engines lighting up to start slowing them down and thus allow them to reenter the Earth’s atmosphere. Their reentry, like all other reentries from orbit, proved fiery but the missile

warheads were protected by a thick thermal cover cap made of a light but resistant ablative material. Having survived reentry and now going at high hypersonic speeds in the high atmosphere, solid rocket thrusters then put the warheads on their precise final trajectories before their protective nose cone covers were ejected. Each OGM-5 warhead, containing ten individually-targeted nuclear projectiles and a combined inertial-radar guidance package, lined up on their designated target area. In the case of the missiles from the VALLEY FORGE, they dived down on the Russian ICBM base at Tatishchevo, which contained 27 missiles sheltered inside protective underground silos.



Typical Russian ICBM silo group.

Once in their final dive and still going at hypersonic speed, each warhead's guidance radar painted the ground below them and did final adjustments to its trajectory while recording their precise geo-location via GPS. With that done, the ten sub-projectiles were ejected, each of them now locked on a precise GPS location and steering towards that point. Contrary to what many thought, the best point to hit in such circumstances was not the silo itself, with its heavily protected steel and concrete cover. Instead the OGM-5 sub-projectile hit the ground some twenty meters to one side of the silo it was targeting, penetrating deeply underground before exploding. The fireball of the five-kiloton warhead detonating underground basically vaporized everything within a radius of 150 meters, blowing in the walls of the missile silos and of their control bunkers and utterly destroying the Russian missiles. With their impact points having been judiciously

chosen years ago with the help of reconnaissance satellite or spaceplane photos, many of the sub-projectiles were able to destroy two silos in one shot when those silos happened to be close to or within 300 meters of each other. The space interceptor VALLEY FORGE was already far away, continuing along its orbit, by the time the Tatishchevo ICBM base was utterly destroyed, along with its 27 heavy ballistic missiles. Half of the Russian ICBM land-based force was destroyed in mere minutes by the six space interceptors, but the remainder of that force was not safe yet, as squadrons of heavy supersonic bombers flying low started launching salvos of nuclear-tipped air-to-surface missiles, or ASMs in short, targeting the remaining Russian ICBM bases and bomber bases. The crews of seven heavy transporter-erector-launcher trucks, or TELs, had enough warning time to get to one of their pre-registered launch pads after leaving their protective bunkers, then to raise their missile launch canister to the vertical. Five of those seven missile had the time to be fired out of their canisters before the rain of American ASMs fell on them. Those five missiles were still at very low altitude and climbing when the blasts and fireballs from the exploding American missiles caught them in mid-air, destroying them. While no Russian civilian targets were targeted, Russian citizens still suffered when the wind carried radioactive debris and fallouts from the missile and bomber bases which had been located around them and had just become victims of a classic counter-force nuclear strike. As for the submarine-based Russian

missile force, it was being eliminated piecemeal along the American coasts while being hunted down by the enraged crews of American warships and patrol planes, who fully realized how close to utter destruction their home states had been. It was still a bloody fight for both sides, but the American NIKE-



SPRINT interceptor missile defense system stopped every Russian missile fired at the continental United States. Soon, the American littoral waters of the United States were littered with eviscerated and sunk Russian submarines.

03:47 (Mediterranean Time) / 20:47 (Washington Time)

C.I.C. of the American cruiser U.S.S. MONTANA

Sprinting east towards the Syrian coast, in the Mediterranean.

The Assistant Communications Officer of the U.S.S. MONTANA had a somber air on his face when he came to Captain Jefferson Chandlers, a message in his hands.

"Sir, we just got bad news from Task Group 61.2: the CONSTELLATION is now sinking. Its escort group is now concentrating on rescuing the surviving members of its crew, while the planes who flew off the CONSTELLATION are now rerouting to land at allied airfields in Greece and Italy."

Chandlers, standing next to the main electronic plot table in the C.I.C. of his brand new nuclear-propelled cruiser, read quickly the message before looking back at the young officer.

"And what about the planes which were attacking the surviving destroyer of the Russian flotilla which attacked our carrier group?"

"They had to cut their attacks due to low fuel and are now landing in Greece, sir. They however did send two minutes ago an updated position, heading and speed concerning that Russian destroyer, sir. That info is in the last paragraph of the message, sir."

Chandlers nodded his head once, having read that part as well, which enjoined his cruiser to give chase and destroy the remaining Russian ship.

"And Rear Admiral Lyman?"

"He is missing, along with half of the crew of the CONSTELLATION, sir. Captain Granger, on the cruiser SOUTH CAROLINA, is now in command of what's remaining of Task Group 61.2."

Those last words from the communications officer made some bitter bile go up in Chandlers' throat. It appeared more and more that Rear Admiral Lyman had badly mishandled his carrier task group. First, Lyman had assumed that he would be able to detect any Russian submarine before they would be close enough to launch their missiles. Second, his anti-submarine sweeps and screening had proved insufficient, with at least two VICTOR-Class attack submarines which had been escorting one OSCAR-Class cruise missile submarine escaping initial detection. Then, Lyman had compounded his mistake after realizing the OSCAR was much closer than he had thought at first by detaching part of his destroyer screen to run at the OSCAR, thus

opening a wide gap in his anti-submarine defenses. The two VICTORs had promptly used that mistake to infiltrate the American defensive screen and get close to the CONSTELLATION before firing a volley of anti-ship missiles and heavy torpedoes at the task group. The OSCAR had then added its 24 SS-N-19 SHIPWRECK anti-ship missiles to that deadly salvo before it could be sunk by planes from the CONSTELLATION. Thankfully, those SS-N-19 missile had not been armed with nuclear warheads, but their 750-kilo conventional explosives warhead still hurt...a lot! The CONSTELLATION was then hit by at least two missiles which started a severe fire in her aircraft hangar, while three of its escort ships had also been hit by either missiles or torpedoes. As a result of that short initial but furious battle, the American Navy had lost one aircraft carrier and one destroyer sunk, plus had one cruiser and one destroyer seriously damaged and rendered combat non-effective. Worse, in all that tangled melee, Lyman had ignored the two Russian warships which had been trailing his task group and probably directing the Russian submarines towards it. Only after the initial salvo of Russian anti-ship missiles had struck did Lyman belatedly order his escort ships to chase those Russian destroyers away. By then, however, his remaining four destroyers and one cruiser had proved too busy hunting the deadly VICTORs to properly take care of the UDALOY and SOVREMENNY-Class destroyers, allowing the SOVREMENNY destroyer to add its eight SS-N-22 anti-ship missiles to the submarine-launched missiles. That had proved too much for the American escort ships and four more missiles had hit the CONSTELLATION, sealing its fate, while also sinking an already damaged destroyer and badly damaging a second cruiser. The planes already launched by the CONSTELLATION had then belatedly attacked the two Russian surface warships and sank the UDALOY destroyer, while damaging to an uncertain degree the SOVREMENNY. So, the balance of that fight stood at one American carrier and two destroyers sunk, plus two damaged cruisers, this against three Russian submarines and one destroyer sunk and another destroyer damaged. While this could appear to neophytes as a near draw, it was in Chandlers' mind a clear defeat, with the United States losing one of its only twelve precious aircraft carriers. Now, he was tasked to intercept and sink that wounded SOVREMENNY destroyer, which was apparently trying to retreat towards the Syrian port of Tartus. Grabbing an electronic pen, Chandler marked the last known position of the Russian destroyer and added its speed and heading to that marker before giving a string of orders.

“Bridge, alter course to 087 and go to top speed! Aircraft section, I want two PELICAN B to take off and start clearing our path ahead, to find and sink any Russian submarine protecting the approaches to Tartus. Sensors Officer, I want us to be in complete electronic silence from this moment on. Use only our passive sensors to maintain watch around us: I want to play our stealth features to the max and surprise this SOVREMENNY destroyer. Weapons Officer, have our five-inch guns’ primary ammo carrousel loaded with semi-armor piercing rounds. The first three initial salvos will be with terminally-guided shells.”

Chandlers’ executive officer, Commander Patrick Moynihan, made a mean smile on hearing his last order.

“That should make our gunners happy, Captain: eight five-inch guns against four 130mm guns. Won’t this be the first recorded use in combat of our new five-inch terminally-guided shells?”

“I believe so, Pat. With that SOVREMENNY having fired all of its missiles against our task group, this will be an old-fashioned gun duel at sea, minus the side-by-side boarding, of course.”

“Now, that would have pleased our embarked marines!”

“Well, I am afraid that they will have to be content with guarding any eventual Russian survivors fished out of the sea after we sink that destroyer. However, let’s not be complacent and underestimate our enemy today. Remember the Battle of Savo Island, Pat.”

Moynihan cringed as he remembered his history class lessons and book reading about that 1942 battle off Guadalcanal, in the Pacific. Then, a superior Allied flotilla of cruisers and destroyers had made the mistake of underestimating the Japanese Navy’s abilities in night battle, on top of using outdated and ineffective tactics and battle procedures. As a result, the Allies had lost four cruisers sunk, plus another cruiser and two destroyers seriously damaged, while the Japanese had three cruisers damaged to various degrees. The Japanese had lost 129 men killed in action, while the Allied losses totaled a stinging 1,077 men killed. Rear Admiral Lyman had already made enough mistakes tonight, with his sailors paying the price for those mistakes, but Moynihan was confident that Captain Chandlers would not repeat them, as he was well known as a first-class naval tactician.

07:34 (Mediterranean Time)

Thursday, November 14, 1996 'C'

Bridge of the American nuclear-propelled cruiser U.S.S. MONTANA

Sailing east towards the coast of Syria, Eastern Mediterranean.

"A message from the SOUTH CAROLINA, sir."

"Thank you!" said Captain Chandlers as he took the message form carried by a petty officer. The message in question was a short one, but its content made Chandlers tighten his jaws at once: over 2,000 men were missing from the crew of the CONSTELLATION after it had sunk some three hours ago, while another 461 more crewmembers on the other ships of Task Group 61.2 hit by Russian missiles or torpedoes were either dead or wounded. Barely four minutes later, he was given another message, with 'Top Secret' classification and 'Immediate' priority, sent by the Pentagon to all American ships, units and bases around the World. Its content was definitely to his taste and he grabbed the ship's intercom's microphone and set it on 'ship wide address' before speaking in it, reading the paragraphs which were less highly classified.

"Attention all hands! This is your Captain speaking! We just got a message from the President, via the Pentagon: our forces are to hunt down and destroy every Russian warship and submarine which will be found, even if they are simply fleeing. The Russian Navy is to be erased from the World's oceans for its attempt at destroying the United States with thousands of nuclear-tipped missiles fired from within our coastal waters. Thankfully, none of those missiles were able to pass through our anti-missile defenses and no nuclear blast occurred within the continental United States proper. We are now to make sure that no such attack could ever be attempted again against our country. In about two hours, we are due to intercept a Russian destroyer which had been part of the group that attacked and sank the carrier CONSTELLATION. Unless it surrenders to us, I intend to sink it as soon as it will be within range of our weapons. After that, we will go pay a visit to the Syrian port of Tartus, where we will destroy the Russian Navy base located there. That is all!"

As Chandlers hooked back the microphone, he was able to hear cheers from other parts of his cruiser, something that made a mean smile appear on his lips.

"The crew is out for blood: good!"

09:28 (Mediterranean Time)**C.I.C. of the U.S.S. MONTANA****At battle stations and sailing at slow speed**

"Sir, we have the SOVREMENNY in sight on both our I.R.S.T.¹⁹ and our ESM²⁰ detectors. It is now at Heading 261, approximate distance of twenty miles."

"Good! Gunnery Officer, our five-inch guns will start firing terminally-guided shells as soon as we can establish a more solid distance appreciation to the enemy. Sonar Officer, ping once our long-range sonar to establish the distance to the target. Let's make it believe that an American submarine is hunting him."

"Aye, Captain! Pinging once now!"

The whole 10,000-ton cruiser reverberated when the powerful sound wave was blasted out of its bow-mounted low-frequency active-passive sonar. A few seconds later, the sonar officer spoke up.

"Range to target: 19.3 nautical miles, Captain."

"Excellent! Gunnery Officer, program a terminal guidance basket area centered at a distance of nineteen nautical miles and at heading 261. Fire when ready!"

Some six seconds later, the gunnery officer spoke back, having entered the trajectory parameters for his terminally-guided shells.

"Opening fire now!"

At the pressing of a button, all four double 127mm gun turrets of the MONTANA, erupted in unison, sending eight shells westward. Those shells, targeting an area of the sea some nineteen miles away, flew at first on purely ballistic trajectories, with their internal inertial/GPS guidance systems tracking their actual positions. Once some three nautical miles away from the designated target zone, the millimetric radar seekers in the nose of the shells took over as the projectiles dived down towards their target zone. With the SOVREMENNY destroyer being the only ship occupying that area, all eight shells started correcting their trajectories with the help of small canard surfaces near their nose. Diving down on the Russian destroyer at a speed close to Mach 2.5, they gave

¹⁹ I.R.S.T. : Infra-Red Search and Track system. A totally passive detector that scans the horizon around a ship and detects the infra-red signatures of approaching ships and aircraft.

²⁰ ESM : Electronic Search Measures. Part of an electronic warfare suite that passively detects the electronic emissions, both radio and radar, from other ships or aircraft.

very little time for the crew of the destroyer to react. All eight projectiles slammed into the unfortunate Russian ship and penetrated deep inside its hull before exploding. Then, three seconds later, eight more 127mm shells hit the Russian ship and exploded, followed three seconds later by a third salvo of shells. Out of the 24 guided-shells fired by the MONTANA, 23 made direct hits on the SOVREMENNY-Class destroyer, while one shell barely missed the ship but detonated in the water near its hull, caving in a few hull plates and creating a severe water intake. The Russian destroyer was already combat-ineffective before it could fire a single shell or missile in self-defense. With its machinery spaces gutted by the shells' explosions and with power cut out all over the ship, the destroyer's crew did its best to combat the damage and save its ship but that fight was already a losing one. With multiple fires and water intakes, the Russian ship started sinking by the bow as the surviving bridge crew at last spotted the sinister gray silhouette of the MONTANA on the horizon. The most senior surviving officer, realizing that his situation was hopeless, then gave the only order that still made sense.

"TO ALL CREW! ABANDON SHIP! I SAY AGAIN, ABANDON SHIP!"

However, with all the motor boats of the destroyer destroyed by American shells, the surviving Russian sailors were left only with inflatable rafts to use, with many sailors having to simply don a life vest before jumping into the sea. Those survivors, expecting their attacker to come and pluck them out of the water, were then shocked to see the American cruiser instead accelerate away towards the East and the Syrian coast, leaving them alone at the surface of the sea.

CHAPTER 9 – AFTERMATH OF A WAR



The Situation Room in the White House, Washington, D.C.

14:20 (Washington Time)

Thursday, November 14, 1996 'C'

Situation Room, The White House

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

"You look tired, General." Said President Perot after a first look at Ingrid after arriving in the underground Situation Room of the White House. Ingrid made a weak smile as she responded to his remark.

"Because I am tired, Mister President. I have been surviving on twenty minutes power naps for four days now, using a cot I set up in a secondary office of the NC4. I just couldn't leave the NC4 with all that was happening. Thankfully, it seems that we were able to take the wind out of those Russians. While our ships and aircraft are still continuing to hammer what is left of the Russian war machine, it is already down to a state where they can't no longer strike directly at our country. May I ask what our various allies and the other powers around the World think of our actions, Mister President?"

Perot nodded his head slowly at her question: apart from reassuring the American public and keeping it informed about the main events of the war via nightly televised addresses, staying in contact with allied nations and other governments in order to gain, if not their military support, at least their sympathy towards the United States, had been one of his biggest worries during the last four days.

“I can’t say that none of our allies disappointed me to various degrees but they all agreed that we acted purely in self-defense. As for other governments around the planet, some of the usual puppets and stooges for the Russians clamored that we had set up a false Russian attack in order to justify our strikes on the Russians but the more moderate countries around them quickly told them to piss off. Overall, only a tiny minority of hypocrites and loudmouths are still criticizing our actions but even their own citizens are not buying their B.S.”

“I am sure that we will remember who was on which side, Mister President.”

“Oh, you can be sure of that, Ingrid. Well, everybody seems to be here, so let us sit down and start this show.”

With both Perot and Ingrid taking their places around the long conference table of the Situation Room, Perot then looked somberly around him, eyeing the expressions on the faces of his cabinet members and various advisers, both military and civilian ones.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Now that the threat of a Russian nuclear strike has faded, we are finally able to hold a meeting together in Washington. I will now let General Dows brief us on the outcome of this most brutal war.”

While staying in her seat, Ingrid used the control panel of her station to start projecting large color pictures showing various tactical situations, mostly around and close to the continental United States.

“Mister President, ladies and gentlemen, everything started during the afternoon of last Sunday, when one of our imagery analysts at the National Reconnaissance Office alerted the NC4 at the Pentagon about an anomaly concerning Russian submarine bases. When we flew new orbital reconnaissance missions, we found out that this analyst had been correct and that 131 Russian nuclear submarines which were supposedly in port at the time were in fact out at sea, with inflatable dummies taking their places at quay. Allied with the fact that most of the diesel submarines and patrol ships of the Russian Navy were also at sea at the time, supposedly conducting anti-submarine exercises along the Russian coast, that could mean for me only one thing: the Russians

meant to conduct a surprise nuclear strike against the United States, with their nuclear submarines possibly planning to fire their missiles from very close to our coasts, in order to maximize surprise and prevent our defenses from reacting in time to them. From documents we recently found on a captured Russian warship, we now know that their surprise strike was due to be launched at midnight on Sunday night. However, the warning given to us by that N.R.O. imagery analyst made me ask permission from the President to go to DEFCON TWO and to activate our defensive plan MEGIDDO FOUR, which is meant to counter a surprise nuclear strike made by submarines close to our coasts. Basically, that plan called for an immediate and massive anti-submarine sweep of our coastal waters, in order to find any enemy submarine close to the continental United States, and for the immediate activation of our anti-missile defense batteries. Well, less than two hours after the alert was given one of our frigates, the U.S.S. NANTUCKET, found a Russian VICTOR-Class nuclear submarine lying on the bottom, less than twelve nautical miles from the entrance of Portsmouth Harbor, and then sank it. A mere ten minutes after that, an AKULA nuclear attack submarine was found near Boston Harbor but the frigate that found it was torpedoed at the same time as it destroyed the AKULA. By the way, those of you who think that Russian submarines are junk are dead wrong: most of their nuclear submarines are formidable beasts with performances in speed and deep dive capabilities often superior to that of our own submarines. The AKULA proved to be a dangerous opponent for our frigate and other Russian submarines proved that day that they were no pushovers. What followed in the hours after those two encounters can only be described as a mad waltz of ships and aircraft buzzing around our coastal waters and engaging Russian submarines as they were being found. What helped us tremendously in that phase of the war is that the H-Hour fixed by the Kremlin for the launch of their submarine-based missiles was set for some seven hours after we started finding their submarines. With those submarines being at depth and out of radio contact, they were not able to alert Moscow to the fact that we were hunting them down, something that allowed us to find and destroy many of those submarines before they could launch their missiles. The missiles which were launched, typically from less than a hundred nautical miles from our coasts, were thankfully all intercepted and destroyed by our NIKE-SPRINT anti-missile batteries. If not for those NIKE-SPRINT missiles, our country would have suffered a minimum of 400 nuclear strikes against our military bases, industrial centers and main cities.”

Ingrid then paused for a moment in order to let that sink into the minds of the other participants. At the same time, she made a slide appear on one of the viewing screens, which showed a map of the United States on which hundreds of orange dots were visible.

“Ladies and gentlemen, each of the orange dots you now see on that map represent the targets those Russian missiles would have nuked if not for the great work of our anti-missile batteries. In such a case, our casualties would have been in the tens of millions.”

A wave of horrified exclamations and remarks went up around the table as the cabinet members and advisors looked at the map. After letting that map up for a good ten seconds, Ingrid then replaced it with another map, this one of Russia, on which a number of military installations were marked.

“This map of Russia shows the various ICBM and strategic bomber bases around that country, along with the main naval bases of the North Fleet, Baltic Fleet, Black Sea Fleet and Pacific Fleet. While our navy was hunting down the Russian submarines located around our coasts, our own strategic bombers and orbital spaceplanes put into effect another aspect of our MEGIDDO FOUR defense plan, which was meant to prevent Russian nuclear-tipped missiles and heavy bombers from launching strikes against the United States directly from Russia. That phase of our plan was actually the only one calling for the use of nuclear weapons against Russia, but we intentionally used warheads sets at their lowest yields. In this, we had complete success in eliminating every ground-based Russian ICBM and destroying on the ground all their heavy bombers. By the way, those bombers were found lined up and ready to fly off just as our own bombers struck them. If we had not discovered their attempt at launching a surprise nuclear strike on us, then our country would now be reduced to a vast field of radioactive dust and debris.”

“But why?” asked in an angry tone Daniel Inouye, the Secretary of State. “Why did the Russians decide to attack us like this, General?”

Ingrid looked at Inouye with a grave expression as she answered him.

“The Russians did not want to attack us, Secretary Inouye: only a handful of power-drunk psychopaths sitting in the Kremlin did. That fact is the main reason I decided to limit to the strict minimum the use of nuclear weapons against Russian territory. Those Kremlin leaders had been chafing for years about the way we were countering their various plans to expand their powers at the expense of many others.

Those same leaders also played a hidden role in the recent terrorist attacks against civilian airliners, hoping that those terrorist attacks would confuse us and keep our attention concentrated on the wrong regions. While we have by now mostly won this war and are presently cleaning up our secondary objectives, I will not consider this war finished until those Kremlin bastards will have paid for their crimes.”

Perot nodded his head at those words.

“I also want those psychopaths to pay, General. Thus, I am ordering now that the CIA and the NSA concentrate their efforts and assets in locating President Yurchenko and his clique. Once his precise location becomes known to us, we will then make him pay the ultimate price for his monstrous attack against us.”

“We will find him, Mister President, sooner or later: he can’t stay in hiding very long if he still wants to give orders around.”

It was then the turn of John McCain, the Secretary of Defense, to ask a question to Ingrid.

“And how much did this victory on the Russians cost us to date, Ingrid?”

“Too much!” she replied at once. “Up to now, we have lost once carrier sunk, the CONSTELLATION, and three more carriers damaged to significant degrees after our carrier groups at sea were attacked by packs of Russian nuclear submarines guided in by Russian surface warships. We also lost seven frigates and destroyers and one cruiser sunk, plus another thirteen frigates and destroyers damaged, while three of our cruisers suffered some damage. We also lost two heavy bombers shot down while over Russia’s territory. As for our human casualties, they amount to 3,760 dead and 4,925 wounded. As I said before, those Russian submarines were no pushovers. I am sorry to say this, but we will probably suffer some more casualties in the days to come. Considering what could have happened if the Russians had achieved surprise for their nuclear attacks, then we can thank our luck for having suffered so few casualties so far.”

“All that thanks to the good work of a single N.R.O. imagery analyst who caught up on the Russians’ trickery about their nuclear submarines.” said John McCain. “We definitely owe a big debt to that analyst. Do you know his name, Ingrid?”

“Yes, I do! That analyst’s name is Rhonda Shaefer, of the naval section of the N.R.O.”

McCain took the time to write down that information before looking back at Ingrid.

“So, what is left to finish before you consider our job fully completed, Ingrid?”

“The last phase of defensive plan MEGIDDO FOUR calls for the destruction of the various industrial plants providing military equipment and weapons to the Russian forces, plus the various military depots located within Russia. Our ultimate goal is to defang for good the Russian military, so that it could never again rise to become a threat to us. This latest Russian provocation was truly the last straw.”

“Agreed!” said in a firm tone President Perot. “I will make personally sure that all the other governments on Earth understand that we acted in self-defense and that we will not accept any hypocritical criticism of our actions. Any attempts at trying to excuse the actions of the Russians will be viewed by me as a demonstration of belligerence towards the United States which will then attract American economic and political sanctions on those said governments. Enough about fair-weather friends!”

Everybody around the conference table, including Ingrid, nodded their heads at that declaration by the President.

06:49 (Washington Time)

Saturday, November 16, 1996 ‘C’

NC4 Operations Center, The Pentagon

Arlington, Virginia

Ingrid had walked into the NC4 Operations Center only minutes ago and was barely starting to sip on a cup of hot coffee when a watch officer assigned to the public media news channels let out a strangled shout of surprise.

“What the... GENERAL, YOU BETTER COME LOOK AT THIS!”

Hurrying to the media news channels desk with her cup of coffee, Ingrid then put on the headset presented by the watch officer as he quickly explained to her what was happening.

“This is broadcasted by the BBC but is actually a video produced by the Russian Army High Command and then sent to the BBC. It supposedly shows Russian soldiers taking down President Yurchenko in one of his isolated and fortified residences in the Urals.”

Putting down her cup of coffee, Ingrid then watched and listened to the video showing a large group of Russian soldiers assaulting a compound situated in the middle of a heavily forested and hilly region. Thirty or so armed men, most probably members of Yurchenko’s bodyguard force, tried to repel that assault but were quickly overwhelmed,

utterly swept aside by the tanks and armored personnel carriers of the assault force, which also copiously hosed down the buildings of the compound with tank gun and heavy machine gun fire. The image soon switched to that of a portable video camera whose carrier was following closely soldiers charging inside the main building. The few presidential bodyguards those soldiers encountered tried to surrender but were gunned down on the spot with the ruthlessness typical of the Russian Army.

“Please tell me that we are recording this, Major!”

“We are, General!”

Ingrid then concentrated back on the video, which had visibly been edited to cut out the less interesting parts. The next scene showed President Yurchenko and four of his closest collaborators, pleading for their lives in what appeared to be some underground command room. Their pleas were however met with a massive volley of automatic rifle fire which cut down and shredded the five autocrats. That scene was greeted in the NC4 with collective cheers which included Ingrid’s own cheers. A Russian general was then filmed as he stepped forward and delivered the coup-de-grace to Yurchenko before facing the camera and speaking at it.

“Russian compatriots and comrades, the warmonger is now dead! I, General Alexei Vladimirov, Commander of the Russian Army, urge all Russian forces to stand down and stop any offensive operations, so that Mother Russia can be spared more blows from the American forces. To the government of the United States, I am asking for an immediate armistice, so that the killings could stop. I will now represent Russia for the time being, until truly democratic elections could choose a more responsible government.”

The watch officer, still shocked by this, looked at Ingrid.

“Can we really thrust this General Vladimirov, General?”

“I am not sure yet, but this is an opportunity that we can’t miss.”

Ingrid then looked around her while shouting as loud as she could.

“ATTENTION TO ALL! TRANSMIT IMMEDIATELY THE FOLLOWING TO ALL OF OUR UNITS, SHIPS AND AIRCRAFT IN FLIGHT: AN IMMEDIATE CEASEFIRE IS NOW IN EFFECT! STOP ALL OFFENSIVE OPERATIONS AND RESTRICT YOURSELVES TO ONLY SELF-DEFENSE MEASURES UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.”

Nearly overwhelmed by the emotions from this historic moment, Ingrid sat down on the nearest chair and let out a deep sigh of relief.

“An end to this war, at last!”

17:10 (Washington Time)
Sunday, November 17, 1996 'C'
The Dows' residence, Aurora Hills
Arlington, Virginia

Ingrid closed her eyes for a moment, savoring the moment, after stepping into her house after a week spent at the Pentagon.

"Home, sweet home!"

Joyous shouts then made her open her eyes, in time to see her three children, Nancy, Lucy and Leonardo run to her from the living room. With joy filling her, Ingrid met them with open arms to share a collective hug and a shower of kisses. The first to speak then was Lucy, tears in her eyes.

"We missed you so much during those terrifying days, Mom. Now that martial law has been terminated and public travel allowed again, we decided to wait for you here."

"You are a true national hero, Mom." added Leonardo. "Your leadership and military genius saved our nation from a terrible fate."

"Well, that national hero is presently in dire need of a long, hot shower, followed by a long night of sleep."

"Then, let us help you with your shower, Mom." said gently Nancy. "Leo and Lucy will then give you a nice massage to chase away all that stress you lived through, while I will cook schnitzel mitt spätzle²¹ for your supper."

Ingrid's smile widened to a grin at the mention of her favorite dish.

"Now you are talking! I'm all yours, kids!"

Leo and Nancy joined their strengths to grab Ingrid in their arms and then proceeded in bringing her up the main staircase, towards Ingrid's private bathroom, while giggling.

²¹ Schnitzel mitt spätzle : German recipe of fried veal in batter with buttered noodles. Very popular in Germany.

CHAPTER 10 – NO GOOD DEED GOES UNPUNISHED



Nancy Dows, wondering about the vagaries of human life.

03:09 (Washington Time)

Friday, December 20, 1996 'C'

Bethesda Naval Hospital, Maryland

U.S.A.

Lieutenant (Navy) Denise Warren, a senior nurse at the Bethesda Naval Hospital, was doing a night round of the wards of the hospital, making sure that the patients were asleep and not in pain. Due to the war that had recently been fought against Russia, the hospital was full, with over 1,600 patients being cared for, many of them in critical conditions or having been amputated of at least one limb. The ones that made Denise most sorrowful were however the burn victims, whose suffering was both atrocious and relentless. Denise was in fact heading towards the burns section, where

the nurses of that department had been swamped for weeks now and desperately needed help.

Leaving the main hallway and entering the burns unit, Denise abruptly stopped, while indignation filled her: the nurse at the duty station was apparently asleep, slouched over her reception desk. Walking quickly to the duty station, Denise then shook the nurse none too gently but restrained the level of her voice, in order not to wake the patients.

“Come on, Wierman, wake up! I said wake up!”

When she got no reaction from the nurse, Denise started to get suspicious and checked her pulse and breathing. Thankfully, Ensign Wierman proved to be alive but unconscious. Denise’s first thought was to call the security section but she decided to wait before doing that: the raucous that would create would surely wake all the patients in this department and maybe in the rest of the hospital. Grabbing one of the flashlights resting on the duty desk, Denise firmly held it while starting to inspect the various patients’ rooms of the burns section. Apart from providing her with an extra source of light if needed, the flashlight was both long and of sturdy construction, thus could be used as a bludgeon if she ever faced an intruder.

As Denise was about to enter a large ward reserved for female patients, she saw a white silhouette standing inside the ward. Her heart accelerating and becoming ready to use her pocket radio, she cautiously and silently approached the glass door of the ward and looked at the person standing in the alley running between the two opposite rows of beds. That was when the intruder slowly turned around and looked calmly at Denise. That intruder was definitely a woman, and a tall one, but her accoutrement surprised and confused Denise: the intruder wore a white and gold full-face mask, a long white gown and a pair of white gloves. Furthermore, the mask appeared to be a rather fancy one, with golden engravings of the kind Denise had seen once at a carnival party in Venice, Italy. Then, the intruder spoke in a soft voice.

“Don’t worry, Nurse: I came to help.”

Before Denise could reply to that, the intruder raised both hands high in the air and her body started shining brightly from the inside. Within a couple of seconds, the intruder had become so bright that Denise could not look at her directly. Then, a silent explosion of white light erupted from the intruder’s body, going through the walls without causing

any damage or noise. The brightness went on for nearly twenty seconds before it diminished in intensity, finally allowing an utterly confuse Denise to look again at the intruder. The masked woman was still looking calmly at her and spoke for the second time.

“All is well here now. Those brave men and women will now be able again to enjoy life free of pain and disabilities.”

Before Denise could ask her what she meant by that, the intruder simply vanished from where she stood, like a ghost would. Entering at last the ward, Denise Warren cautiously approached the spot where the intruder had been, her flashlight switched on. Movement to her left then made Denise swiftly pivot on her heels, her heart accelerating. What she saw in the light cone of her flashlight was one of the female patients, a sailor she had helped care for yesterday, sitting in her bed and swinging out her legs. That patient, apparently blinded by Denise’s flashlight, raised one arm to shield her eyes and spoke, some irritation in her voice.

“Hey, could you lower that damn flashlight? You are blinding me!”

“But, but you were supposed to be under heavy sedation because of your burns, miss. You should stay in bed.”

“Why? I feel perfectly fine right now.”

Walking quickly to the sailor’s bed, Denise did a cursory examination of her body, which had been burned on over forty percent of its surface. Her eyes bulged when she found that there were no traces left of those burns on the female sailor. More movement around her then made her look around the ward. What she saw made her hair stand on her head: all the patients were now awake and coming out of their beds, apparently feeling fine. That was when Denise grabbed her radio microphone and nearly shouted in it.

“SECURITY, THIS IS LIEUTENANT WARREN! SOMETHING INCREDIBLE JUST HAPPENED IN THE BURNS SECTION. I ALSO SAW A FEMALE INTRUDER, MASKED AND DRESSED IN A WHITE ROBE. SHE IS NOW GONE! SEND HELP HERE ON THE DOUBLE!”

03:56 (Washington Time)

Hospital security section

Bethesda Naval Hospital

Major Frank Kelso, the head of the Marine security detachment of the hospital, looked up from the notepad in which he had been writing down the answers from Denise Warren to his questions, incredulity showing on his face.

"That's a rather fantastic story, Lieutenant Warren. Are you sure that's what you saw?"

"Yes!" shot back Denise, exasperated at having to repeat herself constantly. "You saw like me what happened in that ward...and in the rest of the hospital. We now have over 1,600 patients who have been miraculously healed of their wounds in an instant, most probably by that explosion of silent white light from that female intruder. Hell, those who had been amputated even regrew their missing limbs! What else but a pure miracle could this be?"

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant, but I don't work on the basis of miracles."

"Maybe you should, Major Kelso." interjected Rear Admiral Charles Latimer, Chief-Surgeon of the Bethesda Naval Hospital, who was watching Denise's interview. Kelso looked at Latimer as if he was crazy.

"I should, sir? Why?"

"For two reasons, Major: first, only a true miracle could explain the instant and complete healing of all of our patients. Second, such a miracle has happened in the past. Don't you remember what happened in September of last year, when a woman appeared in the Mount Sinai West Hospital, in New York, and generated a silent burst of white light that covered the whole of New York City, instantly healing every disease and wounds in a radius of many miles?"

"I remember that too, sir!" said excitedly Denise. "So, that woman I saw was the same angel who did the mass healing in New York?"

"I believe so, Lieutenant."

"An angel, sir?" said Kelso. "And how the hell are we to find her?"

"Oh, I believe that finding her should be simple enough, Major: a simple phone call to the Pentagon should do the trick."

"We have an angel in the Pentagon, Admiral?" asked Kelso, completely confused by now. Latimer threw an annoyed look at him, becoming exasperated by his obtuseness.

"No, but her mother works there. Right now, I will ask you to close your inquiry on this and classify it as a closed case. I will deal with it from here on. Come with me, Lieutenant Warren."

Denise was too happy to get away from Major Kelso and followed her rear admiral out of the security section. As they walked together, Latimer spoke to her in a low voice.

"Lieutenant, the intruder you saw earlier this morning was the daughter of General of the Army Ingrid Dows. That girl is actually half-Human, half-Angel, something she publicly revealed during a televised interview on CNN made in New York last March, after she flew down by herself in Chinatown and pushed back by her mental powers a large crowd of racist rioters who were attacking the Chinese residents there."

"I remember that, now. Wow! That young Dows deserves our eternal gratitude for what she did here this morning."

"She indeed does. She also did us another big favor at the same time."

"Oh? What would that be, sir?"

"Well, our staff has been working day and night without relief for nearly five weeks now and was despairing about being able to go spend at least Christmas with their families. Now, with all our patients fully healed, I will finally be able to send our staff on some well-deserved leave."

08:14 (New York Time)

Thursday, December 26, 1996 'C'

Pediatric Department, Hudson County Hospital

Bayonne, New Jersey

Harold Miller, the CEO of the Hudson County Hospital Board of Administration, became more and more furious as he toured the now empty wards and private rooms of his hospital. In contrast, the doctors and nurses in his employ all looked happy or even ecstatic, something that only made Miller angrier. His hospital was now the ninth one in the past six days along the East Coast to have been visited by the now celebrated 'White Angel' and, while that female angel was being praised by about everybody in the country, he saw things in a much different way...the financial way. Empty wards and patients' rooms meant zero revenues for his establishment, something he was most unhappy about. Charging back to his luxurious office in the hospital's administrative wing, he grabbed his telephone receiver and composed the number of the leading lawyer representing the hospital, Paul Magnuson. Magnuson was very good at deflecting or shooting down the numerous lawsuits raised against the hospital for grossly

overpriced medical bills during the last couple of years. The lawyer, still at his home at this hour on the day after Christmas, answered after three rings.

"Hello?"

"Paul, this is Harold Miller. I am at my office in the Hudson County Hospital and I need your legal services, badly!"

Miller then took a minute to explain to Magnuson what had happened at the hospital during the previous night. The lawyer sounded a bit hesitant when he spoke after Miller's explanation.

"And how do I fit into all this, Harold?"

"Don't you see? That 'White Angel' bitch just emptied my wards and robbed us of millions of dollars in revenues we were expecting from the patients we were treating. If we let that bitch free to do it again, it could bankrupt us. You know how unstable our financial situation is. I want you to launch a civil suit against that 'White Angel' that will convince that bitch to stay away from my hospital. What? You don't sound too hot about that."

"Uh, have you considered the bad press such a lawsuit could create against us, Harold?"

Miller, already in a bad mood, then exploded.

"Look, Harold! We pay you big bucks to work for us, so we expect you to do your work to the best of your abilities. I am sure that you can find articles of law that could be used to put down that young bitch. And don't pretend not to know who she is: the whole East Coast knows about her these days."

There was a moment of silence at the other end of the line before Magnuson replied to Miller, clearly sounding reluctant.

"Alright, I will do it but don't be surprised if this ends up blowing in our faces."

The lawyer then hung up, letting Miller put down his own receiver, a mean smile on his face.

"There is nothing like a big lawsuit to cool down misguided activists. I wonder if some leftist movement is funding her."

19:22 (New York Time)

Wednesday, January 8, 1997 'C'

Apartment # 4, 607 West 51st Street

Hell's Kitchen District, Manhattan, New York City

Nancy was finishing her supper with Lucy and Erika when the main entrance door's buzzer was heard. Nancy frowned on hearing it, as paparazzi and press reporters had become a true pest lately, thanks to her nightly visits and mass healings in various hospitals, which had been her way to spread Christmas cheer around. Sighing to herself, she got up and walked to her apartment's intercom box, which had a small camera screen. Looking in the screen, she saw a young man wearing a business suit and waiting patiently for an answer.

"Hum, doesn't look like a paparazzi to me."

She then pressed the 'speak' button of the intercom.

"Yes? What could I do for you, mister?"

"Am I speaking with Miss Nancy Dows?"

"Yes!"

"Miss Dows, I came to personally deliver into your hands a letter in your name."

"A letter? What kind of letter?"

"A legal letter. May I come up to your door, miss?"

"Uh, of course! Come in!" replied Nancy while pressing the 'opening' button of her intercom panel. Once she saw that the man was in, she went to her entrance door and unlocked it, cracking it open a bit to be able to see the staircase. The man, who was in his late twenties and appeared to be in good physical shape, soon showed up at her door after running up the stairs. Still a bit suspicious, Nancy opened wide her door but stayed alert and ready in case this was an attempt at killing her. The man however stayed polite and simply presented her a white envelope he took out of an inner pocket of his suit's jacket.

"Miss Nancy Dows?"

"That's me!"

"Miss, I am now presenting you this legal summon in your name."

Nancy took the envelope and briefly examined it before looking back at the young man.

"A legal summon? For what?"

The man, who didn't seem to enjoy the least his job, answered her in a sober tone.

"The Hudson County Hospital Board of Administration is suing you for illegal practice of medicine, illegal entry into its hospital and interfering with legal medical treatment. Please don't think that I am enjoying this, but I am simply doing my job. Could you sign this receipt, please?"

Quite flabbergasted by this, Nancy signed the receipt form presented to her along with a pen. The man then bowed his head to her.

"Have a good evening, miss."

The man then left, with Nancy still in her entrance door and looking at the envelope in her hands. She finally closed and locked her door and slowly returned to her dining table, where Lucy looked questioningly at her.

"What was this all about, Nancy?"

"I am being sued by a hospital." replied Nancy before opening the envelope and extracting from it a folded two-page document. Its reading brought a bitter expression on her face.

"I am sued for ten million dollars by the Hudson County Hospital Administration Board, for illegal practice of medicine, illegal entry and interfering with legal medical treatment."

"TEN MILLION DOLLARS!? AFTER YOU HEALED ALL THESE POOR PEOPLE?" nearly shouted Erika Lang, outraged by this. Nancy slowly nodded her head at that.

"Apparently, that hospital cares more about its revenues than about its patients. This summon actually gives me a date to appear in court in New Jersey, to present a plea in front of a judge."

"Give me that piece of trash!" said Lucy, who took the document from Nancy and then read it. At the end of her reading, Lucy rolled her eyes and swore to herself.

"Fuck! Do people have any sense of charity and care left in them? They are suing an angel, you, for healing babies and young children? Their lawsuit is bound to be rejected outright by the courts."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that, Lucy." Replied Erika. "I heard about many previous lawsuits which were about as outrageous as this one and which succeeded in court. Nancy better take this thing seriously and get a lawyer to defend herself."

"But I don't want to spend my money on lawyers! I want to spend what I have to support the band and also support my charitable projects, like the Windermere Community Home Project."

"I know." said softly Lucy while patting her sister-by-adoption's hand. "Why don't we call Mother and get her opinion about this?"

"A good idea! Let's call her right now!"

The three young women then moved to the main sofa of their living room, with Nancy using the telephone there to call her mother in Arlington. To her relief, Ingrid was at home and took the call on the second ring.

"Ingrid Dows speaking!"

"Mom, something awful just happened. A legal summon has just been delivered to me: the Hudson County Hospital is suing me for ten million dollars for having healed its patients overnight."

Nancy then spoke for a couple of minutes, reading portions of her summon and describing what she had done at that hospital. At the end, Ingrid stayed silent for a few seconds while weighing that information.

"Look, don't worry about this for the moment and concentrate on your studies and on your charitable work. I will take care of finding a good lawyer to defend you."

"But lawyers are very costly, Mom, and I don't have tons of money for that."

"You won't need to pay a dime yourself, Nancy. Like I said, I will take care of this. Once I find a suitable lawyer, I will put him or her in contact with you. In the meantime, don't worry about this. Do you understand me, Nancy?"

"Yes, I do! Thank you so much for this, Mom: I may be a half-angel but I am a big zero when it comes to this law stuff."

"I know: law is a very tricky business these days. Now, relax and have a good evening, my sweet Nancy."

Ingrid then hung up, leaving Nancy to also slowly hang up before looking at Lucy and Erika.

"Ingrid is going to take care of finding a lawyer for me and promised me that I won't have to spend a dime on this."

"That's what good parents are for, Nancy." said Lucy in an approving tone.

09:50 (New York Time)

Tuesday, March 17, 1997 'C'

Civil cases courtroom, Superior Court Division

William Brennan Courthouse

583 Newark Avenue, Jersey City, New Jersey

"No need to be nervous, Miss Dows: we are here today to simply register a plea." said in a reassuring tone Joshua Stein, the attorney whom Ingrid had found to defend Nancy. The latter nodded her head but didn't seem much reassured by his words.

"I know, Mister Stein, but this is my first time in a court of law and any possible criminal record could really hurt my future as an artist."

"First off, this is a civilian lawsuit case, not a criminal case, miss. Second, your reputation is in no way in danger, on the contrary. It is the Hudson County Hospital that is looking bad here, not you. In fact, I believe that the whole country is yearning for you right now."

"You really believe that, Mister Stein?"

"Of course I do, Miss Dows! You are an angel and you were simply performing a miracle and an act of compassion, the way only angels can."

"Oh, okay!"

Stein gently smiled to this young, most beautiful but also most modest girl he was defending. Even more than for his young client, Stein considered this court case a truly important one. Nancy Dows had never proclaimed to be an angel sent by Yahweh, the God of the Hebraic faith, but any angel holding divine powers of the kind his client had repeatedly demonstrated in the past and who had performed numerous mass healings would and did get the total admiration and respect of Joshua, who was a practicing Jew. As both sat at the defendant's table, Joshua gave Nancy a few last-minute instructions.

"Remember, miss: you are to speak only if asked to by either the judge, the court clerk, the prosecuting attorney or me. Also, when talking to the judge, call her 'Your Honor' and not 'Miss' or 'Misses'."

"Got it! About the judge, do you know what kind of person she is?"

"Judge Emma Kitzinger is a very experienced and fair judge with a good heart. We couldn't get much better than her to judge our case."

More reassured now, Nancy looked around the courtroom, in which only a dozen spectators sat, including two reporters.

"I was expecting more people to be present here today, Mister Stein. How come there are so few spectators?"

"Because your case has not been publicized...yet. I did not want to see you getting harassed by an army of paparazzi, while the lawyer for the Hudson County Hospital had equal reasons to avoid publicity: this lawsuit was in my opinion a very bad

decision by the hospital's board and is liable to cause tremendous damage to the hospital's reputation, which is already not very good and is stained by many stories about grossly inflated medical bills given to its patients."

The duo then stayed silent for the next minutes, awaiting the arrival of the presiding judge. The court clerk finally got up from her chair as the judge, a slightly overweight woman in her fifties wearing glasses, entered the courtroom via a back door.

"ALL RISE FOR THE HONORABLE EMMA KITZINGER, JUDGE OF THE SUPERIOR COURT OF NEW JERSEY."

Nancy, like Stein and the other persons present in the courtroom, got up at once and watched Judge Kitzinger as she took her seat behind the court's bench. After laying down and organizing the files she had brought with her, Kitzinger looked around the courtroom, paying special attention to Nancy before speaking.

"The court clerk will now announce the case at hand."

The said clerk, a tall but thin woman in her forties, then read from a file in her hands.

"The court is now in session for Case Number 255871, the Hudson County Hospital versus Miss Nancy Dows. Miss Dows, please answer by a 'yes' or 'no' the following questions, meant to verify your identity. Is your name 'Nancy Dows'?"

"Yes!"

"Is your mother named Ingrid Dows?"

"Yes!"

"Is your date of birth November fourth of 19..."

The court clerk hesitated, then went to whisper to the judge, who in turn looked at Nancy.

"Miss Dows, the case file states your date of birth as being November fourth of 1982, which would mean that you are presently fourteen years old, thus are a minor. Is that date correct?"

"Yes, Your Honor! I was indeed born on that date, aboard the spaceship U.S.S. PROMETHEUS, which was at the time between Jupiter and Saturn. My mother was commanding that spaceship."

"But you look to be about eighteen, miss."

"I know, Your Honor, but that is due to what I am, a half-Human, half-Celestial being. As for being a minor, that is not really correct, Your Honor. While I am biologically fourteen years old, my mind harbors the souvenirs and experiences of past

lives dating back over 2,000 years. When I started a charitable work project involving the buying of a building in New York, I applied and obtained from the New York City family affairs court a special status declaring me to be legally considered as a mature adult citizen. I have a copy of that ruling with me if you need to see it, Your Honor.”

“Please provide that copy to the court clerk, Miss Dows.”

It was actually Joshua Stein who brought that copy to the court clerk, who in turn brought it to Judge Kitzinger so that she could read it. After reading carefully that document, the judge gave it back to the court clerk.

“That ruling indeed seems to be a legal one, albeit unusual. The court clerk will enter it as part of the court file. You will thus be treated as an adult for this case, Miss Dows.”

“Thank you, Your Honor.”

“You’re welcome, Miss Dows. The court clerk will now read the accusations brought against you by the board of the Hudson County Hospital.”

Getting up again, the female court clerk read from a document in her hands.

“The board of the Hudson County Hospital is seeking reparations for a sum of ten million dollars against Miss Nancy Dows, for illegal practice of medicine, illegal entry in the hospital and interfering with the work of the hospital’s staff.”

“How do you plea to these charges, Miss Dows?” asked the judge.

“Not guilty to all charges, Your Honor.”

“The court will thus enter your plea of ‘not guilty’ to these charges. I am setting the date of July 28 of this year, a Monday, as the trial date. The trial will start at nine in the morning. Is this trial date and time agreeable to both the defense and the prosecution?”

“Yes, Your Honor!” replied Joshua Stein, imitated a few seconds later by Paul Magnuson. Judge Kitzinger then banged her gavel once.

“Then, the trial for this case will start at nine in the morning of July 28 of this year. This court is now adjourned!”

As the spectators left the court after the departure of the judge, Joshua Stein went to speak with Paul Magnuson, whom he knew personally, while Nancy stayed a few steps back.

“Paul, I believe that your clients are making a dreadful mistake by suing my client: they risk badly staining the reputation of their hospital. You should tell them to

back off while they still can. I must warn you that I will be filing a countersuit for attempt at damaging the reputation of my client.”

Magnuson let out a sigh of frustration before replying to Stein.

“I already tried to convince my clients to drop this lawsuit, Joshua, but they refused. They want blood.”

“Well, they may get blood but it won’t be from my client, Paul. See you in July!”

Nancy and her lawyer then walked out of the courtroom, encountering in the hallway a few press photographers who took multiple pictures of Nancy while shouting questions. Stein answered for Nancy with ‘no comments’ before accompanying her out of the justice building.

08:46 (New York Time)

Monday, July 28, 1997 ‘C’

William Brennan Courthouse, 583 Newark Avenue

Jersey City, New Jersey

The atmosphere in the courtroom this morning was vastly different from the one in March, when Nancy had pleaded ‘not guilty’. For one, the room was packed, with an electrified atmosphere inside it. Also, an army of reporters, press photographers and paparazzi were besieging the courthouse, giving headaches to the municipal policemen guarding it. The court’s master at arms had also been obliged to select who could attend the trial, so great was the number of people who wanted to be in the courtroom. Joshua Stein watched who was led in as they waited for Judge Kitzinger to arrive. One man attracted his attention, making him whisper to Nancy, who was trying her best to hide her nervousness.

“See that older man in a blue-gray suit and blue tie, Nancy? That’s Saul Stefanick, a billionaire known for his charitable works. That he deemed important enough to watch this trial in person tells a lot about the publicity impact of this case.”

“Is that a positive thing for us, Mister Stein?”

“Indeed! Even if we lose, something I strongly doubt, Stefanick would be the kind of man to offer to pay the claimed damages for you.”

“Oh!” simply said Nancy, registering the billionaire’s face in her memory. She then saw another man enter the courtroom, a tall, impossibly handsome man in his thirties whose appearance made her suck air in, attracting the curiosity of her lawyer.

"What? Who is that man you are looking at with such an incredulous expression?"

"He is my father, Mister Stein."

"So?" replied Joshua, not getting it.

"So? My father is Michael the Archangel. He is a full-fledged Celestial who represents 'The One', the spiritual entity from whom I hold my powers."

Joshua, stunned into speechlessness, snapped his head around to look at Michael, who was approaching the first rows of seats in the courtroom. The newcomer then took a seat just behind that of Nancy and kissed her on the forehead.

"Don't worry, Nancy: you will not regret healing all of those poor people. The One is looking at you and he is very proud of what you did."

"Thank you for coming, Father. It means a lot to me. In fact, I would love it if you could visit me more often."

"I will do my best, my sweet daughter."

Joshua Stein, who had problems not starring at Michael, then saw another newcomer entering the courtroom that made his eyes bulge out.

"Nancy, your mother is here!"

Nancy looked towards the entrance to the courtroom and beamed with joy on seeing Ingrid, wearing a civilian female suit, coming towards her. Not able to restrain herself anymore, she nearly ran to Ingrid and exchanged a hug and kisses with her.

"Mom, thank you for coming! You can't know how much this means to me. Father is also here."

"I know: The One informed me of that yesterday. Don't worry about this trial: everything will be fine."

Now feeling much better, Nancy returned to her defendant's seat, while Ingrid sat next to Michael in the row behind Nancy's chair.

When Emma Kitzinger entered the courtroom, with the persons present being called to stand up for her entrance, she didn't miss the fact that the most celebrated general in American history was present in her courtroom. She however kept an impassive expression and sat down behind her bench before banging her gavel.

"This court is now in session. The court clerk will now read the accusations made by the prosecution against the defendant."

The court clerk did so, following which Kitzinger told Magnuson to present his case against Nancy. The lawyer actually looked a bit embarrassed as he started speaking.

“Your Honor, in the early morning hours of December 26 of last year, the accused illegally entered the Hudson County Hospital, then healed by some magical effect all 384 patients inside it. As a result, the medical work of the hospital’s staff was thrown into chaos. Also, with all its patients leaving the hospital in the next day, the Hudson County Hospital found itself without revenues for many days, resulting in millions of dollars lost and with its staff left without work. First, on the charge of illegal practice of medicine, it must be pointed out that the defendant holds no diplomas in medicine and is in fact presently studying music in New York. She thus had no qualifications or rights to treat the patients of the hospital. She also entered the hospital without the knowledge or consent of its staff, a fact that the defendant will have a hard time to deny. Finally, her acts severely interfered with the work of our medical staff, who had to reassess all the patients present that day in the hospital. I believe that those accusations are amply supported by the evidence provided to this court.”

Magnuson then took a bit over fifty minutes to present that so-called evidence, following which Judge Kitzinger looked at Joshua Stein.

“Mister Stein, you may now present your counter-arguments to the court.”

“Thank you, Your Honor!” said Stein before getting up from his chair. “I will start with the accusation of illegal practice of medicine. That accusation is actually completely irrelevant, as my client was not even pretending to practice medicine on December 26 of last year. She was instead performing a divine miracle as a half-Human, half-Celestial, with the goal of helping suffering souls. My client may not be a qualified medical doctor or even nurse, but she is an angel whose duties include that of helping those in need.” That declaration started a round of whispers and soft exclamations around the courtroom, forcing Kitzinger in banging her gavel.

“SILENCE IN THE COURTROOM! You may continue, Mister Stein.”

“Thank you, Your Honor! About the accusation of illegal entry into the grounds of the Hudson County Hospital, my client indeed cannot deny having entered the hospital, but she entered it as a visitor with good intentions, and not to commit some crime like stealing or hurting others, on the contrary. Her visit resulted in the instant healing of 384 souls, 86 of them being children, including 25 toddlers and twelve babies. Without her actions, many of those souls would have eventually died or ended up with permanent

disabilities. I thus strongly believe that the actions of my client fall under the protection of the 'Good Samaritan Rule'. As for the accusation of interfering with the medical treatment given by the hospital's staff, I would rather qualify her actions that night as 'helping with the medical treatment' of those patients. Finally, I surmise that this frivolous lawsuit was launched for a single reason: greed! In this case, the Hudson County Hospital never delved on the beneficial effects of my client's visit to that hospital, instead concentrating solely on the loss of revenues it suffered when all of its patients were healed by my client. I am convinced that this court will see this lawsuit for what it is and will award my client with a just compensation for this attempt at staining her reputation."

The judge stayed silent for a few seconds as Joshua sat back, then looked at Magnuson.

"Does the prosecution wish to respond?"

"I do, Your Honor! For one, I strongly object to the accusations of greed the defense just made against my clients. The defense threw these accusations without presenting any justification or evidence for making such accusations."

In response, Kitzinger looked back at Joshua Stein.

"Do you have facts that support your accusations of greed as a factor in this lawsuit, Mister Stein?"

"I certainly do, Your Honor."

Joshua, who had made his homework concerning this case, then took a file and brought it to the court clerk, who in turn brought it to the judge.

"Your Honor, I would like to enter as evidence the three documents in this file, each of which document a medical bill handed to patients of the Hudson County Hospital in the past months and which can only be qualified as 'outrageous' in terms of the amount requested for the said treatments. The first medical bill concerns the treatment given to a patient who had cut one of his fingers. That treatment was limited to disinfecting that wound and then applying a bandage to it before the patient was discharged. In return, that patient received a medical bill totaling 5,600 dollars."

Even Kitzinger was stunned by that amount, as outraged whispers went around the courtroom. Stein then added to that first argument, further hammering down his nail.

"The second bill concerns a patient who had suffered a two-inch shallow cut to the abdomen from a boxcutter blade. The hospital made six stitches to close that cut, with the patient leaving the hospital the same day. However, that same patient then

latter received a medical bill for 12,000 dollars for that cut. The third bill concerns another cut finger, which cost the patient 7,000 dollars. I can also add the fact that the Hudson County Hospital, a for-profit medical establishment, is presently classified as the most expensive hospital in this state, charging an average of 740 percent above costs for its treatments. The accusation had declared as part of its accusations against my client that it had lost millions in revenues because of the actions of my client. The documents I just submitted as evidence shows where those millions in lost revenues came from: from suffering patients who had to pay the outrageous medical bills given to them by the Hudson County Hospital.”

Emma Kitzinger read carefully the documents handed by Stein and gave them back to her court clerk before eyeing severely Paul Magnuson, who was now feeling in his small shoes.

“Those documents will be entered as evidence as defense items number two, three and four. Do you wish to dispute those documents, Mister Magnuson?”

“Uh, no, Your Honor.”

“Do you have more arguments to present, Mister Magnuson?”

“None, Your Honor.”

“Mister Stein, do you wish to present further arguments or evidence in this case?”

“No, Your Honor. I believe that what I submitted clearly shows this lawsuit to be totally frivolous, not to say outrageous, and to have been motivated solely by greed instead of by true concerns for the patients of the patients of the Hudson County Hospital.”

Kitzinger mulled these words for a moment, then banged her gavel once and spoke in a strong, clear voice.

“This court has to agree with the defense in this case. The accused obviously had no malevolent intent while visiting the Hudson County Hospital. Furthermore, her nightly visit resulted in the alleviation of much suffering and medical grief to the patients of the hospital, which included babies and toddlers. Thus, her actions indeed fell under the protection of the Good Samaritan Rule. I thus find the lawsuit thrown at Miss Nancy Dows by the Hudson County Hospital to be without merit and thus dismiss it. Furthermore, in view of the frivolous nature of that lawsuit, I condemn the Hudson County Hospital to pay the court costs of this case and to pay two million dollars in

potential damages to Miss Dows' reputation that this lawsuit could have caused her. This court is thus adjourned."

Stunned at first by such a quick outcome, Nancy then hugged Joshua Stein, then Ingrid and Michael, as the courtroom erupted in cheers.

"I can't believe that we won so quickly."

"That's because the case against you was paper-thin, Miss Dows." said Stein. "The Hudson County Hospital made a huge mistake by throwing that lawsuit at you. However, they will probably fight that compensation payment tooth and nail. Don't expect to get that money for at least another few months."

"I don't really care about that money, except for the fact that it will eventually help finance my Windermere Community Home Project. You did a great job, Mister Stein."

"It was done for a truly divine cause, Miss Dows." replied Stein, grinning from ear to ear.

The four of them then walked out of the courtroom and headed for the ground-level parking lot of the court building. At one time, Joshua Stein twisted his neck to talk to Michael while still walking but, to his surprise, couldn't find him.

"Hey! Where is your father, Nancy?"

"He had to split before we could get to the main entrance."

"Oh, why?"

"Because of that!" replied Nancy while pointing down the main staircase leading to the ground level of the building. Looking that way, Joshua Stein saw what looked like an army of reporters, cameramen and photographers rushing up the stairs.

"Like my mother would say: INCOMING!" said Nancy, bracing herself.

CHAPTER 11 – THE QUEEN IS DEAD. LONG LIVE THE KING.



Margaret Rose Windsor, in her sixties.

07:03 (New York Time)

Sunday, August 24, 1997 'C'

Apartment #4, 607 West 51st Street, Hell's Kitchen District

Manhattan, New York City, U.S.A.

Having awakened early, as per her custom, Nancy was already eating breakfast on this Sunday morning when Lucy and Erika joined her at the small dining table of their apartment. Both of the latter, holding mugs of hot coffee, also saw that Nancy was eating while listening with one ear to televised news, another habit of hers. Erika smiled and shook her head at that.

"Decidedly, you are a true news freak, Nancy."

It was Lucy who actually replied to that comment.

"That's something she got from our mother, Erika. Ingrid IS a news freak. You can probably put that on a professional deformation as a top military commander."

"Yeah, I can understand that. I suppose that good information is half of a war won."

"It is half of a war won, Erika." replied in turn Nancy while munching on her toast covered with raspberry jam. "You wouldn't believe the numbers of wars lost because of a lack of good information or, even worse, bad information. I..."

Nancy then stopped speaking in mid-sentence and snapped her head towards their television set, making Lucy and Erika also look at it. They saw a newscaster speaking in front of a background showing the royal palace of Buckingham in London, with a side picture showing Queen Margaret.

"...Queen Margaret is said to have died early this morning, British time, victim of a stroke. Queen Margaret was known to be in poor health and to have been a heavy smoker all of her life. As per British royal custom, her son David will succeed her on the throne. We still have not heard any British official statement about how Queen Margaret's funerals will be arranged and when they will be held. The British Prime Minister..."

Seeing genuine sadness showing on Nancy's face, Erika gently touched her left hand and spoke softly to her.

"Queen Margaret's death seems to be touching you, Nancy. Did you know her personally?"

"I met her twice when I was still only eight-years-old, when I brought back to England the remains of Sir Francis Drake, one of my past incarnations. I was treated at the time to a royal reception in Buckingham Palace and given a part ownership of Buckland Abbey, the Devon manor which Sir Francis owned in the second half of the Sixteenth Century. It was fully owned and administered by the British National Trust Society in 1991 but, as the late incarnation of Sir Drake, I earned the right to visit it at will and to use the old bedroom used by Francis Drake. Queen Margaret in person then gave me copies of the keys to the manor."

"Wow! And what kind of person was she, Nancy?"

"She was a very intelligent and caring woman who deserved much better than being trapped into her monarchic role, where she was forced to follow the directives and 'advice' of a bunch of old, desiccated royal advisors. In truth, she could have been a first-class artist and musician and we had fun playing piano together during that royal reception. Damn, I must go to England and attend her funerals, so that I could pay my last respects to her."

"But school is starting again in about a week, while we have a gig scheduled at that Ninth Avenue night club on Tuesday night." objected at once Lucy, making Nancy give her a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry about that, Lucy: I would be gone for only a couple of days and the funerals will still take a few more days to be arranged. It will probably take place during next weekend, giving me plenty of time to return for the commencement of the new school year. Gee! That means that I better start booking right away my trip to England and reserve a hotel room in London: with all the dignitaries, celebrities and European royalties who will want to attend the funerals, the hotels in London are bound to be fully booked in a matter of days, while their prices will most probably shoot up to the stratosphere. Where's that telephone book?"

Finding and bringing to the dining table their New York City telephone directory, Nancy then started leafing through the pages listing various travel agencies and airlines while continuing to eat. Noting down a few numbers, she went to sit on their lounge's main sofa, next to their telephone, and started making a series of calls while taking more notes. Meanwhile, Lucy and Erika sat down in front of their television set to listen to the news. However, as per the habit of American channels, little more was said about the death of Queen Margaret, the newscast quickly reverting to American news. When they finally switched off the television set, they saw that Nancy had put down her telephone and looked a bit discouraged, prompting a question from Lucy.

"What's wrong, Sis?"

"What's wrong is that those British hotels were faster than sharks assaulting a piece of meat and already doubled and tripled the prices of their rooms in anticipation of the funerals. Their usual prices were already worthy of the term 'predatory' but now they have climbed all the way to 'outrageous'. The cheapest hotel room in London is now going for over 600 dollars a night for a broom closet."

"SIX-HUNDRED DOLLARS A NIGHT?!" exclaimed Erika. "Did you call the Ritz Hotel or what?"

"No! I was asking the prices for things like simple inns and tourists' hotels. As for London's top hotels, forget it! With the army of rich European royals who will want to attend the funerals, their rooms will be in the thousands of dollars a night...at a minimum."

"Welcome to London!" said Lucy in a mocking tone.

16:09 (London Time)
Wednesday, August 27, 1997 'C'
Custom and immigration counters
Heathrow International Airport, London western suburbs
England, UK

When she stepped forward to one of the immigration wickets of the international arrival hall, Nancy presented to the British officer both her American passport and the honorary British passport she had received from Queen Margaret some six years ago. The official, a forty-something man with a very British-like moustache, opened his eyes wide on examining her documents, then respectfully saluted her.

"Welcome back in England, Sir Francis. I gather that you came to London for Queen Margaret's funerals?"

"You are correct, sir. Have they fixed yet the time of the official funerals? That information was still not available at the time of my departure from New York."

"It has just been announced, miss: the funerals will be held at Westminster Abbey on Saturday morning, starting at nine. Before that, the Queen's body will be exposed on Friday in Westminster Hall. After the funerals, the Queen's body will be carried to Windsor Castle and incinerated in Slough before her remains will be placed in the royal vault under St-George's Chapel, next to her father, King George the Sixth, and her mother, Queen Mother Elizabeth. I however must warn you that it is next to impossible to find a room in London right now and that what little is left available is going for truly outrageous prices."

"I know, my good man. I already got the sticker shock while calling from New York, trying to book a room. Thankfully, I had an option available to me: I will go to my manor of Buckland Abbey, near Plymouth, and prepare for the royal funerals there."

The British official nodded his head in approval and stamped both of her passports before giving them back to Nancy while smiling to her.

"Then, I wish you a nice stay in England, Sir Francis."

"Thank you! And a good day to you as well, sir."

Taking back her passports, Nancy then went down to the luggage carrouseis hall, where she collected her two suitcases before proceeding to the customs counters.

There, she got the same kind of respectful, deferral treatment she had received at the immigration counter and was quickly cleared to leave the terminal. Her next move was to go take a taxi, or 'cab' in British parlance, and ask for a ride to the nearest train station, where she could take a train to Plymouth. Thankfully, no one recognized her at the train station and aboard her train and she was not hounded by any reporter or photographer, probably because those were already busy chasing after European royals and other V.I.P.s arriving in London for the funerals. In fact, President Perot was himself due to attend the funerals but would arrive only late Friday night. Once her train arrived in Plymouth, Nancy took a taxi ride to Yelverton, the small town next to Plymouth where Buckland Abbey was located.

22:51 (London Time)

Buckland Abbey, near Yelverton, region of Plymouth

Devon, England



Buckland Abbey, Yelverton, Devon. Started being built in 1278. Converted into a manor in 1541.

When her cab stopped in front of the main entrance of Buckland Abbey, the manor that Sir Francis Drake had possessed, it was already dark and no lights showed inside the old manor. Her driver gave her a questioning look then.

“The building closed for visitors in the afternoon, miss, as you can see. Do you wish to go back to Yelverton, so that you can find a room at a local inn?”

"No need for that, mister: I have the keys to the place."

"You have the keys, miss? How?"

"Simple: it belonged to me, some 350 years ago. How much do I owe you for the ride?"

The cab driver, still not understanding who she was, hesitated before giving her the cost of her ride, which she paid at once. An afterthought then came to her mind and she smiled to the driver, who wore a pair of thick glasses, while raising her right hand.

"Let me give you a tip. Please don't move for a moment."

Subjugated by her beauty and charisma, the taxi driver stayed still as she touched his forehead with three of her fingers. However, he couldn't help stiffen when her right hand started to glow, but she reassured him in a soft voice.

"Don't be afraid, good man: I am going to tip you."

The driver then felt a soothing sensation through his body as Nancy's hand glowed for a few seconds. When she lowered her hand, the driver had to remove his glasses, as his vision had blurred, and looked at them in confusion. His confusion then changed into disbelief and joy as he realized that his eyesight was now perfect.

"Bloody Hell! I can see clearly without my glasses! How did you do that, miss?"

"I lived here, some 400 years ago, when I was Sir Francis Drake. Thank you for the ride, mister."

Only then did the British man finally understand who that supremely beautiful teenage girl was. Completely overwhelmed, he still had the presence of mind to get out and open her door, then took her suitcases out of his trunk. When he started to kneel in front of her, Nancy gently stopped him and smiled to him.

"Doing good deeds is my mission in life, my good man: no need to kneel before me. You can best thank me by being good to others around you."

"Please, let me carry your suitcases inside, Sir Francis."

"That you can do, sir."

Followed by the cab driver, Nancy walked up to the front door of the old manor and took out of her purse the set of big iron keys she had received from Queen Margaret six years ago. Selecting a key, she inserted it in the door's lock and turned it. The mechanism opened with an audible 'click' and she then gently pushed the door open, entering a medieval lobby and inviting the driver in. Next, she walked down a hallway and climbed the stairs of the magnificent central staircase of the manor, made of

polished and varnished wood. She finally entered a large room with lacquered wooden wall panels and pointed at a free space in the middle of what was known as ‘The Drake Room’.

“You may put down my suitcases there, sir. Thank you again for your help.”

“It was an honor, Sir Francis. Have a good night, miss.”

“The same to you, sir.”

The cab driver then left the room to return to his vehicle. Nancy, now alone, looked with nostalgia around her. After all these centuries, this place still felt like home to her. Thankfully for her, an addition had been made to this room after she had been given co-ownership of the manor: a replica of a Sixteenth Century canopy bed similar to what Sir Francis had slept in during his stay in Buckland Abbey. Putting her suitcases on the bed, Nancy quickly emptied them, distributing her things into the various chests and closets of the medieval room. Next, she stripped naked and hung her clothes before pulling down the bed’s sheets and slipping in with delighted relief. Sleep came easily to her then.



The Drake Room, Buckland Abbey.

08:33 (London Time)

Thursday, August 28, 1997 ‘C’

The Drake Room, Buckland Abbey

When she woke up in the morning, Nancy could say that she had truly slept like a baby and felt fully recovered from the change of time zones her trip from New York had implied. Still naked, she got out of bed and went to a large window where a miniature replica of the GOLDEN HIND, Sir Francis’ ship, lay on top of a big wooden chest. She admired the model for a moment, then looked out through the old medieval window: the

sky was cloudy and a bit gray, a common weather state in England...when it didn't rain. After a minute of contemplating the outside panorama, Nancy went to her clothes and put on her panties, then put on a fresh set of clothes, choosing a conservative-looking, dark blue-gray female suit. Now being dressed in a decent manner, Nancy retrieved the small paper bag containing the sandwiches and bottled water she had bought in the train from London and went down to the kitchen of the manor. That room was still exactly as it had been when Sir Francis had lived in Buckland Abbey, with a huge fireplace, a set of smaller woodstoves, iron utensils and a large, strong wooden table. She did not light any of the stoves, knowing that tourists would start visiting the manor starting at eleven, and simply sat at the table to eat her sandwiches and drink her water. She was still eating when a middle-aged woman entered the kitchen and did a doubletake at her sight.

"What the...? Who are you, miss, and how did you get in the manor?"

"Relax, madam. I am the co-owner of the manor and I used my own key to enter it last night."

The woman seemed confused by those words for a few seconds, until an expression of revelation came to her face.

"Miss Nancy Dows? Is that you?"

"I am Nancy Dows, madam." said calmly Nancy while continuing to eat. "You probably saw me only once before, when I was nine, so I can understand why you didn't recognize me at first. I came to attend the funerals of Queen Margaret but, finding no rooms in London, decided to come here and use the Drake Room, which was reserved for my use when I was given co-ownership of the manor by the Queen. Don't worry about my presence disturbing your guided tours: I will stay discrete and will keep my things out of sight. Is the crypt of the chapel still accessible?"

"Uh, yes but it is under lock and is opened only during guided tours, miss."

"That's okay: I have the key for it. Thanks for the information."

A bit flustered and also quite excited by now, the woman then left the kitchen at a quick step, probably to announce Nancy's presence to the other tour staff members for the manor. Effectively, the woman returned a few minutes later with one man and two other women, all of whom bowed politely to Nancy and with the man speaking to her.

"Welcome to Buckland Abbey, Miss Dows. I am Arnold Green, the head tour guide for the manor. We were not expecting your visit, I must say."

"You can blame that on the lack of hotel rooms in London, Mister Green. However, I also wanted to see again Buckland Abbey. It seems to have been well maintained during the past few years."

"The National Trust Service does its best to preserve the historic places in Great Britain which are under its care, Miss Dows. How long are you going to stay in Buckland Abbey, if I may ask?"

"I will stay until Sunday morning, when I will take a plane to go back to New York. However, I will only sleep here and will eat out in town, while also visiting a few places around Plymouth and London. I know that the living facilities in the abbey are strictly limited, in order to preserve the historic cachet of the manor, so I will use this place as little as possible."

Green, apparently satisfied by her response, bowed again to her.

"I must thank you for your consideration, miss. We will now let you finish your meal. Have a good day, Miss Dows."

The British then left the kitchen, allowing Nancy to finish her frugal breakfast alone. Once done, she carefully gathered the sandwiches' wrapping and empty water bottle and put everything back in its place before going up to the Drake Room, where she stored out of sight in a chest her clothes and suitcases, then carefully rearranged the bed's sheets. With the Drake Room now as she had found it last night, her next move was to go down to the ground level and go to the chapel of the manor. Using an old stone staircase, she went down to the small crypt situated under the chapel. Thankfully, electric lamps had been installed there years ago and she didn't have to hunt for a flashlight in order to see around her. With emotion growing in her, Nancy slowly approached a large, rusty bronze plaque fixed to one of the walls and stopped in front of it, then bowed her head in respect to the final resting place of one of her past incarnations, Sir Francis Drake, national hero for many but also despised pirate for others.

"You could say that I had many ups and downs in my diverse past, Sir Francis, like you did yourself. You however fully deserved to rest here, in your home country, instead of at the bottom of the ocean. I will now go visit other dead people who are honored in history. Rest in peace, Sir Francis."

Gently touching the bronze plaque for a few seconds, Nancy then stepped back and left the crypt, going back up to the ground floor and walking out by the main door of the manor. She looked around the quiet countryside and gardens surrounding the manor for

a moment, then concentrated and flew off the ground, rising into the air and taking speed eastward, towards London. A tour staff present in the parking lot close to the abbey saw her fly away and, after watching her with his mouth open ajar in shock, then ran inside the manor to tell that tale to the other tour guides and house cleaners.

10:14 (London Time)

London Metropolitan Police patrol helicopter

Flying around Westminster Palace, London

Officer Harry Coyle, sitting in the front passenger seat of his police helicopter as it patrolled the area around Westminster Palace, suddenly tensed up when he saw through his binoculars a tiny dot approaching Westminster Palace at low altitude.

"Heads up, George! I see something approaching the palace from the West at low altitude, at our eight o'clock."

The pilot, George Stockdale, immediately snapped his head in that direction: one worry the government had was that some terrorist group, possibly Irish separatists, would try to attack London during the lying-in-state and funerals of Queen Margaret. Security was thus tight around downtown London and included helicopter patrols like their own. Changing heading and accelerating, the two police officers were soon able to better distinguish what that flying dot was. What they saw left them with their mouths wide open.

"Bloody Hell! How is this possible?" could barely say Stockdale before he activated his headset microphone to call his air controller at the London Metropolitan Police Headquarters.

"London Metropolitan Police Control, this is Helicopter 06, flying over Westminster Palace. We have a young woman flying at low altitude towards Westminster Palace, over."

"Helicopter 06, from Control: what type of aircraft is this woman flying, over?"

"No aircraft, Control! She is simply flying in by herself, à la Mary Poppins, over."

There was a pause on the radio before the controller's voice came back on the air.

"Say again, Helicopter 06!"

"Control, I say again: a young woman is flying by herself at low altitude towards Westminster Palace. She is presently some two kilometers West of the palace and flying at an altitude of 600 feet and an approximate speed of 130 miles per hour, over."

"Helicopter 06, are you drunk?"

"Hell no, Control! I am dead serious!"

By the time Stockdale had said those words, his helicopter had crossed path with the flying girl, so he performed a tight turn to the right in order to catch up with her, then approached her from her left, on a parallel path some thirty meters from her. As he came level with her, the girl, a blonde of devastating beauty, smiled to the two police officers and waved in a friendly manner at them, making Harry Coyle make a remark to his colleague.

"I don't know who that girl is but she sure is a hell of a looker, George!"

"She is, but she is still approaching a restricted security zone. Control, this is Helicopter 06. We are now flying alongside the flying woman. She is young, in her late teens, is blond and doesn't appear to be armed. She is wearing a dark blue and gray female business suit and waved at us in a friendly fashion. I request instructions, over." There was again a pause on the radio before the controller's voice came back on the air.

"Helicopter 06, signal to that woman to come down and land outside the palace security perimeter. A ground patrol will then check her out there, over."

"Understood, Control. Helicopter 06 out!"

Stockdale then looked at Coyle, sitting to his right in the cockpit of their helicopter.

"Signal her to come down and land at once, George."

"Uh, okay! Just let me film her for a moment first: if not, the others will never believe us."

"Good idea!"

Grabbing his handheld surveillance video camera, Harry Coyle filmed the flying young woman for a few seconds, then gestured to her to make her understand that he wanted her to land. In response, the girl nodded her head and gave him a thumbs up signal before starting to slow down and lose altitude, to the satisfaction of the two police officers.

"Helicopter 06 to Control: the flying girl is complying with our instructions and is flying down while slowing. She should land on Broad Sanctuary, near the crossing with Parliament Square, over."

"Acknowledged, Helicopter 06. Stay with her until she has landed and is met by our officers on the ground, over."

"Will do! Helicopter 06, out!"

Stockdale then looked back at the flying girl, adjusting his own trajectory in order to follow her from fifty meters away, so that he wouldn't risk killing her with his rotor blades.

"Damn! I can't wait to learn who she is and how she can fly like this."

When Nancy landed softly and silently on the sidewalk, watched by a crowd of disbelieving passersby, she was nearly immediately approached by a group of four rather nervous British police officers. Nancy noticed at once that, contrary to British customs, those police officers were armed, carrying both submachine guns and pistols. She thus stayed motionless and calmly let the policemen approach her before speaking to the constable leading the group.

"Do not worry, gentlemen: I simply came to pay my respects to Queen Margaret. My name is Nancy Dows and here are my passports."

Partly reassured by her friendly tone and attitude, the senior constable took the two passports presented by Nancy and carefully examined them. He then knelt in front of her and bowed his head in respect.

"Welcome to London, Sir Francis. You may proceed to Westminster Hall, where the Queen's coffin is lying in state."

"Thank you, my good man." replied Nancy, nodding back before starting to walk towards the Westminster Palace complex. The three other police officers in the group then rounded up their leader as he got back on his feet.

"Why did you call that girl 'Sir Francis', sir?" asked one of the constables.

"Because this girl is the famous New York angel, Nancy Dows, who once was Sir Francis Drake in a previous incarnation. Let me call Headquarters on that and pass the word about her."

Crossing the intersection with Parliament Square, Nancy then walked for a good fifty meters in order to get in the back of the line of people waiting to enter Westminster Hall, where the coffin of Queen Margaret lay in state. Many of those people took a step back, unsure of what she was, while others knelt for her. To all, she simply gave them friendly smiles and continued on, until she took last place in the line, behind an aging couple who seemed unsure how to react to her. Nancy nodded her head once to the couple while smiling.

"Don't mind me, good people: I am here to pay my respects to Queen Margaret, like you."

"Uh, how could you fly like you did, miss?" asked the man in the couple.

"I am a half-angel, sir. One of my past incarnations was as Sir Francis Drake."

The old couple, stunned, would have knelt before her, or rather tried to kneel, as they appeared to be in poor physical shape, with probable arthritis in their joints, but Nancy gently stopped them from doing so.

"Please, don't kneel! We are all here to pay our respects to Queen Margaret. Let's keep our focus on that."

"But you are an envoy of God and..."

Nancy politely shook her head at once at those words.

"I am sorry but I don't represent what you call 'God'. I am an envoy of 'The One', who never pretended to be your god."

There was a long hesitation before the old woman spoke, her voice raspy.

"I heard about the healings and miracles you performed in New York, miss. May I ask a favor from you?"

"Go right ahead, madam."

"Arthritis is making my husband and I suffer more and more these days, miss. Could you provide us some relief, please?"

Nancy hesitated before responding: she certainly could and would like to perform a healing here, but that would detract on the present circumstances and would focus public attention away from the day's intent, which was to pay homage to Queen Margaret. A strong mental voice then echoed inside her mind.

"Do good and help those people, Nancy: Margaret Rose Windsor would have wanted this. I will help you in order to enhance your healing effect."

"Thank you, Great One!" mentally replied Nancy, who then closed her eyes and concentrated. Within seconds, she started glowing from the inside, soon becoming as bright as a floodlight, forcing the people around her to cover their eyes. Then, a wave of white light exploded silently out of her and expanded at hypersonic speed through the Greater London Metropolitan area, touching over seven million people and healing them nearly instantly of any sickness, wound, deformity and even of amputated limbs they had suffered from. When she stopped glowing and opened her eyes again, Nancy sent out a strong telepathic message around her.

"PLEASE DO NOT HONOR ME FOR THIS: FOCUS INSTEAD ON HONORING YOUR DEAD QUEEN, AS I INTEND TO DO MYSELF."

While most people simply looked at her with new reverence but kept quiet and stayed in line, the reaction of the few reporters, photographers and paparazzi present around Westminster Palace was too predictable: they all started to rush towards her, their cameras held at the ready. Thankfully, The One was ahead of Nancy in that aspect and those rushing media members suddenly froze as if transformed into statues under the disbelieving eyes of the passersby, would-be visitors to Westminster Hall and policemen on watch in the area. Nancy then smiled to the old couple, who was now feeling in top shape.

“Let’s ignore those leeches and concentrate on our visit instead, my good people.”

“Uh, they are not dead, I hope, miss?” asked the husband, making Nancy shake her head.

“No, they are simply frozen in time for a few minutes, time for this lineup to move along and for us to enter Westminster Hall. I in fact believe that we can do a few steps forward now.”

“Uh, right you are, miss.”

While the policemen stationed around Westminster Hall were stunned by this development and checked out on the frozen reporters and photographers, they were far from displeased by it, as those media types had proved to be like pests since the early morning. With the word about Nancy’s presence and nature quickly passed around by radio among the ranks of the police officers, the lineup of mourners was able to move along while the frozen reporters were simply kept watch over in order to avoid possible collisions with circulating vehicles. However, the police commander in charge of the security force for the ceremony took the understandable precaution of assigning two constables to discretely follow Nancy from a distance, not for considering her a potential risk but rather for preventing anyone else to create a disturbance around her.

After waiting patiently and advancing with the lineup for over one hour while conversing with the old couple and with other nearby mourners, Nancy finally entered the huge Westminster Hall, where Queen Margaret’s coffin lay on top of a dais, with four soldiers in parade uniforms guarding the coffin. While the mourners were not allowed to touch the coffin, which was draped with the royal colors of the Windsor Family, they were able to file past it while a few meters from it. Nancy stayed silent when she got close to the coffin and briefly stopped for a second while bowing her head before

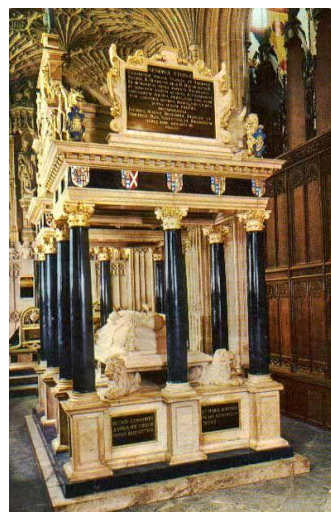
continuing on and exiting the hall. Once outside, she shook hands and hugged the old couple. The old woman in the couple also kissed her on the cheek, tears in her eyes.

“Thank you for having come to honor the Queen, miss. Also, thank you for healing our ailments. It was a great honor to meet you.”

“And it was most agreeable to meet you and your husband, madam. If you will now excuse me, I have another queen to pay my respects to.”

With those mysterious words, she then walked away towards the nearby Westminster Abbey. A minute after that, once she was out of direct sight of Westminster Palace, the crowd of frozen reporters and photographers around Westminster Hall unfroze all at once. Watched by the sarcastic police officers around them, they then ran around like headless chickens while asking about Nancy, making more than a few mourners mock them.

Ignoring that kerfuffle, Nancy calmly walked to Westminster Abbey, the final resting place of over thirty historical English monarchs and royalty members. There, she found quite a few churchgoers busy praying in the main church of the abbey. Going to the Chapel of King Henry VII, Nancy then found the door to its North Aisle locked, which did not surprise her: that part of the abbey was actually of restricted access for most visitors. Not phased by that detail, she simply teleported to the other side of that door and found herself inside a rather narrow space, facing a tomb made of light beige marble. Nancy slowly approached the tomb until she stood one step from the monument and its twin bronze plaques. One plaque was dedicated to the top coffin, containing the remains of Queen Elizabeth I, while the other plaque was connected to the coffin lying under that of Queen Elizabeth I, which contained the remains of Queen Mary the First, Elizabeth’s elder sister. Nancy contemplated with respect the marble figure depicting Queen Elizabeth lying in death, holding a royal scepter and an Earth globe. Sir Francis Drake had shown great devotion and respect to that queen, who had proved to be one of the truly great monarchs of England and had also been a woman of unprecedented power for her time. In contrast, the coffin of Queen Mary, nearly hidden from sight under Elizabeth’s coffin, got a nearly disdainful look from Nancy: Queen Mary the First had been a cruel and ineffective



monarch, fueling a bloody religious inquisition against her Protestant subjects and even committing near treason by allying herself with Spain, which wanted at the time to conquer England and impose Catholicism on its inhabitants. It was not for nothing that she had been dubbed 'Bloody Mary'. Looking back at the lying effigy of Elizabeth I, Nancy then whispered softly a few words.

"Please excuse me for not having been present at your death, My Queen, as I found my own death an ocean away while chasing after gold, some eight years before your passing. You were our greatest monarch, by far."

With that said, Nancy then turned around and left the room, rematerializing inside the Chapel of Henry VII and leaving Westminster Abbey altogether.

With another pilgrimage left to be done, Nancy started walking towards Saint-Paul's Cathedral, her next destination. However, seeing that it was well past noon, she entered a pub on her way, intent on eating lunch. Once inside, she found the place fairly crowded by numerous patrons, many of whom were discussing in a rather excited tone. Looking in the direction of the bar area, she saw that a large television screen set on a piece of furniture was switched to the BBC News Channel.

"Oops!" she said softly to herself when she saw that she was the main center of attention of the reporting, with a file picture of her splattered next to the image of the speaking newscaster. Then, heads started to snap around to fix her, while silence fell in the pub, with only the sound from the television being heard. Even the barman was now staring at her in silence, frozen in the gesture of wiping dry an empty glass. Doing her best to play it cool, she calmly walked to the bar and addressed the barman.

"I would like to have lunch here, mister. Could I have a menu please, plus a mug of your best blond beer."

The barman, nearly hypnotized by her youthful beauty and by the knowledge of what she was, swallowed hard before painting a smile on his face.

"Of course, miss!"

The man then fetched a menu and handed it to her, then started filling a mug with a foamy blond beer.

"If you will take a table now, my waitress will bring you your beer in an instant, miss."

"Thank you!"

Walking to a small empty table in a corner, next to the front windows of the pub, Nancy sat down and opened the menu to examine it. However, her eyes caught on a little toddler girl of maybe four or five who was standing next to her mother on the U-shaped bench seat of her own table, staring at her. That made Nancy grin in return: that little girl was truly cute.

“Hi, sweetie! What is your name?”

“Amelia!” answered the girl in a little voice.

“And my name is Nancy. You are really cute, Amelia.”

“Thank you!”

In contrast, the girl’s mother was nearly paralyzed and had a lot more difficulty to speak.

“T...thank you, miss! Are you the angel who just visited Westminster Hall and healed all of London?”

“Actually, I simply came to London to pay my respects to Queen Margaret, madam. The rest was just happenstance.”

“Uh, I see! Sit down and eat your food, Amelia: you should let the lady in peace.”

“Don’t worry, madam: I really don’t mind her.”

The pub’s waitress then came to Nancy’s table to bring her glass of beer to her. That diversion allowed her to look quickly at her menu and to order a plate of classic English Fish And Chips. While sipping on her beer and waiting for her food, Nancy watched and listened the BBC news on the pub’s television. She nearly played turtle and sank her head between her shoulders when the newscaster started presenting a video file produced some months ago and documenting her life and past exploits, including her discovery of Sir Francis’ coffin in Panama and the multiple mass healings she had done around the United States, spiced up with past footage showing her flying around on a few occasions over New York and Washington.

“Damn! I really shouldn’t have stopped here.”

Things got even more embarrassing for her when the waitress brought her order to her table, as the reporting on BBC News was suddenly switched to a view just outside of 10 Downing Street, the official residence of the British Prime Minister. The Prime Minister himself was standing behind a little lectern with microphone and speaking to the camera.

"Good afternoon, good citizens of London and Great Britain. My message is to Miss Nancy Dows, who is presently visiting London. First, I must thank you for the bottom of my heart for all the good you just did today. I also want to thank you for coming here to pay your respects to our beloved Queen Margaret. Finally, I would be immensely grateful if you could come and visit me at my official residence before you return to the United States, so that we could have a small chat together. I am hoping that you will be able to hear my message, Miss Dows. Thank you!"

As the Prime Minister was shown returning inside his residence, all eyes in the pub then turned to Nancy, who felt hot under the collar.

"Gee! No pressure!"

She was able to eat a first bite of her food before giving up and getting up to walk to the bar, where she spoke to the barman.

"Would it be possible to make a local phone call, sir?"

"Uh, no problem, miss. Here you go." answered the barman, extending one arm and grabbing his telephone before putting it down in front of her on the counter.

"Hum, I don't know the number of the place I want to call, mister, if you see what I mean."

The barman proved quick on the uptake then and he smiled to her while whispering.

"You want the Prime Minister's residence I presume, miss?"

"You're right on target, mister."

The man nodded, then turned away to face the wall mirror before punching a number and speaking in a low voice, in order not to be understood by his customers. After a couple of connection changes, he then turned to face Nancy and handed her the receiver.

"You have the Prime Minister's residence on the line, miss."

"Thank you!" said Nancy before speaking in the receiver while keeping her voice down. "Hello, this is Nancy Dows and I would like to speak with the Prime Minister."

"One moment, please!" replied a man's voice. A few more seconds and she heard the politician's voice on the line.

"Miss Dows, I am truly happy that you were able to hear my message. Just by curiosity, how did you hear it?"

"In a pub where I stopped to have lunch, Mister Prime Minister. Unfortunately, I now have about forty people staring at me while I am talking to you, which is why I'm keeping my voice low."

“Oh! I am dreadfully sorry about that, miss.”

“That’s alright, Mister Prime Minister. About your invitation, I still have a couple of things to do around London today. Could I drop in on you sometimes around four or five this afternoon? I would also be grateful if no crowds of reporters would be waiting for me then.”

The Prime Minister had a chuckle at that.

“Don’t worry about that, miss: I am the first one to try my best to avoid those leeches. I will be awaiting your visit with much anticipation. Thank you for calling me, miss.”

“The pleasure was mine, Mister Prime Minister.”

Putting down the receiver, Nancy then thanked the barman before returning to her table, where she resumed her eating while doing her best to ignore the few people still staring at her from time to time. Thankfully, most of the customers showed the legendary British sense of gentlemanliness and avoided looking at her out of politeness and respect.

Nancy ended up finishing her meal at the same time as little Amelia and her mother. As the mother and child were getting up from their bench seat, Nancy hurried to get up herself and go whisper to the mother.

“Could I ask you a favor, madam?”

The woman looked at her with unmitigated surprise and curiosity.

“Me? Doing you a favor? How could I possibly do that in view of your incredible powers, miss?”

“Easy, madam: by using your power of motherhood. I would like to do a little something for your cute Amelia. Don’t worry: I am not talking about performing some kind of miracle on her. Is she afraid of heights?”

“Uh, not that I know of, miss. What do you have in mind?”

“With your permission, I would like to take her out for a minute on a flight over downtown London. Do you think that she would like that?”

“Like that, miss?” nearly exclaimed the woman, breaking into a grin. “She loves watching birds fly around.”

“Then, let me just pay first for my meal, then we will go out on the sidewalk.”

However, even that simple gesture turned out to be a bit complicated, with the barman and owner insisting on making her meal a free one. Nancy finally had to relent.

"Alright then! Do you mind if I tip your waitress for her services?"

"Not at all, miss."

Nancy then turned to face the young waitress and gave her as a tip what she would have paid for her meal.

"Here you go, miss. Thank you for your service."

The young woman looked for a moment at the banknotes now in her hand, then grinned to Nancy while doing a curtsy.

"Thank you very much, miss. It was a great honor to serve you."

"The honor was mine, miss."

Next, with the other patrons watching her, she left the pub with little Amelia and her mother, stopping on the sidewalk outside the entrance. Taking the little girl in her arms, Nancy gave her a huge grin.

"Are you ready to play Supergirl now, Amelia?"

"YES!"

"Then, hold tightly to me with both arms around my neck, Amelia. Here we go!"

The little girl squealed with joy when Nancy, holding firmly to Amelia, started floating off the sidewalk, watched by the girl's mother and by dozens of incredulous onlookers. She then gradually accelerated upward, taking some altitude before increasing her forward speed. Soon, the pair was flying around downtown London at an altitude of 200 meters, with little Amelia loving every second of it. Since she was close to Buckingham Palace, Nancy made a detour to overfly it, giving to Amelia a terrific overhead view of it. Seeing a group of royal guardsmen in red uniforms and bearskin hats parading on the grounds of the palace, Nancy had an idea and smiled to Amelia.

"How would you like to sow some chaos among those royal guardsmen, Amelia?"

"Yes! Let's do it!"

Holding firmly to the child, Nancy then dove down to near ground level, making Amelia scream with a mix of fear and delight. The pair then zoomed in front of the group of marching guardsmen, making them hesitate and lose step. Both Nancy and Amelia were laughing as they climbed back to altitude.

"That was fun!"

"It sure was, Amelia."

To the little girl's disappointment, Nancy had to cut her flight after a couple of minutes.

"I believe that it's time for us to return to the pub before your mother gets worried, Amelia. Did you like your flight?"

"Yes! We really have to come down now?"

"I am afraid so, sweetie. I now see your mother down there, in front of the pub." Starting a smooth and slow descent in order not to frighten the girl, Nancy finally landed next to the mother, who gratefully took back her child before kissing Nancy on both cheeks and also letting Amelia kiss Nancy.

"Thank you so much, miss: that was about the most fantastic gift you could have given to my little Amelia."

"It was a true pleasure for me, madam: your child is a true little angel. Well, time for me to go!"

Nancy then flew off again, visually followed by Amelia, her mother and dozens of other onlookers.

Her next stop was the front steps of Saint-Paul's Cathedral, in the center of London. After landing smoothly on the top steps, Nancy then entered the huge cathedral and headed towards the staircase giving access to its underground crypt, where dozens of famous British politicians, military figures, eminent scientists and prestigious personalities were buried, many in ornate tombs, others simply having their names on bronze plaques fixed to the walls. However, the tomb Nancy wanted to visit was definitely one of the most ornate and revered, being a marble sarcophagus sitting between the tombs of Admiral Nelson and that of the Duke of Wellington. Stopping in front of it, Nancy soberly read for herself the polished brass plaque fixed to the front of the sarcophagus.

"Herein lies Brigadier Nancy Laplante, born on June thirteen of 1982 in Montreal, Canada. Died June 26, 1941 in Berlin, Germany. Victoria Cross and two bars. Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire. Distinguished Service Order and one bar. Distinguished Service Cross and two bars. Distinguished Flying Cross. Officer of the Legion of Honor (France). War Cross with Palm (France). 1939-45 Star. Canadian Volunteer Service Medal. Killed while in enemy hands."

Nancy then stayed silent for a long moment while looking at the plaque and sarcophagus. She knew that the body resting in that sarcophagus was that of Nancy

Laplante 'C', one of the three Nancy Laplante to have lived across the timelines. Nancy 'C' had actually lived for a fraction of a second only, when an Imperium Ministry of Security guard from the year 2386 'B' had gone to the Gestapo center in Berlin where Nancy 'A' was being horribly tortured and had tried to kill her with a bullet to her head. However, that had triggered a split in the timelines and had created Timeline 'C', the present timeline Nancy was standing in. While Nancy Laplante had officially died in Timeline 'C', Nancy 'A' had actually survived, as the fatal bullet meant for her had never touched her before it jumped to the brand-new Timeline 'C'. Instead, Nancy 'A' had lived on to escape the Germans and return to the England of 1941 'B', where scientists from the 24th Century of Timeline 'A' had then rescued her and brought her back to her timeline of origin. There, she had eventually created the Time Patrol, an organization dedicated to the protection and integrity of History. As for Nancy 'B', she had been rescued with her parents by the Time Patrol when assassins had broken into the Montreal hospital where she had just been born in 1982 'B'. Nancy 'B' and her parents had then followed the Time Patrol into exile to the distant past, as the organization had mutinied against the wimpy government of the Earth of 2384 'A' after it had refused to take risks to save Nancy 'A', who was being held by the Imperium, a militaristic and brutal empire in the 24th Century of Timeline 'B'. In the complex war between timelines that had followed, the Imperium 'B' had been erased from History by the Time Patrol, only to see the apparition of another Imperium in Timeline 'C'. That Imperium 'C' had however disappeared as well, condemned by the ineptitude and geopolitical blunders made by a succession of British governments during the second half of the 20th Century of Timeline 'C'. Now, the United States was firmly on top as a World superpower in Timeline 'C', while Great Britain had sunk to the rank of a middle power, having lost nearly all of its overseas empire. As for Nancy Laplante 'A', she had finally died in her own timeline, killed in Kurdistan while covering the conflict there as a war correspondent. As far as she knew, Nancy 'B' was now a fully grown field agent of the Time Patrol, with primary responsibilities for covering the 17th Century and 19th Century of Timeline 'A'.

With still no one else in the crypt at this time, Nancy stayed near Nancy Laplante's sarcophagus for a good fifteen minutes, caressing the marble while reminiscing about all that Nancy Laplante and her own mother Ingrid, who had been adopted by Nancy 'A', had accomplished. Giving a parting kiss to the sarcophagus,

Nancy then walked out of the crypt, returning to the main floor of the cathedral: she had a visit to pay to the Prime Minister of Great Britain.

When Nancy attended the funerals proper on Saturday morning, it was as a V.I.P. guest of the British government, rather than as some anonymous civilian mourner. Furthermore, she attended the ceremony in the first ranks of the mourners at Windsor Palace, close to both the Prime Minister and to the new British monarch, the son of Queen Margaret, who was going to reign under the name of King Charles the Third. While King Charles appeared to be a decent enough man to Nancy, he was definitely not the sharpest tool in the toolbox in her personal opinion, something that was probably going to only cement the future demise of the Imperium 'C'.

The day before that, Friday, had been a busy one for Nancy, with an in-person and lengthy televised interview followed by a discussion panel, both organized by the BBC and both of whom were now being syndicated around the World. That discussion panel had however not made only friends for her, as a number of Church Leaders had participated in it and had been less than pleased, despite her best attempts at being as polite as possible, by her declarations about the existence, or rather non-existence in her opinion, of the God of the Christian Scriptures. However, actions and deeds speak louder than words, so a large number of British citizens now believed what she said about religious matters, something that had been reinforced by the mass healings she had performed in Plymouth, Glasgow and Edinburg on Friday. Now it remained for her to see what the Christian Evangelists and the various fundamentalist religious preachers in the United States would say about her declarations when she returned to New York on Sunday.

CHAPTER 12 – TO ARGUE WITH FANATICS...



20:45 (New York Time)

Sunday, August 31, 1997 'C'

International Arrivals Hall, New York International Airport

Borough of Queens, New York City, U.S.A.

A big grin appeared on Lucy's face when she saw a line on the flight arrival information electronic board change.

"GIRLS, NANCY'S FLIGHT HAS JUST LANDED!"

The three other band members, who had been waiting with Lucy at the exit doors of the customs check counters, cheered at that piece of news and renewed their expectations while watching the exit doors, along with a small crowd of other persons also waiting for relatives or friends. However, the noise of a rather boisterous crowd approaching made them look down the concourse leading to the taxi lanes and bus stops. What they saw made Lucy frown.

"Who the hell are these guys?"

"Can't you read their signs, Lucy?" asked in a sarcastic tone Erika Lang. "They are Christian evangelists and I could bet about why they came here."

Lucy's frown changed to a dark look as she eyed the various signs and posters carried by a number of people in the approaching crowd, which was chanting some religious hymn and shouting Christian slogans. Already, a couple of airport police officers posted in the vicinity were hurrying towards the group, probably to make sure that they didn't cause some kind of trouble.

"Nancy certainly doesn't need this after her long flight from London. Hopefully, the airport police will disperse or chase away those idiots before they could annoy Nancy."

Unfortunately, her pious wish didn't come true. While more airport police officers ended showing up near the customs exit doors, they then simply stood watch as the crowd of believers formed a thick line behind and on both sides of the four band members. While that infuriated the four young women, there was nothing they could realistically do about that, so they did their best to ignore those religious fanatics while waiting for Nancy to pass the customs doors. Some twenty minutes later, a growing stream of passengers started coming out, making the band members redouble their attention. Finally, they saw Nancy come out of the customs area, pushing a luggage cart carrying her two suitcases and one travel bag. Lucy started waving her hand at once to attract Nancy's attention.

"HERE, NANCY! WE ARE HERE!"

Nancy did see her and flashed a happy smile then, but her smile disappeared nearly at once as a man in the Christian crowd then shouted at his companions.

"THERE IS THE SPAWN OF SATAN WHO PRETENDS TO BE AN ANGEL!"

The crowd at once lifted high their signs and posters and started shouting a mix of slogans and accusations.

"BLASPHEMER! WITCH! STOP DENYING GOD!"

It took all her restraint for Lucy not to simply rip away the nearest religious sign just then. What happened next however took her and her three friends by surprise. The man who had shouted first at Nancy's appearance then made a few quick steps towards Nancy while holding some kind of bottle or thermos container. Once only three paces from her, the man did a throwing motion with the arm holding the bottle, making a red liquid splash out of it. However, that red liquid, obviously intended to hit Nancy, never got to her and instead reversed course once about one meter from her, as if pushed back by a strong gust of wind. The red liquid then ended up hitting the thrower, who got splattered by it. The man, now covered with red paint, froze with stupor as Nancy calmly walked past

him while pushing her luggage cart towards Lucy and her band members. Erika then reacted by shouting at her friends.

“QUICK, FORM A SCREEN AROUND NANCY! MAKE A WAY FOR HER THROUGH THESE IDIOTS.”

The airport policemen were next to react. While two of them went to the paint thrower to arrest and cuff him, four more policemen, their batons held high, pushed their way through the screaming and chanting crowd, helping Lucy, Sarah, Erika and Carmen to open a passage for Nancy. More policemen then came at a run to help keep the crowd of believers in check. The whole scene was captured by the dozen or so reporters, photographers and cameramen who had also been waiting for Nancy's arrival. As soon as Nancy and her band members managed to break through the agitated crowd, a reporter and a cameraman bearing the logo of CNN ran to Nancy, with the reporter then asking her a question.

“Miss Dows, were you expecting this crowd to be waiting for you at the airport?”

“Not really, mister, but their presence here does not surprise me one bit.”

“Are you aware that many well-known Church officials and preachers here and around the States are calling you a blasphemmer and a witch?”

In response, Nancy threw a dubious look at the reporter.”

“What else did you expect them to say? Their ignorance and intolerance have been enduring for centuries, causing the suffering and death of hundreds of thousands of innocents through history. Too many of them have been making money and gaining power by lying to those gullible enough to believe them. I am what I claim to be: a semi-Human, semi-Celestial being bent on doing good around me. What these zombie-like idiots think of me is of no import to me.”

“But they have vowed to unmask you as a supposed impostor and witch, miss.”

“Good luck to them on that, mister. They will end up with eggs on their faces, not me. Now, if you will excuse me, I have to return to my apartment in Manhattan and prepare for the start of the new school session.”

Nancy, still tightly escorted by her band members, then accelerated her pace, leaving the reporter and cameraman behind while heading towards the short-term parking lot of the airport, where Erika had parked her minivan. Once out of the terminal and inside the parking lot, Nancy gave a questioning look to her sister Lucy.

“How did they know that I would arrive in New York at this hour, Lucy?”

“Easy: reporters filmed your departure from London, so about everyone in town knew which flight you were on. By the way, that reporter was not exaggerating: about every religious or cult leader in the country is damning you as an envoy of Satan, for denying publicly the existence of God during your interview with the BBC and during the following discussion panel in London.”

Nancy couldn't help let out a sigh of discouragement then.

“Hypocrisy and intolerance, as always. When will those people open their minds to something else than their rigid doctrines?”

“Don't hold your breath on that, Sis!”

Piling up in Erika's minivan, the group soon started rolling towards Manhattan and their apartment building in the Hell's Kitchen District. Trying to make Nancy forget about her tumultuous welcome at the airport, Lucy asked her a few questions about her trip to England, quickly imitated by the three other band members. That actually worked, with Nancy being too happy to tell them about her trip. She was much more relaxed when their minivan entered their private garage and parked inside their apartment building on West 51st Street, near the corner with 11th Avenue. With both Erika and Carmen insisting on helping Nancy to carry her bags, the group went up to her apartment, which she shared with Lucy and Erika, where Nancy let out a sigh of relief once inside.

“Home, at last! If you don't mind, girls, I will go take a relaxing shower.”

“How relaxing do you want it to be, Nancy?” sneakily asked Erika, making Nancy smile and shake her head.

“Thanks for the offer, Erika, but I need to shower by myself, so that I could reflect on how I will deal with all those intolerant idiots.”

“Couldn't you just vaporize them?” asked in zest Sarah, making Nancy shake an index at her.

“Sarah, I am an angel, not a demon, remember?”

“Too bad!” replied the piano virtuoso, making her friends and Nancy giggle.

As Nancy disappeared inside the apartment's bathroom, the four girls went to sit in front of the television set of the living room, switching it to CNN. Not surprisingly, the kerfuffle at the airport was one of the top news items. Then, a CNN discussion panel exchanged comments and opinions about the incident. Even on that quite liberal-

thinking news channel, it was evident that Nancy was now the subject of what promised to be a controversial and confrontational clash of beliefs, something that made Lucy blow air out in discouragement.

“Poor Nancy! She is doing her best to do good and help the people around her, yet she ends up being vilified. How is she going to be able to concentrate properly on her studies now?”

“By acting as if those morons didn’t exist!” was Sarah’s categorical reply, making the other girls nod in agreement.

10:09 (New York Time)

Tuesday, September 2, 1997 ‘C’

South-west corner of West 57th Street and Ninth Avenue

Manhattan, New York City

“You got a good pan shot of the building, Jack?”

“Yes, Christiane!”

“Then, let’s go in!”

Followed by her cameraman and her photographer, Christiane Amanpour crossed the street and walked to the main entrance of the eight-story



brown brick building, which occupied the South-west corner of West 57th Street and Ninth Avenue. She knew that the building was an old one, having being built in 1881, and had fallen into disrepair and neglect over the years but recent renovation and repair work was evident on its façade. The main entrance in particular had been completely redone and was now sporting a modern-style glass and steel look. Pulling open one of the two glass doors, Christiane entered a small lobby which lodged a waiting lounge with leather-upholstered sofas and a reception counter, then went to the reception counter, behind which sat a young woman who had to be a receptionist. Behind her stood a big black man wearing a private security guard uniform. The guard was actually armed, wearing a pistol, a riot baton and a can of pepper spray at his belt. Stopping one pace from the counter, which sported a thick transparent protective pane, Christiane smiled to the young receptionist.

"Good morning, miss! I am Christiane Amanpour, from CNN, and I would like to visit your community home project."

"Are you expected by our manager, Miss Amanpour?"

"Er, no! We decided to come after the events of Sunday at the airport, when Miss Nancy Dows arrived from England."

"Then, let me call our manager to tell her that you are here, miss."

Christiane patiently waited while the receptionist grabbed her telephone receiver and spoke with someone. That call was a short one and the receptionist smiled to Christiane while putting back down her receiver.

"The project manager, Misses Barbara Fenwick, will be happy to receive you, Miss Amanpour. She should be here in a minute."

"Thank you, miss!"

While waiting for the manager's arrival, Christiane noticed that the security guard had a number of military medal ribbons pinned to his shirt, something that awakened her curiosity and made her smile to the guard.

"You are a military veteran, mister?"

"Yes, ma'am!" replied the black man, who stood a good 185 centimeters and appeared quite strong and muscular. "I served 23 years in the Marines before retiring from the Corps."

"And how long have you been working here as a security guard, mister?"

"For a bit more than a year now, miss. Miss Dows personally hired me after she helped me out of Skid Row. You see, after I left the Corps, I fell on hard times and ended up living on the streets. Then, Miss Dows met me, gave me shelter here and healed me from my post-traumatic stress disorder, which had caused me to become homeless."

Christiane was left speechless for a couple of seconds by that before she could ask another question to the guard.

"That is quite a story. Would you mind telling me your name, sir?"

"Not at all, miss! My name is Joshua Abercromby and I retired from the Marines with the rank of staff sergeant. When I became homeless, I became unable to collect my military pension cheques but, by becoming resident at the Windermere Community Home Project, I gained a fixed address and a mailbox and was able to collect again my pension. Many other ex-homeless people who now reside here also gained a fixed

address and a mailbox, something that helped them a lot. Getting any government benefit when you don't have a fixed address is downright impossible, something that is the main reason why they can't get any government help. By offering a fixed place of residence to the homeless, Miss Dows solved one of their biggest problems stopping them from getting a new life."

"That is truly admirable on the part of Miss Dows, Mister Abercromby."

Christiane was going to ask more questions to the guard when a mature woman showed up at the reception lounge and opened the armored glass door giving access to the interior of the building.

"Miss Amanpour, please come in! I am Barbara Fenwick, the day manager of the Windermere Community Home Project."

Christiane, followed by her cameraman and photographer, passed the opened armored glass door before shaking hands with Fenwick.

"Thank you for accepting to meet with us, Misses Fenwick. You said that you are the day manager of the building. Does that mean that there is a manager for the night shift?"

"Yes, it does! Due to the nature of our community project, we often receive new applicants for residency past normal work hours. Also, most troubles we face from time to time happen in the evening or at night, so we need a person in charge at night to take care of things."

"And such troubles...are they frequent?"

"More than we would care for, Miss Amanpour. We had to deny entry to suspected drug dealers and street gang members many times in the past. We also had to urgently help individuals and even families which had just been evicted from their homes for various reasons and were stuck on the streets. If things get really serious or when someone is in need of urgent medical help, then we call Miss Dows, who shows up and does her magic, be it by healing the sick or by calming hot heads. Miss Dows created this project and cares a lot about it and about the people who now live in the building. She is always ready to come at any time of the night when needed, except of course when she is away from New York, like when she was in England for the funerals of Queen Margaret."

"I see! In fact, the recent events in England, when she performed a number of mass healings, prompted this visit of mine to your project. Miss Dows is now front and

center in the news and CNN wants to better document her goals, deeds and intentions, so that the American public gets to know her better.”

“A laudable goal and one which I will be happy to contribute to by offering you a guided tour of our project. First, I will show you our communal dining hall, one of the main components of our project. If you will please follow me.”

Following closely the manager, Christiane and her cameramen entered a large room situated close to the reception lounge. There, she saw long rows of tables with chairs and a kitchen service counter, behind which she could see one female employee serving a late breakfast to a man wearing dirty, tired clothes. If not for the homeless man, Christiane would have thought that she was in some school cafeteria. Barbara Fenwick swept the room with one arm while speaking.

“This was originally a rented commercial space, which accounts for its size and high ceiling. Other ex-store spaces on the ground floor level have been renovated and reconfigured in order to serve as communal facilities for our residents and visitors. But before continuing, I believe that a bit of history is needed here. This building was built in 1881 and was then considered the summum of apartment buildings in New York. It was also one of the rare ones at the time to accept tenants who were considered socially undesirable by the society of the late 19th Century, like single mothers. After World War 2, it gradually fell into disrepair and neglect and lodged mostly low-income people. Many struggling young actors and artists lived here at the times, one of them being Steve McQueen, the famous action movie actor. The then owner, on top of neglecting the maintenance of the building, also started harassing and abusing his tenants in order to make them leave, so that he could resell the building at a good profit. The city eventually prosecuted that owner for harassment and vandalism and seized control of the building, with the intent of demolishing it. However, since it was such a historical landmark, opposition to its demolition was swift and widespread and the building found itself in limbo for many years, until Miss Dows spotted it in 1995 and acquired it, using much of the money gained by her discovery of the famous treasure of Sir Francis Drake in Panama. She also received charitable donations and support, which has allowed her to start serious renovations to the building. Those renovations are still ongoing on the top floors of the building, which are still empty of occupants, but we are hoping to complete those renovations in a year or two, something that will then allow us to accept more residents.”

“That is a fascinating story indeed, Misses Fenwick, and also a heart-warming one. It certainly doesn’t jive with the portrait some are now trying to paint of Nancy Dows.”

Barbara Fenwick threw a sober look at Christiane at those words.

“Those people in question are no more than hypocrites and bigots full of intolerance and prejudices, Miss Amanpour. Just this morning, the local Catholic diocese called me to say that it was terminating its donations to the Windermere Project because, quote, Miss Dows uttered blasphemies and denied the existence of God, unquote.”

“Wait! You are telling me that the Catholic Church was contributing to this charitable project but decided to cut its aid because of Miss Dows’ declarations?”

“Exactly! So, now this project will have to find other contributors to compensate for that cut in our budgets, thanks to the intolerance of the Catholic Church.”

“That’s not going to help the image of the Church in New York, I guess.”

“Not one bit, miss. Now, to go back to this cafeteria. It serves day and night good quality meals to the registered residents of the building, composed of ex-homeless people and poor families and individuals, and this for free. The cost of the food is kept to a minimum by collecting surplus products from big supermarkets, which otherwise would end up in the garbage. Miss Dows has negotiated deals with many such supermarkets and groceries stores to collect products which were otherwise going to be thrown away because of expired or near-expired consumption dates. Contrary to most thinking, such food expiry dates don’t mean that the food is unsafe, far from it. These so-called expired food items are often still perfectly edible for days and weeks, but are often disregarded by store customers in favor of products with more recent production dates. The amount of wasted food this produces is staggering and results in our city refuse dumps being filled with tons of still edible foodstuff, which then decomposes and produces methane, a gas harmful to the planet’s environment. The foodstuff we collect that way thus feeds our residents at very little cost. When we are left with surplus to our local needs, which happens often, then we have a mobile canteen truck that goes around the city and serves hot meals to the homeless people which we are still unable to lodge here.”

“And how many such ex-homeless people are now living here, Miss Fenwick?”

“We presently provide shelter to 269 ex-homeless people, plus provide no-cost or very-low-cost apartment spaces for struggling, poor individuals and families, for another 96 residents.”

“Would it be possible for me to visit one of those apartments after this, miss?”

“I will be happy to give you a tour of them, Miss Amanpour. First, though, let’s visit our kitchen, so that you can see for yourself the level of food quality we serve.”

Using a double-door separating the dining hall and the kitchen, Christiane followed the manager to the line of steam plates and hot plates situated behind the service counter. While most of these plates were still empty due to the time of the day, she was shown a few on which stainless steel containers lay.

“Right now, we have at the counter a few items for those who would like to eat brunch, like bacon, sausages, ham, scrambled eggs, pancakes and French toasts. We also have ready at a self-serve counter fresh fruits, cereals, milk and fruit juices, while our cook can prepare fresh eggs on demand. If you would like to test the quality of our ingredients, then you are welcome to grab a plate and taste them.”

Christiane smiled at that and looked at her photographer.

“Well, I will certainly eat a bit now but my photographer is a man who is a good eater. Two opinions will be better than one, I believe.”

“Indeed, miss!”

Grabbing an empty plate and a set of utensils, Christiane then put on it one slice of bacon, one sausage and a small portion of scrambled eggs. Her photographer however served himself a much more substantial portion, all the while filmed closely by the team’s cameraman. Sitting at a small table set in one corner of the kitchen, Christiane and her photographer started eating their food, taking their time to properly taste and judge their quality. Christiane soon was nodding her head in approval, while her photographer went in near-barfing mode.

“This is actually about as good as what I would eat at our CNN studio’s cafeteria. I am impressed, Miss Fenwick. Just by curiosity, what did you plan to serve for the coming lunch?”

“For lunch, we are going to serve three main choices: hamburgers; BBQ chicken and beef stew. For supper, we will serve pork chops and fish fillets. Would you like to see our freezer and cold storage room now, so that you can see that our reserves of foodstuff are of good quality?”

“Certainly! Up to now, I must say that I am quite impressed.”

“Thank you!”

Again followed by her two assistants, Christiane went to visit the walk-in freezer and cold room storage of the kitchen, where she was able to look at and smell the various items stored inside them while pictures and videos were taken. Everything seemed well to her and she soon walked back into the kitchen proper, where they filmed a cook busy cutting vegetables and cubes of beef for the coming lunch menu. Again, the items seemed plenty edible to her, making her remark on it.

"I can't believe that such quantities of still perfectly edible foodstuff could be thrown away in bulk by supermarkets and groceries stores."

"That's the American society for you, Miss Amanpour: wasteful and finicky. Millions of people around the World would be most happy to eat what we throw away every day. By the way, a city food and hygiene inspector visits our kitchen regularly to certify that it complies with municipal and state standards."

"There is certainly a serious lesson to be learned here, miss. What next?"

"We will pay a visit to our health and social services department, which is next door to the cafeteria and reception lounge."

Leaving the kitchen and returning into the main entrance hallway, Barbara Fenwick pushed open a door with a plaque saying 'Health and Social Services Department' and entered a waiting lounge furnished with chairs and with a reception counter. The room was ringed with seven doors, each bearing an engraved brass plate. Fenwick then proceeded in touring the doors, so that Christiane could read what was written on the plates.

"As you may well understand, Miss Amanpour, providing shelter and food are only part of the help homeless people need to rebuild their lives. This department thus provides extra services to help them. We presently have in-house on a permanent basis a social worker, a community services nurse, a substance-abuse counselor and an employment counselor. As our population grows, along with our available budget, we plan to increase our permanent health and social staff and to offer more services to our residents, like an in-house pharmacist able to provide medications at no cost and an adult education counselor to arrange various education and professional training programs for the ex-homeless, so that they could become good contributing citizens again."

Christiane looked gravely around her for a moment before speaking in a subdued tone.

"This makes me ask why our government has not arranged itself such services to help our homeless population, especially when you consider the amount of public money wasted on questionable projects and programs."

"A pertinent question indeed, Miss Amanpour. One such wasteful and poorly administered program is our federal Veterans Affairs Department. It is supposed to care for and help our military veterans and should in theory be able to help people like Joshua Abercromby, the security guard you saw at the front reception. Unfortunately, the VA has become a bureaucratic monster, tangled in red tape and poorly administered by bureaucrats who are too often either incompetent or corrupt, or both. From our experience with this project, a large minority of the homeless people we found and helped have proven to be veterans, often suffering from PTSD, who fell through the numerous cracks in the VA system. Another sizeable portion of the American homeless population is made up of people with mental troubles or disabilities, which is a reason why we are planning to acquire the services of an in-house psychiatrist."

"But such professional specialists cost a lot to employ, Misses Fenwick. How are you able to pay the professional staff you already have here?"

"Thankfully, we enjoy the financial support of many generous people, including that of a billionaire philanthropist who I will leave unnamed at his own request. Miss Dows also contributes what she can as she is still studying at the Juilliard School of Music, via her revenues gained by playing occasional gigs with her band and through the royalties earned from radio stations playing her tunes."

"Yet, a rich organization like the Catholic Church just decided to stop helping this project, just because of Miss Dows' personal opinion about God."

"Exactly!" replied Fenwick in a sour tone. "And the Church publicly proclaims that one of its goals is to help the poor and the downtrodden. Talk about hypocrisy! Now, I will make you visit one of our small apartments reserved for ex-homeless people, then will visit a no-cost family apartment."

Going out of the health and social services office suite, the manager led Christiane and her cameramen to a bank of elevators of modern construction.

"The original elevators installed in this building were among the first to be found in New York but were getting really old and decrepit, so a major cost in our renovation budget was to replace them with modern elevators. That cost us a pretty penny and was quite a complicated job."

"I can believe that, miss."

The group then entered a cabin and did a quick trip up two levels, to then step into a long hallway that had obviously been renovated recently.

"This floor was finished renovating mere weeks ago and a few of our ex-homeless lodging units are still empty, but not for very long. We will visit one of them now." said Fenwick before walking down the hallway and stopping in front of a door marked with the number '326' and the letters 'A-B-C', something that intrigued Christiane.

"Why the letters 'A-B-C' under the number '326', Misses Fenwick?"

"Because this apartment was originally a three-bedroom apartment. When we renovated it, we then split it into three separate singles rooms, plus a common lounge, kitchen and bathroom. This, while providing adequate living space for each of our ex-homeless people, allows us to house more of them. For those who could cause trouble with other residents because of mental illness or deficiencies, we lodge them in single rooms with a small bathroom and make them eat at our communal cafeteria."

Fenwick then unlocked the door, using a master key, and invited Christiane and her cameramen in. What the CNN crew saw inside was a fully furnished suite provided with second-hand furniture that was still in good condition. However, the kitchen's original appliances had been pared down, leaving only a refrigerator, an electric hot plate, a toaster oven, a microwave oven and a coffee machine in place.

"Uh, where is the kitchen stove, Misses Fenwick?"

"An early experience forced us to remove the stoves from our ex-homeless units, miss. Some of our residents, through either negligence or mental troubles, misused their stoves and started fires in their apartments. Thankfully, we had installed a system of water sprinklers as part of our renovation program and the damage caused was minimal and nobody got hurt. Since then, our ex-homeless residents are encouraged to go down and eat at our communal cafeteria. They however still can prepare quick snacks with the use of their hot plates, microwave ovens and coffee machines. As for their refrigerators, they can take up some essential fresh items like milk, bread and juices given out by our kitchen staff. However, no alcohol is given out and the purchasing of them is strongly discouraged. As you know, alcoholism is one of the biggest plagues afflicting homeless people."

"Decidedly, Miss Dows seems to have thought out her project in both detail and good sense."

"She has! For a girl of fifteen, she is an incredibly mature and responsible person, thanks to her souvenirs from her past incarnations. We will now go visit one of the three lodging units of this apartment suite."

Going to a door and opening it, Fenwick showed to Christiane what had been a regular bedroom, with a large window providing plenty of light and ventilation. However, instead of containing a standard bed, the room looked more like a bachelor's unit.

"As you can see, each of our ex-homeless residents can feel at home in such a room setup. The large sofa you see there is actually a sofa-bed which can be deployed at night for sleeping. There is also a clothes closet, a small desk with chair, a shelving unit, an AM/FM radio set and a small television set, plus a telephone. For showers, shaving and relieving themselves, the residents use the common facilities of the apartment suite. It's not luxurious by any means but it is still decent and comfortable and infinitely better than living on the streets, especially in Winter."

"What about housecleaning? Are your residents proving to be responsible enough to clean their places by themselves?"

"Some do. For the others, we have janitors and maids who visit the apartments regularly and keep them clean. By the way, those janitors and maids are all ex-homeless or ex-unemployed people whom we helped and who reside in this building." Christiane could only nod her head in approval while looking around the room.

"Decidedly, all this represents something that should inspire our various government levels into action."

"Thank you, miss! As for our low-cost apartments, they are actually like this apartment, but with their bedrooms kept and furnished as such and with a stove unit in place in their kitchen. Do you still wish to visit one of them?"

"I do, at least to be able to take pictures of it."

"Then, I will see if I can get permission from its occupant to visit one of them. Right now, all of our refurbished family apartments are occupied, but more of them should be finished renovating in a couple of weeks. If you will follow me."

This time, the group went up by another two levels and went to a numbered door, on which the manager knocked. After a few seconds, a young woman carrying a small toddler in her arms opened the door and looked questioningly at the CNN team, fixing in particular the man carrying on one shoulder a big television video camera.

“Yes?”

“Good morning, miss! I am escorting around a CNN television team who wishes to see one of our family units. Would you be ready to allow them to quickly visit your apartment?”

The young woman, who could not be more than twenty-years-old, hesitated only for a second before opening wide her door and stepping out of the way.

“Please come in!”

The group entered quickly, letting the woman close the entrance door, then walked into the living room of the apartment. Again, the furniture they saw was second-hand but in reasonable condition. The two bedrooms also had second-hand furniture, while the bathroom proved to be fully equipped, although not exactly to luxurious standards. After touring the apartment quickly and taking both still pictures and video images of it, Christiane and her team ended back in the living room, where she spoke softly to the young mother.

“Miss, I am preparing a documentary about this building and the community home project created by Nancy Dows. Would you be ready to tell us how your family ended up here?”

“Why not, especially if it could attract more public support for the project? My husband was already unemployed and hunting for a job when we were evicted from our previous place for non-payment of rent. My husband, our child and I then lived for two days on the streets before an employee of this project spotted us and arranged for us to occupy this apartment. That was three months ago. My husband is still hunting for a job and in fact went out this morning to go to the local unemployment center. We have yet to receive our first social security cheque and were worried about starving on the streets when the project employee found us and brought us here. Since then, we have lived here, with no need to pay any rent and with food and second-hand clothes provided for free. Misses Fenwick told me that the project intends to open a daycare center soon, at which time I will be able to go search for a job myself in order to help support my family.” Christiane felt a lump form in her throat as she stared at the young mother, whose face showed plenty of past hard times and privations. Considering her age and that of her toddler child, she probably had been a teenage mother of possibly less than eighteen years of age at the time of her pregnancy. Unfortunately, her story was much too common around the United States and was also one that was too often ignored by too many people.

"Thank you, miss. You were of great help."

Christiane was about to turn around and leave when the young mother urgently touched her forearm.

"Wait, miss! I wish to say something more to you."

"By all means, miss. Go ahead!"

"Well, I saw yesterday some televised news where church leaders and preachers called Nancy Dows a spawn of Satan, a witch and a blasphemer. I have met and spoken with Nancy Dows and she is no witch or demon. She only has goodness and kindness in her heart. I find it profoundly unjust that her name is being vilified like it is presently. Could you help dispel publicly these lies about her, miss?"

Christiane, her face most sober, nodded at once in response.

"You can count on me to do that, miss. Have a good day!"

Some twenty minutes later, the CNN team got out of the building and went to the corner with Ninth Avenue. As they were waiting for the pedestrian light to turn green, Christiane's video cameraman couldn't help shake his head in both wonderment and disgust.

"And the Catholic Church is calling Nancy Dows a spawn of Satan and a witch? This project is the work of a saint!"

"No!" replied at once Christiane's still photographer. "This is the work of an angel."

20:19 (New York Time)

Apartment # 4, 607 West 51st Street

"Yes! Right in the kisser!" nearly shouted Lucy, who was watching on CNN with the rest of the band the report prepared by Christiane Amanpour, who had just asked a pointed question that had left a Catholic Diocese spokesman looking like a hypocrite and a fool. While not showing her enthusiasm the way her four friends did, Nancy couldn't help feel happy as Amanpour continued to fire pointed barbs and questions at the churchman.

"Like they say, there is no better disinfectants than light and the truth."

Three days after that, CNN published the results of a snap public poll done around New York, results which constituted a stern public rebuke and indictment of the Catholic Church, while expressing overwhelming support for Nancy. While that shut up the local churchmen for a while, it still wasn't enough to silence the various big (and rich) television preachers around what was known as 'The Bible Belt' in the Southern and Midwest states. Faced with such hypocrisy and bad faith, Nancy could only tell herself to ignore her critics and continue on with her charitable work. If anything, the whole brouhaha proved a boon for her projects, with charitable donations to her Windermere Community Home Project turning into a flood within days. Soon, she was able to start a new phase of renovations for her building, something that added up more living units and more services to her project and truly made her feel like a million dollars.

CHAPTER 13 – THE GLOVES ARE OFF



A Somali pirate 'mother ship' being sunk by naval gunfire.

09:12 (Washington Time)

Thursday, October 30, 1997 'C'

The Oval Office, The White House

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

Ross Perot nearly growled in frustration as he threw down on his desk the daily intelligence situation report he had been reading.

"Another American cargo ship attacked off the coast of Somalia, with three of its crewmembers either killed or wounded? This is the fifth such incident to happen this month alone, and I don't even count the commercial ships or private boats belonging to other nations which have been attacked and boarded by pirates in the same area. We do have warships patrolling in the Indian Ocean, no?"

His national security advisor, Brent Scowcroft, who had brought him the report, looked a bit embarrassed as he answered Perot.

"Yes, we do, Mister President. However, there are too few of them to efficiently patrol such a vast expanse of water and they are also hampered by existing international

laws, which oblige our crews to treat the pirates they catch with what I consider 'kids' gloves'."

"Well, screw international laws! I believe that it is high time to take the gloves off with those pirates. In the good old days, such pirates would have been hanged on the spot, no ifs or buts, while I believe that every nation on Earth considers high-seas piracy as a major crime."

"And what do you have in mind about that piracy problem, Mister President?"

"Using a big stick!" replied Perot before grabbing the receiver of the encrypted telephone linking the White House with the Pentagon and composing a number. Scowcroft's ear went up when he heard who Perot was calling.

"General Dows? This is the President! I suppose that you have heard about the Somali pirates' attack on the EXXON TEXAS?... I am in mind of dealing decisively with that recurring problem. Could I hope that you have some kind of contingency plan already written concerning that piracy problem?... You do? Good! Grab that contingency plan and come and see me right away at the White House. I will be expecting you."

Perot then closed the line and made a mean smile while looking back at Scowcroft.

"Time to let our attack dogs loose, Brent."

15:28 (East Coast Time)

Friday, October 31, 1997 'C'

Parade and assembly hall of the 1st Battalion/6th Marine Regiment

Camp Lejeune, North Carolina

"Good strike, Meachum! However, you had a chance to finish off your opponent while he was down but you didn't take it. Remember one of the main principles of Krav Maga: to continue to strike your opponent until he or she is completely incapacitated. Both of you may now sit down. Calderon, Visby: you are next!"



Corporal Greta Visby

Greta Visby jumped to her feet, both eager and excited, when her name was called up by their Krav Maga instructor, Zev Weiss, an ex-Israeli paratrooper who had emigrated to the United States years ago and who had been hired as a civilian martial arts

instructor in order for him to teach his art to the marines of the 6th Marine Regiment. Martial arts training had now been compulsory for all American front line soldiers and combat aviators for over five years, on order from General Ingrid Dows, who had imposed a number of rules and directives meant to make American soldiers better, both physically and mentally, instead of being simply good shooters or technicians. On her part, Greta was a hundred percent for those rules and directives and she particularly loved her twice-weekly Krav Maga training sessions, both because she liked its blend of multiple martial arts into a combat technique that was both realistic for the battlefield and devastatingly effective and because, while athletic and strong for a woman, Greta accepted the fact that most male soldiers would be stronger physically than she could ever be. Krav Maga, with its emphasis on using all types of strikes and weapons available in order to win and survive, exactly fit the bill for Greta. Wearing her combat armored vest, helmet and ballistic protective glasses, like all the other marines practicing Krav Maga, both to protect against blows during practice fights and to accustom the marines to fight with the weight of their equipment on, Greta faced her opponent, Corporal Alphonso Calderon, while taking a combat stance. Calderon was actually slightly shorter than Greta, who stood a good 177 centimeters, but definitely had more muscle mass than her. He was also a nervous type with quick reflexes, making him a dangerous opponent in a hand-to-hand fight. However, things got spiced up when Zev Weiss threw to Calderon a short baton meant to imitate a knife.

“Corporal Visby, a man armed with a knife just jumped in front of you while you were in a city back alley. Defend yourself!”

Greta did not have time to reflect on that added degree of difficulty before Calderon aggressively advanced on her while screaming, his short baton held at waist level and ready to strike. Then, another main principle of Krav Maga kicked in to help her: developing muscle memory for quick reactions in a fight. On top of assiduously practicing Krav Maga with her platoon twice a week when not out on a field exercise, she had been paying out of her own pocket for extra lessons and practice sessions during weekends at the Krav Maga club owned by Zev Weiss in Charleston, where he was teaching his art to civilians. She had not bragged about that to her marine companions, so Calderon could be in for a bit of a surprise today. Her left hand shot out in order to block Calderon’s right arm, while she simultaneously made a lightning-quick strike with her right hand. Her hand, bent upward, went to Calderon’s throat, hitting it with the palm of her hand. The Puerto Rican pedaled back while gurgling, his breath temporarily taken

away. Greta did not give him a chance to recover and followed up her first attack with a kick to the groin, measuring her strength in order not to truly hurt her comrade. Despite wearing a jock strap, Calderon collapsed on his knees, pain visible on his face and still struggling for air. Greta then kicked him in the solar plexus with her left boot, again measuring her strength, sending the poor Puerto Rican on his back. With him flat on the ground and vulnerable, Greta then jumped with both feet over him in a classic 'commando stomp' meant to break his sternum, a mortal blow, but separated her feet at the last moment, with her boots instead landing on each side of his upper torso. Bending down and picking up the short baton dropped by Calderon, Greta then struck him with it in a vertical stabbing blow to his heart. Zev Weiss applauded enthusiastically as she stepped away from the hurting Calderon, still on his back.

"BRAVO, CORPORAL VISBY! MEN, THIS WAS A PERFECT DEMONSTRATION OF THE PRINCIPLES OF KRAV MAGA: SIMULTANEOUS ATTACK AND DEFENSE; PHYSICAL AGGRESSION; CONTINUING TO STRIKE YOUR OPPONENT UNTIL HE IS COMPLETELY INCAPACITATED; ATTACK PREEMPTIVELY OR COUNTER-ATTACK AS SOON AS POSSIBLE; USE ANY OBJECT AT HAND TO HIT YOUR OPPONENT; TARGET YOUR OPPONENT'S BODY'S MOST VULNERABLE POINTS; USE SIMPLE AND EASILY REPEATABLE STRIKES; MAINTAIN AWARENESS OF YOUR SURROUNDINGS; DEVELOP MUSCLE MEMORY FOR QUICK REACTIONS IN A FIGHT AND INSTINCTIVE RESPONSES UNDER STRESS. Visby, Calderon, you may now sit down."

Before going back to her previous place, Greta went to help Calderon get up. The Puerto Rican grimaced with pain as he slowly got back on his feet.

"Remind me never to attack you, Greta."

"Only after I will have knocked you down, Alphonso." replied Greta while smiling.

Both of them sat back down and watched the next duel between two other marines of their platoon. At four in the afternoon, a bit less than half an hour later, Weiss declared the training session finished, with the platoon sergeant, Staff Sergeant Jeffrey Brown, then dismissing his marines for the weekend. However, before Greta could walk away to return to her mini-suite in her unit's barrack building, Zev Weiss intercepted her and spoke to her in a low voice while smiling to her.

“That was a truly excellent fight you did, Greta. Consider yourself as having just graduated to a blue belt G2 level. I will hand you your new belt at your next private practice session in my Charleston’s club.”

That made Greta break into a wide, happy grin as she shook hands with Zev.

“Thank you, Zev: you are a truly excellent instructor and teacher. You can be sure that I will continue my Krav Maga training assiduously. See you tomorrow at your club.”

Greta then walked out of the battalion’s parade square and towards her barrack block, situated just across the street. The said barrack block, a modern building built only three years ago, was a world apart from the old barrack blocks in which past marines had lived in. The four-story building actually looked much more like an apartment block, with individual suites and balconies for the marines living in it. Entering the building with her platoon comrades, Greta climbed the stairs to the third floor, where her own suite was. That suite, similar to those of other marines with the rank of corporal or lower, included a small living room with a sofa-bed, TV stand, dresser, desk and chair and a small refrigerator, a large closet to store her field kit, spare uniforms and civilian clothes and a small bathroom with toilet, sink and shower stall. While small by civilian standards, her mini-apartment was enough for Greta’s personal needs. She was a quiet type and a bit of an introvert and liked to read and watch documentaries, being an autodidact as well. Some of her male comrades thought of her as being a bit dull and an intellectual type, having hoped that such a pretty young blonde would have been more of a party girl, but she didn’t care much about that opinion. She drank only occasionally and, while appreciating the occasional sex, only dated men infrequently. As for marrying, that was not part of her future prospects for the moment, as she wanted to consecrate her life to being the best marine she could be and to travel and live adventures as much as possible.

Greta had just finished taking a shower and was drying herself up when the P.A. system of the building started blaring.

“ATTENTION TO ALL THE MARINES OF THE 1ST BATTALION! ATTENTION TO ALL THE MARINES OF THE 1ST BATTALION! YOU ARE TO IMMEDIATELY ASSEMBLE IN THE BATTALION’S PARADE HALL FOR AN URGENT BRIEFING BY THE BATTALION COMMANDER. I SAY AGAIN...”

"Oops! That sounds like another no-notice urgent deployment at sea." said Greta to herself, remembering how her first deployment at sea, on the battle carrier NEPTUNE, had started. Quickly dressing back into a clean combat uniform, she then put on her field cap and, leaving her mini-suite, locked her door before running downstairs and across the street to the entrance of her battalion's parade and assembly hall. There, she was quickly joined by the other single, living-in members of her unit. However, that left a third of the battalion members, who were married and lived in the PMQ area of the base, still absent. The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Paul Wilkinson, seeing the gaping holes in the ranks of his unit, then took a quick decision and spoke into his microphone.

"MARINES OF THE 1ST BATTALION, SINCE WE ARE STILL WAITING FOR THE MARRIED MEMBERS LIVING OFF BARRACKS, I AM GOING TO TEMPORARILY DISMISS THOSE OF YOU ALREADY HERE, SO THAT YOU COULD RETURN IN YOUR BARRACKS AND PREPARE YOUR FIELD KIT FOR A DEPLOYMENT AT SEA IN THE INDIAN OCEAN. I WILL HOWEVER KEEP OUR ULTIMATE DESTINATION TO MYSELF UNTIL THE WHOLE BATTALION COULD ASSEMBLE HERE. BE BACK HERE WITH YOUR FULL FIELD KIT IN ONE HOUR. DISMISSED!"

As Greta and her comrades ran out of the hall to return to their barrack buildings, one of the members of her fire team, Private Mike Hanley, the most junior member of the fire team she was leading, asked her a question while running alongside her.

"Corporal, do you have any idea of where we are going to go exactly? The colonel mentioned the Indian Ocean."

"The Indian Ocean is a big place, with lots of shitholes and trouble spots around it, Hanley. You better not hypothesize about our precise deployment. Concentrate instead on packing correctly your gear and think in terms of weeks and months, rather than in mere days."

"Uh, understood, Corporal!"

With Hanley splitting away after entering the building, Greta ran up to her mini-apartment and took out of her closet her big field backpack. Apart from the sleeping bag pouch and small individual folding tent attached to it, it already contained two sets of spare combat uniforms, four sets of underwear, a spare pair of combat boots and a personal hygiene kit with towel, but Greta still added to it an extra khaki-colored bath towel, two more pairs of socks, a mosquito head net and a bottle of mosquito repellent. She also put a few

energy bars as emergency rations in one pouch attached to her web gear. Next, she put all her empty rifle magazines inside their carrying cargo pouches fixed to her armored vest. Thinking to herself for a few seconds while reviewing her kit, she went to a locked steel box hidden in a corner of her closet and put it on her sofa/bed before unlocking and opening it, revealing a pair of automatic pistols and their spare magazines and ammunition boxes inside. The bigger pistol, a FN Five-seven, was her favorite sidearm, having an impressive twenty-round capacity magazine and high muzzle velocity, which gave it a longer effective range than other pistol calibers and also much more penetrating power against typical military armored vests. She had adapted a holographic sight on top of its slide, plus a laser dot sight under the muzzle, so she could use it in low light or night conditions. She filled five magazines for it, inserting one in her pistol but not cocking it, leaving the chamber empty for more safety, then placed her pistol and magazines in their belt holster and magazine holders and put two extra boxes of 5.7mm ammunition in her field pack. Next, she grabbed her subcompact, 9mm, ten-shot Glock 26 pistol and filled three magazines for it. One of those was inserted in her pistol, while the two others went in her ankle magazine holder, which also supported a short combat knife in its scabbard. As for her Glock 26, it went in the ankle holster she had bought for it. Fitting both ankle holsters in place, she then covered them with the leg bottoms of her combat trousers, just above the top of her combat boots. Lastly, she filled both of her water bottles with fresh tap water, then put on her armored vest, web gear and backpack before leaving her room and locking it.

Once in the battalion building, she was directed by a waiting NCO to go get her rifle at the unit's armory, situated inside the building. There, she picked up her personal weapon, a Winchester M1985A2 .243 caliber assault rifle with integrated AGL-95 single-shot 60mm grenade launcher. She had already fought with her rifle and killed enemy soldiers with it during two military campaigns: the Caucasus War of 1996 and the Somalia Aircraft Hijacking Incident of the same year. She had even been able to destroy an enemy armored vehicle with her grenade launcher while in Armenia. As an experienced hunter who had lived her youth and teenage years in the forests of both Northern Sweden and of Alaska, she liked the high accuracy and long range of her assault rifle, with which she was able to consistently hit a man at distances of over 500 meters. When she entered the parade/assembly hall of her battalion, she found pallets of live ammunition and field rations waiting there. She was thus able to fill her rifle

magazines and store boxes of bullets, four rifle grenades and two-days-worth of rations in her backpack and web gear. Now fully ready for her incoming deployment, she sat on her backpack and waited, placing her fire team members in line as they showed up.

Some forty minutes later, once all of the battalion members were present, Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson returned behind his microphone and spoke in a strong voice.

“Marines of the 1st Battalion, we have been ordered on a new mission, a deployment at sea in the Indian Ocean. Contrary to when we deployed on the battle carrier NEPTUNE, we will not need to fly to our mother ship, as it is already docked at the Sunny Point Ocean Terminal. We will board the U.S.S. GUADALCANAL with our armored amphibians and our wheeled vehicles, then sail at best speed towards the Indian Ocean, where we will take a station off the eastern coast of Somalia. While the hymn of our glorious corps starts with the words ‘from the shores of Tripoli’, where we fought the Barbary Coast pirates nearly 200 years ago, we are now going to fight pirates again, this time in Somalia. This will not be a simple sea patrol job: it will imply for us to land in Somalia in order to clean up for good that nest of pirates.”

All 1,275 marines present in the hall, including Greta, loudly cheered at those words.

06:03 (East Coast Time)

Saturday, November 01, 1997 ‘C’

AACV-8A armored amphibian of the 3rd Rifle Platoon/Bravo Company

On the docks of the Sunny Point Military Ocean Terminal

Greta, traveling with the marines of her rifle platoon aboard their assigned AACV-8A tracked amphibian vehicle, popped her head out of one of the roof hatches of the big armored vehicle as it started climbing a ro-ro ramp. It was still dark around but the lights around the docks of the military ocean terminal allowed her to see the ship they were about to roll into.

“Wow! Look at that big bugger! It is about the size of an aircraft carrier.”

“Is it as big as the NEPTUNE?” asked PFC Joshua Stern from one of the seats lining the port inner side of the armored amphibian’s hull. Greta shook her head at that.

“No, not even close, but it is still a big ship and also an impressive one: I can see a total of four large caliber gun turrets just along its port side.”

Her remark made more marines stick their heads out through the roof hatches, with them swooning about what they saw.

“Wow! These are twin five-inch gun turrets. You can imagine the kind of volume of fire they could pump out during a shore bombardment?”

“Well, we were told that the U.S.S. GUADALCANAL was a tank landing ship, so a heavy gun battery would make sense for it in order to provide fire support for an amphibious landing. However, I just can’t picture such a big ship beaching itself in waters shallow enough to let out vehicles directly on the beach. Either this ship was mischaracterized, or it has something we don’t know about.”

Greta and the other marines then kept looking outside of their vehicle as it followed other armored tracked amphibians inside a cavernous vehicle storage deck which apparently ran nearly the whole length of the ship and was over 200 meter-long and some twenty meters-wide.

“Gee! We nearly could play a game of football inside this place.” exclaimed Dan Weatherly, the assistant light machine gunner of Greta’s fire team.

“Well, we won’t have the excuse of too little space to exercise if we become out of shape during this deployment.” replied Greta.

“I wonder if they have a swimming pool aboard, like on the NEPTUNE.”

“That would surprise me, Dan: this ship spells ‘combat operations’ all the way.” Guided by sailors to proper parking spots, the 28 AACV-8 armored amphibians and 41 wheeled vehicles of the battalion were soon parked and then solidly tied down by chains to the steel deck of the vehicle hangar. That still left plenty of deck space for more vehicles if need be, something that impressed Greta. Orders were then shouted out, making the marines leave their vehicles with their weapons and field kit, to line up in long files which were then led out of the vehicle hangar by designated sailor guides. The sailor guiding the file that included Greta, a chief petty officer, led the marines out and into the starboard side hull of the ship, which was of catamaran design, then went down one deck, using a wide ramp with a moderate inclination, and followed a long and wide passageway before stopping next to a steel door on the outer side of the passageway.

“Well, gentlemen...and lady. I am Chief Petty Officer George Willis and we are now at the entrance of the platoon quarters assigned to your sub-unit. I will now give

you a quick tour of it and then let your lieutenant assign you to your respective cabins. Follow me!”

Willis, followed in double file by the marines, then entered a fairly large empty space measuring some eight meters by twelve meters, with two corridors to the left which were lined with cabin doors. Willis then stopped at one end of the empty lounge, which actually had benches fixed to the walls around it, before speaking again.

“First, some ship history. The U.S.S. GUADALCANAL is the first ship of a new class of landing ships and is designated in military parlance as a LST-H, or Landing Ship Tank – Helicopter. It is a big ship, displacing 36,000 tons at full load and measuring 891 feet in length overall, while it has a maximum beam of 165 feet. Why so large, some would ask? Because the GUADALCANAL is a catamaran design, using two parallel hulls separated by a sponson section hanging over water. That kind of ship design provides lots more deck space than a conventional monohull design, something very useful for a LST and which allowed it to meet the recent new ship habitability standards of our navy, may God bless General Dows for them. Some may ask how such a huge ship could safely beach itself in order to let out ground vehicles by its bow ramp. The answer is by using the double bottom of the centerline sponson platform as an extra flotation device. Just before beaching, that section, which is waterproof and extensible, lowers itself down via hydraulic jacks to the level of the ship’s keels, adding the equivalent in buoyancy of over half of the volume of the ship’s twin hulls under the waterline. Thus, instead of its normal draught of twenty feet, the GUADALCANAL will then draw only ten feet of water, allowing it to lower its bow ramp in waters less than three feet deep.”

A wave of soft exclamations went around the marines surrounding Willis before he continued speaking.

“Now, apart from being capable of letting out vehicles directly on an unprepared beach, this ship also has stern ramps which allows amphibian vehicles to roll down into the water and then swim to the shore for an amphibian assault. It has as well the option of airlifting up to one company of marines at a time with the help of the aircraft contained in its aviation hangar. Finally, to provide proper naval gunfire support to an amphibious operation, the GUADALCANAL is armed with a total of eight twin five-inch gun turrets, plus missiles and cannons for its self-defense. By the way, those five-inch guns are also of recent design and their barrels have a length of seventy calibers, compared to the earlier guns of 54 calibers, giving them a maximum range with normal shells of 24 miles.

With special extended range shells, their range increases to 44 miles. To top all that, you will be able to swiftly get to your intended theatre of operations, as the GUADALCANAL can reach a top speed of 35 knots.”

More exclamations greeted those words, making Willis smile with pride.

“Well, enough talking on my part. You are presently in your designated platoon assembly area, where your officer will be able to pass on orders and information and where you will also be able to gather in groups during your free time. To my right, you will see the entrance of two corridors. Those corridors are lined with numbered individual cabins of three categories: 38 marine enlisted cabins, five marine NCO cabins and one marine junior officer cabin. You will also find along the first corridor a shower room, a washroom with toilet stalls, urinals and sinks and a small laundry room with sets of washers and dryers. For the lone female corporal in your platoon, don’t worry: you will not have to shower with a bunch of guys around you, as there is a small, separate bathroom with shower stall reserved for the female personnel.”

Willis grinned in amusement when the male marines present let out a loud collective sigh of disappointment, while Greta Visby showed visible relief.

“One last word. As you can see, this assembly area has four large armored windows giving a view of the ocean outside to its occupants. Those windows have in turn individual dark cover plates which are to be closed and locked in place when in a potential combat zone. Right now, and while we will be sailing away from the American coasts, those cover plates can be left open. However, the moment that the bridge will announce night curfew conditions, those cover plates will have to be closed. Captain Wainwright will be very severe about this, as it could attract hostile ships, aircraft and submarines to us. I will now go sit in that corner and will be ready to answer any question you will have while your officer assigns your cabins to each of you.”

Quite happy with what he had just heard from Willis, Lieutenant Kenneth Gomer, the platoon commander, then explored quickly with his platoon sergeant, Staff Sergeant Vincent ‘The Mafioso’ Gambino, the cabins and rooms lining the corridors, checking of which category they belonged to and then discussing briefly with Gambino their assignments. Gomer then returned into the assembly area and addressed his marines.

“LISTEN UP, PEOPLE! I WILL NOW SEND YOU BY SQUAD TO YOUR CABINS. STAFF SERGEANT GAMBINO, WHO IS WAITING DOWN THE FIRST

CORRIDOR, WILL THEN DISTRIBUTE CABINS TO THE MEMBERS OF THAT SQUAD. SERGEANT MILLER, YOUR SQUAD GOES FIRST!”

Some three minutes later, the squad of Sergeant Jeffrey Brown, to which Greta belonged, was called to go down the corridor. Gambino smiled to Greta when it was her turn to get a cabin and knocked on a cabin door.

“Here is your cabin, Corporal Visby. The door next to your cabin, on its right, is the private bathroom reserved for women, so you won’t have to walk far in your underwear to take a shower free of peeping toms.”

“Thank you for your consideration, sir. It is much appreciated.”

With her big backpack still on and with her rifle in hand, Greta opened the sliding door of her assigned cabin and entered a small space measuring two and a half meters by two meters, while the ceiling stood two and a half meters above the floor. While small, that space was made to look much more spacious by the judicious arrangement of things inside it. The single bed actually lay at face-level, with a desk with bookshelf, a closet and a set of drawers built-in under it, similar to what she had seen on the battle carrier NEPTUNE, along with a steel mesh cage meant to lock up a rifle or machine gun. As well, a small flat-screen television set was attached to a wall tablet fixed to the wall opposite the bed. However, there was in addition to that a sink and medicine cabinet with mirror at the back end of the small space, facing the bed, something that made her even more satisfied. Taking off her big field backpack, she put it down under the bed, in a space that was designed to store field kit next to the desk and chair, and also took off her helmet, replacing it with her Marine-issued soft field cap. Her next move was to secure her assault rifle and FN Five-seven pistol, plus her grenades, in the weapons locker of her mini-cabin, putting one of her padlocks on it. She however kept on her the ankle holster holding her smaller pistol. Greta then took out of her backpack her hygiene kit, a set of underwear and one towel, distributing the lot in the drawers under her bed. With that done, Greta left her mini-cabin and went to the platoon assembly area, wanting to see what would happen next. She actually had time while she waited to look at the ocean terminal and the sea through one of the armored windows of the assembly area. After some five minutes, Lieutenant Gomer called for the platoon to assemble, then spoke to his marines.

“Well, it seems that the loading of our combat supplies and equipment will take at least another two more hours. Then, our ship will sail for the Indian Ocean, a trip that will take a good week. We will thus have plenty of time to get accustomed to this ship

before we will arrive in our area of operations. I am now going to go see Colonel Wilkinson, in order to get his directives for the days to come. In the meantime, you will go up to the marines' cafeteria, situated amidship and two decks up, and have breakfast while waiting for my return. Staff Sergeant Gambino will march you up to the cafeteria. Let's move, people!"

While Gomer left their quarters, the platoon sergeant quickly formed up the 41 marines in two parallel files, then ordered them on the march, walking out of their quarters and following the hallway outside before walking up the series of wide ramps connecting the various decks of the GUADALCANAL. When the platoon arrived at the marines' cafeteria, they found a vast compartment measuring sixty meters by twenty meters and filled with long tables with fixed benches. Gambino however didn't tell his marines to sit, instead leading them to the service counter of the cafeteria and asking the cooks on duty there to serve breakfast to his marines. Since their arrival had been anticipated, everything was ready to serve meals and Greta was quickly able to fill a plate with scrambled eggs, sausages, bacon and toasts with jam. She also filled a glass of fresh milk before going to sit with the other members of her rifle squad at one of the tables. While not exactly of three-star quality, the food proved to be more than adequate, putting the marines in a good mood. After emptying her plate, Greta went to get a cup of hot coffee and returned to her table, imitated by most of her comrades. Private Mike Hanley, the most junior member of Greta's fire team, smiled to her while sipping on his own cup of coffee.

"So, Corporal, this would be your second deployment at sea, right?"

"Wrong! After my cruise on the NEPTUNE during the Caucasus War, during which we also participated in the rescue operation in Somalia to free the occupants of two hijacked civilian planes, our battalion went back to Camp Lejeune for training, then returned again on the NEPTUNE, in time for the Russia-United States nuclear spat. While we stood ready to do an amphibious assault if need be, the NEPTUNE took care by itself of the enemy around us, sinking a number of Russian ships and submarines with its missiles. So, this is actually my third combat deployment at sea, Hanley."

"Wow! At that rate, you will soon grow gills, with all that time at sea."

"I don't mind that at all, actually. It is all valuable experience for a marine and I get to do something I love: traveling and seeing new places. It also allows me to save money thanks to the sea pay I get during my time on ships. Thankfully, all my

deployments were on new ships with the improved habitability standards imposed on the Navy by General Dows. In the landings at Guadalcanal, some 55 years ago, our marines had to contend with living out of stretchers stacked four-high. I shudder when imagining what kind of miserable experience that had to be.”

“General Dows...” said Hanley in a dreamy tone. “Now there goes a true fighting legend.”

“A legend who actually fought on Guadalcanal in 1942, both in the air and on the ground. I read her auto-biography about her World War 2 combat career and her fighting in the First Korean War: a truly fascinating book.”

“Yet, she still looks like a near-teenager.”

“Yeah!” said Greta while sighing. “I wouldn’t mind having perpetual youth myself.”

09:41 (East Coast Time)

Taxi approaching the docks of the Sunny Point Ocean Terminal

“Damn! I hope that we will arrive in time to be able to board the GUADALCANAL.” worried Rose Muse while looking again at her watch. “Our producer at CNN will kill us if we miss that ship. How long before we arrive at Dock Number Two, mister?”

“We will be there in a minute, miss.” answered her taxi driver in a reassuring tone. “I already can see that the GUADALCANAL is still at quay, with its ramps still down, so no need to worry. You’re going to do some reporting on the Navy, miss?”

“Uh, yes!” answered Rose, not wanting to say more. CNN knew about this combat deployment of marines to Somalia only because somebody in the Pentagon had leaked to a friend who worked at CNN what had supposed to stay confidential information. Rose couldn’t help wonder if that Pentagon official still had a job today. However, with CNN now in the know, the Pentagon had been forced to accept the request of CNN to embed a small field reporting team with the operation, in exchange of which CNN had promised to keep that information to itself for the moment. That is of course unless somebody else also learned about it, in which case CNN would then publish Rose’s reporting at once, in order to keep one pace ahead of its competitors. Her field cameraman, Bryan Makena, raised his big video camera to his right shoulder in order to film the U.S.S. GUADALCANAL while their taxi was approaching it.

"This is a big baby, Rose, and also an impressive one: look at all those guns on this ship."

"Aren't guns kind of 'passé' in this age of modern warfare?" replied Rose, who didn't know much about military affairs. Her remark made her taxi driver, a man with gray hair, snicker.

"Naval guns will never be 'passé', miss. I served in the Marines myself, decades ago, and there are no better weapons to support an amphibious landing than big naval guns. Missiles may be more accurate and longer-ranged, but they also are a lot more expensive than shells, apart from being a lot more complicated to maintain and repair. Believe me, miss: the marines of my time would have loved to have such a ship as the GUADALCANAL to support them in combat."

"Oh, okay!"

The taxi soon stopped at the foot of a wide ro-ro ramp extending from the aft port side of the U.S.S. GUADALCANAL, allowing Rose and Bryan to get out and start unloading their multiple kit bags of equipment and personal effects. One of the marines guarding the foot of the ramp walked to Rose as the taxi left and asked her a question in a neutral tone of voice.

"Excuse me, miss. This ship is about to deploy on an operational mission. Do you have an authorization to come aboard the U.S.S. GUADALCANAL?"

"I do, mister." replied Rose while taking out of her vest pocket an envelope and extracting from it a document that she then handed to the marine NCO.

"Here is our authorization from the Pentagon's public relations office to go on the GUADALCANAL as an embedded media team, mister."

Taking the document and reading it carefully, the marine then looked back at Rose.

"Could I see some identification cards with photos for both of you, miss?"

"Of course! Bryan, take out your passport."

The marine examined their passports for a moment, then nodded his head and smiled for the first time to the Kenyan-Somali-American young woman.

"Everything seems to be in order, miss. Let me make a radio call to advise my officer and get a cart to pick you and your luggage up."

The marine was tempted to add something in the line of 'one man, one kit' as he eyed the big, bulging equipment bags of the CNN team but restrained himself and took a few

steps away from Rose before calling his superior with his pocket radio. After a one-minute conversation, he came back to Rose and spoke to her.

"My officer will soon come with an electric cart to escort you aboard and bring you to a pair of cabins. Since we don't exactly have visitors' facilities on the ship, you will be staying with one of our marines' sub-units."

"Uh, do you have proper facilities for women, mister?"

Her question brought a smile on the face of the marine sergeant.

"We do! In fact, the battalion now embarked on the GUADALCANAL includes dozens of female marines, miss. Don't worry about your intimacy while aboard, Miss Muse."

Some nine minutes later, what looked a bit like an electric golf cart, but with a larger cargo platform, rolled down the ro-ro ramp and stopped near Rose, with a young marine lieutenant in combat uniform then stepping out of it and saluting Rose.

"Good morning, Miss Muse! I am Lieutenant Kenneth Gomer, commander of the 3rd Platoon, Bravo Company of the 1st Marine Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment. You and your cameraman will be accommodated with the marines of my platoon. For your info, one of my marines is a woman. We will now load your stuff on this cart, then will roll inside the ship."

"Your help is much appreciated, Lieutenant Gomer." replied Rose while shaking hands with Gomer before helping him and Bryan put the team's luggage on the cart. They then rolled up the large ramp and through a wide vehicle hangar half full of armored vehicles and trucks, then down a wide internal circulation ramp that led them down by one deck. Rose was frankly surprised by the wide circulation spaces and said so to Gomer, who smiled in response.

"The U.S.S. GUADALCANAL was specifically designed to accommodate large numbers of both troops and equipment, so particular attention was attached to providing easy access and movement throughout the ship. That is why you will mostly see such wide access ramps instead of the steep and narrow ladders you will see in most war movies about navy ships. In fact, the passageways were made wide enough for small vehicles like our cart to use them. Most vehicles used aboard this ship are also electric, to avoid the fumes from internal combustion engines to contaminate the inside air."

"And what kind of accommodations do your marines have, Lieutenant? What I saw in past documentaries and films about life on Navy ships was not very encouraging."

"Those past standards of living space are now fading away, Miss Muse. Four years ago, General of the Army Ingrid Dows ordered new habitability standards for the ships of our navy, with in particular the need to provide individual cabins to every member of their crews. Since then, all new warships built for the Navy have been designed along those new habitability standards. The cabin you will occupy has a floor surface of fifty square feet and is very well designed and comfortable. There is also a small bathroom reserved for the exclusive use of women. Once in our platoon quarters area, I will have Corporal Greta Visby show you your cabin and that bathroom. Your cameraman will also occupy a cabin in my platoon's quarters."

"Greta Visby? That sounds like a Scandinavian name, no?"

"Corporal Visby was indeed born in Sweden and emigrated to the United States with her father while still a teenager. She is an excellent marine and already has quite a lot of combat experience. She even fought on the ground in Somalia once, when we rescued the passengers of two hijacked airliners that had been forced by terrorists to land in Somalia."

"I remember that incident. It was quite a heroic rescue operation."

"Thank you, Miss Muse. Uh, may I ask what is your family's ethnic origin? Is your family originating from Africa?"

"My father was a Somali merchant who was forced to move to Kenya because of the depredations and thieving of Somali warlords and Islamic extremists, while my mother is Kenyan. Both of them moved to the United States a year before I was born. By the way, I am 22 years-old. If you wonder why CNN chose such a young newbie like me to be sent as an embedded reporter for this operation, the reason was both simple and practical: I can speak Somali, along with Swahili, Arabic and of course English. My cameraman, Bryan Makena, is also of Kenyan origin and can speak Swahili and Kikuyu, a Bantu language common in Kenya."

That answer seemed to interest Gomer to the highest degree, making him smile in contentment.

"But, that's perfect! Our battalion had nobody able to speak Somali...before you arrived. We did however have a number of Arabic speakers. My battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Paul Wilkinson, will be most interested to learn about your linguistic

abilities. Apart from doing your reporting, would you be averse to serve as well as an interpreter while in Somalia?”

“I would be please to act as your unit’s translator on the ground, Lieutenant, as that will also allow me to accompany your marines from up close.”

“Excellent! Aah, here we are!”

The cart, driven by a navy sailor, then stopped in front of a large, watertight door, allowing Gomer, Muse and Makena to step out of it and unload the team’s kit. Gomer then went briefly inside to get the help of two of his marines, who brought the bulging kit bags inside the platoon assembly area. Gomer then pointed to a door on one side of the open area.

“We have a platoon equipment storage room there, Miss Muse. It is only half-full, so we will be able to store your broadcasting equipment inside it. Don’t worry about theft: I hold the key to that room.”

“Excellent! You are a most helpful man, Lieutenant.”

“Thank you, miss!”

Once everything but the personal bags of Rose and Bryan were locked inside the storage room, Gomer went to one of the nearest cabins, which was unoccupied and showed its inside to the CNN crew.

“This cabin was meant to lodge a navy corpsman to be attached to my platoon but, since the corpsmen aboard this ship already have their own individual cabins, Mister Makena will be free to use it.”

Not having expected so much, the cameraman quickly entered the small cabin and dropped off his single kit bag and his camera bag under the bed before sitting in the swiveling chair fixed to the deck in front of the desk located under the bed. That chair proved to be extremely comfortable, being an executive-style captain’s chair that could be inclined and also could slide forward and back by a few centimeters, in order to better accommodate its occupant inside the cabin’s restricted space. His eyes then fell on the small, flat-screen television set hooked to the wall across from the bed.

“You have television sets inside your individual cabins? This is incredible! What channels can you watch on them, Lieutenant?”

“We have access to six main American civilian channels via satellite communications dishes, including CNN and the Sports Network, plus you have a channel for in-house ship announcements and information briefings. At the head of your

bed, along with a book shelf and a reading light, you will find a fixed AM/FM radio with laser disk player, along with a pair of ear microphones, so that you don't wake up other people while listening to music."

"This is great!" exclaimed with enthusiasm the cameraman. "When I think that I was expecting to spend weeks living out of some tiny bed space."

"Well, everybody in the Navy and Marine Corps is now praising General Dows to heaven for promulgating her new crew habitability standards and making our lives at sea more comfortable. One nice side-effect of her new standards is that the reenlistment rate in the Navy has doubled because of them, saving tens of millions in personnel recruitment and training. The few critics she had about this, most of them old-fashioned navy officers, have by now clamed up as a result. Well, I believe that it is time to show to Miss Muse her cabin."

"I'll go with you, so that I know where Rose's cabin is."

With Bryan Makena in tow, Gomer then led Rose down one of the corridors lined with cabin doors and stopped in front of a cabin before opening its door.

"Your cabin, Miss Muse. If you will first drop off your bags inside, I will then show you where the female bathroom is."

Rose did so, noticing at the same time that her cabin was exactly like the one given to her cameraman, then followed Gomer to near the end of the corridor, where he opened another door. This time, instead of being the door to a cabin, she saw inside a small but well-equipped communal bathroom containing two sinks, two toilet stalls and two shower stalls. There was also an over/under combination washer and dryer unit in one corner. That last item left her a bit surprised.

"Why put a clothes washing machine and dryer here? Don't you have a ship's laundromat for the crew?"

Her question brought an embarrassed smile on Gomer's lips.

"Well, there is a laundry room that is part of my platoon's quarters, like in all the new standard ships, but the first couple of years of that system brought a rather unfortunate problem: the female crewmembers who used them alongside male crewmembers ended up seeing their underwear items disappear on a regular basis, with male crewmembers stealing them as some kind of sex trophies. The Navy, after cracking down on that problem with little success, finally decided to provide its female personnel on ships with a separate set of washers and dryers for their exclusive use.

Now, any male crewmember caught inside a female-assigned bathroom, unless busy doing some repair or maintenance in it, will be automatically charged with a disciplinary offense.”

Gomer’s explanation made Bryan Makena burst out in laughter, while Rose slapped a hand over her face.

“Men! They will never change.”

“You are right about that, Miss Muse. You will be sharing this bathroom with Corporal Visby, who is the sole woman in my platoon.”

“And what kind of job does she do, Lieutenant? Driver? Radio operator?”

“Rifleman in charge of a fire team of four marines, including herself.” replied Gomer, becoming most serious. “Corporal Greta Visby is already a combat veteran who earned the Navy Commendation Medal and the Combat Action ribbon, plus four other medals and ribbons. She also holds the Marine Corps Rifle Sharpshooter’s Badge and the Pistol Marksman’s Badge, on top of practicing martial arts.”

“Wow!”

“Wow is the word, miss. A few years earlier, I didn’t think much of women as marines, but Corporal Visby opened my eyes and mind to the reality that women, with the proper training, can be as effective as any men in combat, except in terms of brute strength. However, women have also proven to often surpass men in terms of patience and persistence. The Soviets used those qualities to form some outstanding female combat snipers during World War 2. As for being combat pilots, you just need to look at General Ingrid Dows and at the women who flew with her during the Guadalcanal Campaign in 1942. I believe that Corporal Greta Visby will go far if she stays in the Marine Corps. I will now see if she is in her cabin next door.”

Going to the next door down the corridor, Gomer knocked on it and immediately got a response.

“Come in!”

Opening the sliding door, Gomer stuck his head inside and smiled to Greta, who was sitting at her desk and reading a book.

“Corporal Visby, you will have a female soulmate during this mission: Miss Rose Muse, a CNN reporter who will be embedded with our unit for this deployment. I just allotted her Cabin # 5.”

Putting down her book at once, Greta got up from her chair and came to her door to shake hands with Rose, who found her grip to be quite strong.

"Happy to meet you, Miss Muse. Living as the lone woman surrounded by dozens of young men is not always easy."

"I can believe you on that, Corporal Visby. By the way, this is Bryan Makena, my cameraman."

Greta eyed quickly the tall but fairly thin black man before shaking hands with him.

"Pleased to meet you as well, mister."

Rose then looked questioningly at Kenneth Gomer.

"What's next, Lieutenant?"

"We will raise anchor and leave port in about four hours, after all of our supplies will have been loaded aboard. Then, we will sail for Somalia, crossing the Atlantic, entering the Mediterranean and then passing through the Suez Canal and finally rounding the Horn of Africa."

21:44 (GMT) / 19:44 (East Coast Time)

Monday, November 3, 1997 'C'

Female bathroom, 3rd Rifle Platoon quarters, U.S.S. GUADALCANAL

In the middle of the North Atlantic

Quite tired and sweaty after her intense physical training session in the ship's well-equipped musculation room, Greta went to the female bathroom next door to her cabin and entered it, carrying a set of clean underwear, a towel and her hygiene kit in her hands. Quickly undressing, she then stepped inside one of the two shower stalls of the bathroom and turned on the water. She sighed with relief as the warm water soaked her and washed away the sweat. Next, she soaped herself up before starting to rinse the soap off her body. As she rinsed her throat area while looking up, her sharp eyesight made her notice something for the first time: in one of the top corners of the shower stall was a tiny cubic object painted the same color as the walls of the stall. The way it was placed and its color made it next to unnoticeable to the eye. Looking at it for a few seconds, her curiosity then turned to anger, making her swear to herself.

"What the fuck is that?"

Jumping up inside the shower stall, she tried to grab the mystery object but missed it. Trying a second time, she succeeded in getting hold of it and ripping it off its position as she fell back down. Her anger then turned into pure fury when she saw that a pair of

electrical wires had been connected to the back of the object, which sported a tiny lens of only a few millimeters in diameter on its face.

"A fucking micro-camera! If I catch the pervert who placed this here, I will kill him!"

Hurriedly drying herself and putting on her clean underwear and set of T-shirt and shorts, she briefly went back to her cabin and dropped her towel, dirty underwear and hygiene kit on her bed before nearly running to Lieutenant Gomer's cabin, situated next to the platoon assembly area, knocking on its door.

"Come in!"

Opening the sliding door, Greta took one step inside the cabin before coming to attention.

"Sir, I wish to report a grave infraction: I just found a micro-camera hidden inside one of the shower stalls of the female bathroom."

"WHAT?!" shouted Gomer. Greta then took a few steps towards him and showed him the camera she was holding in her right hand.

"Here is the camera in question, sir. It was fixed to one of the top corners of the shower stall and was quite difficult to notice."

Taking the camera presented by Greta, Gomer examined it carefully for a few seconds before looking back at her.

"Show me where exactly you found it, Corporal."

"Right away, sir."

Both of them then left the cabin and walked quickly to the female bathroom, where Greta made sure that Rose Muse was not inside before entering it with Gomer. Going to the shower stall she had just used, Greta pointed to her officer the spot where the camera had been.

"It was over there, sir. You can see the two wires which were connected to the camera and are now visible, coming out of that tiny hole in the ceiling."

"FUCK! The last thing we need during this deployment is for some pervert to abuse our female personnel. The colonel will be furious about this."

A nasty idea then crossed his mind and he turned around to step inside the other shower stall, a mere pace away.

"GOD DAMMIT! THERE IS ANOTHER CAMERA HERE AS WELL!"

"WHAT?!" nearly screamed Greta, incensed. Gomer then faced her and pointed an index at her.

"Stay here, Corporal, and don't let anyone touch anything here. I am going to go see our battalion commander at once about this. I should be back here in a few minutes at most."

"Understood, sir."

Gomer then left at a near run, still holding the micro-camera ripped off by Greta.

Gomer had been gone for nearly five minutes when Rose Muse entered the bathroom, obviously intent on taking a shower. Greta stopped her at once with an authoritative gesture.

"Stop right there, Rose, and close and lock the door behind you."

While surprised by this, Rose obeyed her and locked the door of the bathroom before looking questioningly at Greta.

"What is going on, Greta?"

In response, Greta signaled her to come to the shower stalls and showed her the tiny camera that was still in place.

"Rose, I want you to keep this strictly to yourself and to not inform CNN about this, so to avoid a very damaging scandal for the Navy. What you see in that top corner is a micro-camera, positioned to film any woman taking a shower. I saw another similar camera while showering and ripped it off before going to alert Lieutenant Gomer. He has just gone to alert the battalion commander about this, so I expect that an intensive investigation will follow."

While truly incensed by this, Rose couldn't help remind herself of other cases of Navy scandals and eyed Greta in a dubious way.

"And what tells you that the Marine Corps or the Navy will not simply bury this in order to avoid a scandal, Greta?"

"Not this time, Rose! Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson is a decent, honorable man who would never condone that kind of sexual abuse. I am confident that he will push to the maximum to find and punish the culprit."

Rose mulled over that for a few seconds before an idea came to her mind.

"Bryan! Apart from being an excellent cameraman, he also is a highly trained video camera technician. Maybe he could tell us something about those kind of surveillance micro-cameras."

"Hum! That's actually a good idea, Rose, but let's wait until Lieutenant Gomer returns before asking Bryan about this. For the time being, you better go back to your cabin and stay there until further notice."

"Okay!" lamely said Rose before leaving the bathroom.

Some three more minutes later, Gomer was back, with Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson, his second-in-command, Major Chris Walters, First Sergeant Richard Fielding and a female Navy Commander. Squeezing herself in one corner, Greta let her superiors and the navy officer look inside the shower stalls, with Fielding cupping his hands together to allow Wilkinson to get up to the level of the intact camera. The battalion commander swore loudly before coming down and letting the female navy commander get up and look herself at the camera. Meantime, he went to Greta, who came to rigid attention.

"Corporal Visby, you told Lieutenant Gomer that you were taking a shower when you spotted the first camera. I thus deduce that you were then naked and thus became a victim of sexual abuse. Do you want to put up an official complaint about this?"

"Certainly, sir! If I may, sir: Rose Muse, the CNN female reporter lodging a few cabins away, told me that her cameraman is an expert video camera technician. Maybe he could help us by telling us what he knows about such spy cameras."

"An excellent idea, Corporal. Go get that man right away. Commander Robertson, could you please get your ship's photographer here, so that he could take some evidence shots of these cameras and of these shower stalls?"

"Of course, Colonel!"

Before Commander Robertson could leave, Greta hurried to speak further.

"Sir, what tells us that other female bathrooms around this ship have not been tampered with as well? Anyone pervert enough to do this would probably try to obtain as much footage of naked women as he could."

Wilkinson exchanged an angry look with Commander Robertson at those words.

"Damn! I believe that Corporal Visby has a very valid point here, Commander. I will have all the female bathrooms used by my female marines checked out right away for spy cameras."

"I will have the same done across the ship, Colonel Wilkinson."

The latter then looked back at Greta as Robertson left the bathroom.

"You again have proved to have a quick, incisive mind, Corporal Visby. I will remember that. Now, go get that CNN cameraman."

"Yes sir!"

Thankfully, Bryan Makena was in his cabin, busy checking the charge in his camera batteries, and Greta was able to quickly get him to the female bathroom, where he examined the camera ripped out by Greta.

"Hum, I actually have seen this model of spy camera before."

"You have? Where, mister?" asked Wilkinson.

"In a New York store specializing in so-called spyware. It sells a number of miniature cameras used by detectives and private investigators, including this model."

"And this spyware, is it legal? Who can buy it?"

"Anybody, sir! The purchase of such equipment is perfectly legal, but some of its uses are not, like in this case."

"Are such mini-cameras expensive, Mister Makena? Could someone buy them in bulk?" asked Major Walters.

"Uh, they are not exactly cheap and normally go for a couple hundred dollars or more a pop. Since military salaries are not known to be very high, I would surmise that, either you will find only a few more cameras, if any, or the pervert at work here will have bought a number of them a few at a time along the months."

"And how does such a pervert see or record the images from such cameras? This one had wires attached to it."

"Well, from what I have seen to date of this ship, I suppose that physically following the wires it was attached to all the way would be next to impossible, while I can't see that someone would be able to string along such wires along any length of this ship. My bet is that this camera was connected to some kind of electronic relay transmitter. I would however have to search the ceiling area to see to where those wires went."

Wilkinson and Walters exchanged a brief look before the former pointed an index at the cameraman.

"Then, could you please go get your tools, mister?"

"No problems, Colonel. I will be back in a minute."

Once Makena was gone, Wilkinson smiled to Greta, who was still standing in a corner.

“Thank you for alerting us to this and well done, Corporal. You may now return to your cabin.”

“Yes sir!”

Quite disturbed by all this and still feeling angry, Greta returned to her cabin, where she did her best to change her mind by listening to some quiet music while lying on her bed.

23:39 (GMT) / 20:39 (East Coast Time)

Suite of the captain of the U.S.S. GUADALCANAL

Captain (Navy) James Wainwright looked down with a mix of anger and discouragement at the over twenty miniature cameras that Commander Sylvia Robertson had just put on his work desk. Behind Robertson stood Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson and Lieutenant (Navy) Steve Partridge, the ship’s security officer.

“I can’t believe this! Where were these found, Commander?”

“Six of them were found in bathrooms reserved for the use of female marines, sir. Of the other sixteen we found in an extensive but discreet search around the ship, ten were found in the shower rooms used by our female sailors, while the last six ones had been planted in the shower stalls inside the cabins of a few of our female officers, sir. The CNN cameraman traveling aboard helped our own electronic technicians to find out how the images taken by those cameras were retransmitted to whoever had placed them. Basically, each camera was connected by wires to a small transmitter, which sent radio signals on a specific, short-range frequency that we are not equipped to trace. Our own electronic warfare equipment could not detect those signals, since it works at different frequencies and because its antennas are outside of the hull, not inside.”

“So, how do we find the bastard who placed those cameras, Commander?”

“We may have had a break about that, Captain.” replied Robertson. “A team is presently investigating a lead given to us by one of the chief petty officers used to guide the marines upon their arrival on the ship.”

23:41 (GMT) / 20:41 (East Coast Time)

Chief Petty Officers’ quarters

The navy lieutenant-commander, accompanied by an electronics engineer and by four burly marines, knocked on the door of a cabin he had stopped in front of but got

no answers. After knocking again, with still no response, he then opened the door and entered a three and a half-meter by three-meter cabin and, looking around, pointed at a laptop computer visible on the work desk of the cabin.

"Granger, check out that computer. The rest, search this cabin for any suspicious electronic equipment but don't make a mess of it."

As the navy electronics engineer opened the laptop and powered it up, the four marines started methodically searching the cabin. Within the first minute, one of the marines called the senior officer to one of the two closets of the cabin and showed him a navy footlocker which was locked up with a key padlock.

"Do I have your permission to cut this padlock, sir?"

"Go right ahead, corporal. Consider this as being an official criminal investigation."

The marine was about to cut the padlock of the footlocker when he froze and exclaimed himself.

"What the fuck? I see a small hole near the back of that footlocker, with an electrical extension coming out of it."

"Let me see, Corporal!"

The senior officer bent down over the footlocker and effectively saw an electrical extension coming out of it. Following that extension, he found out that it ran out of the closet and ended up being plugged to an electrical outlet. Now sure that they had hit the jackpot, the lieutenant-commander looked at the marine corporal.

"There is some kind of live electronic equipment inside that footlocker. Cut that padlock at once, Corporal."

The marine obeyed him and cut the padlock with his big bolt cutters, then opened the footlocker. What he and the lieutenant-commander saw inside made him whistle.

"Look at that shit! This is straight out of a James Bond movie."

The lieutenant-commander's jaws tightened as he eyed the sophisticated radio receiver and recorder system he was now looking at: he had hit the jackpot alright. The footlocker also contained an uninterrupted power supply unit, dozens of laser disks and a couple of computer flash drives. Sifting through the laser disks, he saw that they were simply marked with a date. Taking the disk with the most recent date, which was dated yesterday, he went to the electronic engineer trying to switch on the laptop computer on the desk.

"How are you doing, Granger?"

"Not very well, sir: I can't break through the password of that laptop."

"You did bring your own computer with you, no?"

"I did, sir."

"Then, try this laser disk in it and let's see what's in it."

The young engineer soon had his own computer out and switched on and inserted the laser disk in his CD player, then clicked on the menu to view it.

"It is filled with video files, sir, big ones."

"Open the one marked '3BM-021197', please."

The engineer did so, making a video film open and start playing. Both officers, along with the marines around them, opened their eyes wide when the video showed a young, pretty and athletic blonde naked and taking a shower. The lieutenant commander, while outraged by this criminal video, couldn't help get an erection while looking at the naked blonde.

"We got our guilty bastard! Okay, close the file and let's see what else is on the menu of this CD."

"Which file do you want to see, sir? There are dozens of them."

The senior officer thought that over for a moment while reading the titles given to each video files.

"Let's see! I would guess that '3BM-021197' could mean 'Third Platoon, Bravo Company of the Marines, taken on November the second. Open that file marked as 'ESB-021197'."

The engineer did so and a video appeared, showing another naked young woman taking a shower. However, that young woman was well known by the engineering officer, who exclaimed out loud as the lieutenant commander's mouth opened ajar from the shock.

"Ensign Susan Bridgeman? THE BASTARD! She works in my engineering department."

"Okay, close this file right now! We have seen enough and I don't want us to play peeping tom at the expense of our female navy and marine members. However, what I saw in that footlocker in that closet appeared to be some very sophisticated and expensive electronic equipment. How in the world could a simple chief petty officer afford such equipment?"

"Maybe someone provided it to him, in exchange for copies of all these video files of naked navy women, sir. That CPO Reeves could have made a fortune selling

copies of these video files to criminals running a pornography net. How far are these files he got dating back, sir?"

"Uh, one moment. I will go check."

What he then found shocked the lieutenant commander.

"Fuck! The oldest CD is dated from over a year ago. That guy is sitting on gigabits of pornographic video files."

"Uh, sir, you better come and look at this: I believe that the captain will now want to kill this CPO Reeves."

Ordering first his four marines to not look at the engineer's computer, he then went to look himself at the video now playing on it.

"THE EXO, COMMANDER ROBERTSON?!"

16:56 (GMT) / 13:56 (East Coast Time)

Tuesday, November 4, 1997 'C'

Flight deck of the U.S.S. GUADALCANAL

Approaching the Strait of Gibraltar

Captain James Wainwright, with Commander Sylvia Robertson at his side, greeted the graying man leading the group of three men and two women wearing civilian clothes, who had just stepped out of the PELICAN 'C' VTOL transport which had brought them from the American naval base in Rota, Spain.

"Welcome aboard, mister. I am Captain James Wainwright, captain of the U.S.S. GUADALCANAL. I am happy to see that the NCIS²² was able to send us an investigating team this quickly."

"We had to react as quickly as possible in view of the gravity of the crime, Captain. I am Special Senior Agent Mark Keating, in charge of this investigation team. With me are Special Agents Amie Grant, Roberta Winslow, Thomas Sturgis and Paul Smith. Where is the suspect, presently, Captain?"

"In a cell of our brig section. You will want to interrogate him, I presume?"

²² NCIS : Navy Criminal Investigation Service. In charge of investigating and prosecuting crimes committed aboard navy ships and installations, or crimes involving Navy personnel.

"Definitely, Captain. We have received a directive from General of the Army Dows to treat this case with the utmost severity, as it is bound to impact heavily on our female personnel."

"It is already impacting them heavily, Special Agent Keating. Even my Exo, Commander Robertson, fell victim to that pervert. The bastard managed to place one of his min-cameras inside her cabin."

"How did he manage that, Captain?"

"Easy: this CPO Reeves was in charge of the ship's plumbing and wiring maintenance and repair department. It was thus both routine and easy for him to quote inspect unquote the state of repair of the plumbing installations around the whole ship. But let's go inside in order to continue our conversation in a less noisy environment."

The group, led by Wainwright, then walked inside the big aircraft hangar of the landing ship, crossing its whole length before passing a steel door which gave access to the command installations of the ship. From there, Wainwright guided the NCIS team to a conference room, where they all sat after the agents put down their equipment bags along a wall. Wainwright, assisted by Robertson, then took a few minutes to tell the agents what had happened on the ship and also showed one of the video files contained on one of the laser disks found in Reeves' cabin. At the end of that, Keating slowly shook his head in disbelief.

"From what you just told us, Captain, I would say that we are now facing the biggest case of pornography traffic to ever involve the Navy. You said that the equipment this COP Reeves had was both sophisticated and expensive?"

"Correct! That is why we are suspecting that Reeves was in league with some criminal gang or group that would have provided him that equipment, in exchange for copies of his video files showing naked female sailors and marines. Unfortunately, that bastard has refused to say a word up to now."

"Then, I will be most happy to interrogate him thoroughly, Captain. Where is the equipment and laser disks you found?"

"Still in his cabin. We tried to keep the crime scene as undisturbed as we could. Commander Robertson will guide you to that cabin. One word of caution, though: we have a CNN embedded reporting crew of two persons aboard. They happen to be lodged in the marine platoon quarters where the first camera was found by a young marine corporal while she was taking a shower, so they know about this incident.

However, I strongly advised them not to publish anything about this incident, which could cause a scandal that would prove most detrimental to our female personnel. That CNN crew in turn promised me that they would clam up about the incident.”

“A good move, Captain. Do you have the names and cabin locations of those reporters?”

“Commander Robertson will provide you those names, along with the details concerning this incident, after she has led you to your cabins. You won’t mind lodging with our marines, I hope?”

Wainwright’s question made Keating smile with amusement.

“I am myself an ex-marine, Captain. Once a marine, always a marine.”

“Good! I will now leave you in the good hands of Commander Robertson. Again, thank you for flying in so quickly.”

“It was our pleasure and our duty, Captain.” replied Keating before shaking hands with Wainwright. The captain then left the conference room, leaving the investigators with the Exo, who spoke to the agents.

“If you will now grab your kit, I will lead you to your cabins.”

Shouldering the carrying straps of their travel bags and equipment kitbags, the five NCIS agents followed Sylvia Robertson out of the conference room, going down by two levels and then follow a long, two-meter-wide passageway to a steel door on the right side that she then opened. Leading the agents inside a wide-open space, Robertson told them to put down their bags, then went to get Lieutenant Kenneth Gomer, finding him in his cabin and making him get out to meet the agents.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is Lieutenant Gomer, in charge of the 3rd Platoon of Bravo Company, 1st Battalion of the 6th Marine Regiment. This whole incident started right here, when one of his marines, Corporal Greta Visby, found a camera in one of the shower stalls of the female bathroom of this compartment. Thankfully, each marine platoon quarters on this ship was designed to be able to accommodate either a full weapons platoon or a rifle platoon reinforced by a weapons squad, so there are still enough empty cabins in this compartment to accommodate all of you.”

“Excellent! That will simplify our team’s work by facilitating our communications.”

“If you don’t mind, Senior Agent Keating, I will start with your two female agents.”

“Of course! Ladies first!”

Taking a minute to assign cabins to Amie Grant and Roberta Winslow, Robertson then returned to the platoon assembly area in order to accompany the three male agents to their intended cabins. The five agents then returned to meet again with Robertson and Gomer once they had dropped their bags in their cabins. Keating couldn't help make a remark to the Exo then.

"Gee! I wish I could have had such a cabin during my time as a marine. This is positively luxurious as ship accommodations go."

"Well, only our most recently built warships enjoy such crew accommodations, Mister Keating. Our sailors across the Navy are all fighting to get assigned to one of those new ships."

"I can see why. Now, could you show us to the cabin of that CPO Reeves, while Agent Winslow will stay here to interview this Corporal Visby and take pictures inside your female bathroom?"

"I believe that Corporal Visby is presently in the ship's musculation room, sir." volunteered Gomer. "I will guide your agent to there."

"Thank you, Lieutenant! Well, let's get to work, people."

Now left with Gomer, Roberta Winslow first move was to go visit the female bathroom of the compartment, where she took multiple pictures with her digital camera, concentrating on the shower stalls. Once that was done, she asked to meet Greta Visby, prompting Gomer into escorting her up to the level of the Vehicle Deck, where the ship's sports facilities were situated. When the NCIS agent arrived at the sports section, she was struck by how vast an area it occupied and by how well it was equipped.

"My God! I served a few years on warships as a sailor and what we had available to exercise was minuscule in comparison."

"I can believe that, Agent Winslow. I myself served on a landing helicopter and dock ship and, despite it being about the same size as the GUADALCANAL, its facilities couldn't compare to those of this ship. The sports section on the GUADALCANAL includes a two-level aerobics section, a two-level musculation section, a single-level gymnasium with boxing ring, a martial arts dojo and male and female locker and shower rooms. I believe that we will find Corporal Visby on the upper level of the musculation section: she prefers to use the types of exercise machines found on that level."

"Tell me about that Corporal Visby, Lieutenant." said Winslow while following Gomer. "Is she a good marine? Is her word dependable?"

Gomer gave the NCIS agent a quick look while slowing down his walk, a sober expression on his face.

"To be truthful, Corporal Visby is my best junior NCO. She has now been part of my platoon for nearly three years now and she has proved to be both intelligent, resourceful, deeply honest, strong of character and body, skillful and courageous. She also happens to have fought a number of battles up to now, in both the Caucasus and Somalia, and distinguished herself in action. I expect her to earn her sergeant's stripes soon."

"Hum, sounds like she is a recruitment poster's marine, Lieutenant."

"She would indeed fit the bill perfectly in that role, Agent Winslow. Yet, she is not what you would call a mean, snarling bitch. She is in fact a quite calm, mature and responsible young woman with a great heart. She however also has an apparently insatiable taste for adventure, which is probably what attracted her to the Marine Corps."

"I see!"

Getting to the lower level of the musculation section and not finding Greta there, the pair went up the stairs leading to the upper level and found her there, using a bench-press machine. Roberta Winslow immediately noticed how athletic she looked, with some impressive muscles for a woman. She however also had a sexy body with plenty of curves and a cute young face. She presently wore skin-tight shorts and a tank top that put in valor her fit body as she pumped repeatedly a set of weights while lying on a low bench. Roberta's eyes opened wide when she saw that Greta Visby was pumping up and down a total of forty kilos and looked like she could have handled a lot more weight still. Roberta waited until the young blonde stopped her exercising on the bench before approaching her with Gomer.

"Corporal Visby, I am Special Agent Roberta Winslow, of the NCIS. My team and I were sent to this ship to investigate the incident where you found some evidence of crime. Could we speak in private somewhere?"

"Sure, miss! Would my cabin do?"

"It would."

"Do you have an idea about who the bastard is yet?"

"Yes! In fact, he is presently being held in the ship's brig."

"Good! Lieutenant, I am going to go to my cabin with Agent Winslow, if it is okay with you."

"Consider yourself at the service of the NCIS team until further notice, Corporal."

"Thank you, sir!"

Leaving the musculation section with Roberta and walking along one of the sides of the huge vehicle garage of the ship, Greta then went down one level and returned to her cabin. However, seeing that she was covered with sweat, Roberta stopped outside her cabin's door.

"You look like you really need a shower and I wouldn't want to make you delay that with endless questions. If you don't mind, I will ask you my questions while you shower."

"Too easy! Just let me get some spare clothes and my hygiene kit."

That took Greta only a few seconds, after which she led Roberta to the nearby female bathroom, where she closed and locked the door behind them. While a strictly heterosexual woman, Roberta couldn't help envy Greta's body as she undressed and prepared to shower. She also noticed that Greta's groin was closely shaved.

"I must say that I rarely saw a woman who looked as physically fit as you, Corporal. One of my male colleagues at the Rota office of the NCIS would have drooled at your sight right now."

That attracted an amused smile on Greta's face as she was about to step inside one of the two shower stalls.

"Many men have been drooling about my body in the last few years. In fact, I probably could lead by the nose any of the men in my platoon if I wanted to. However, I became a marine to serve my country, travel and live adventures, not to act like a bordello girl."

Roberta could only nod in agreement at that declaration. She waited until Greta had started the flow of water and was about to soap up before starting to question her, her notepad and pen at the ready.

"First, Corporal, tell me in detail how this whole thing started for you."

Greta executed herself, speaking for a couple of minutes while Roberta took notes.

"Now, Corporal, what does that CNN reporter and her cameraman know about all this?"

"They basically know that someone had placed spy cameras in this bathroom, while the cameraman, Bryan Makena, was able to identify the type of camera and where

it could have been procured. Apart from that, I believe that they have since then been kept away from the subsequent actions by my officers and the ship's staff."

"Excellent! We certainly don't want this to create a public scandal in the States." That made Greta stick her head out of the shower stall, worry on her face.

"You're not going to bury this just to save the Navy's reputation, are you?"

"Don't worry about that, Corporal: the suspect who is being held in the brig will most probably face multiple charges of sexual abuse, trafficking in pornography and conduct unbecoming. At the minimum, he will be liable to at least ten years in jail and dishonorable discharge, with the loss of his military pension and benefits."

"Trafficking in pornography?!" nearly shouted Greta, making Roberta realize that she had said maybe too much. "You are telling me that this bastard sold movies of me naked to someone else?"

"Look, Corporal: this may certainly look bad to you but I promise that we will do our best to find and arrest those linked to that bastard. To be frank, trafficking in illegal pornographic traffic is a huge business all around the World and, unfortunately, too many girls and women fall victims to that. However, General Dows is taking that problem very seriously and is closely following this particular case. Any member of the American forces or Defense Department found to be involved in this will be dealt with very severely by General Dows."

That seemed to reassure a bit Greta, who then continued her shower. Having no more questions for her, Roberta then concluded her interview and let the young marine finish her shower.

16:40 (GMT)

Wednesday, November 5, 1997 'C'

Captain Wainwright's office, U.S.S. GUADALCANAL

Sailing eastward through the Mediterranean Sea

"So, Special Agent Keating, have you found something significant?"

"I am afraid so, Captain. While we still have to do a lot of investigating, we already covered a few facts that are quite disturbing." answered Mark Keating after taking place in a sofa facing Wainwright's work desk. "First off, this CPO Reeves did not only film those women for his own perverted pleasure: he also apparently sold copies of his video files to criminals who possibly provided him with the sophisticated and costly

recording equipment we found in his cabin. After finally being able to break past the password he had installed on his laptop, we found a number of suspect emails using cryptic messages dealing with the sending out of video files and messages concerning the transfer of funds into Reeve's bank account. Those emails were sent to an address that we still have to investigate...in Romania."

"ROMANIA!?" nearly shouted Wainwright, suddenly furious.

"Yes, Captain: Romania. Unfortunately, that country harbors quite a few criminal groups known to be heavily involved in both illegal pornography, including pedophilia, and sexual human trafficking. This means that, in view of how long this Reeves has been collecting his films, copies of these video files are by now most probably to be found around the World."

"But this means that our female personnel could now be open to blackmailing attempts."

"It could, Captain. However, when I advised the Pentagon about this, the answer from General Dows was that any such attempts at blackmail will be replied with all the means at the disposal of the United States, including clandestine actions by the CIA overseas. That by the way comes directly from the President, who was not amused one bit about this. Reeves could in fact face additional charges because of this, including charges of treason, which still warrants the death penalty in the United States. If any of our servicewomen end up being targeted by blackmail attempts, then the Pentagon will provide them full support and protection."

"Knowing how decisive General Dows is in her response to various crisis, I must say that this relieves a lot of my fears, Special Agent Keating. What now?"

"My team will now fly back to Rota with the suspect, Captain. You will then be free to continue with your mission."

"Then, I wish you the best with your investigation. Get those bastards for me, mister."

"We will do our best, Captain." said Keating while getting up from the sofa and exchanging a handshake with Wainwright. The latter sat back, pensive, as the NCIS man left his office.

CHAPTER 14 – SOME ACTION AT LAST



17:15 (Somali Time)

Saturday, November 8, 1997 'C'

Assembly area of the quarters of 3rd Platoon, Bravo Company

U.S.S. GUADALCANAL, off the coast of Puntland, Somalia

Horn of Africa region, Indian Ocean

Greta felt excitement as she and the other members of her platoon assembled in the open area of their platoon quarters after being ordered by Staff Sergeant Gambino to do so: she could smell incoming action in the air. Once the whole platoon was assembled, Lieutenant Gomer stepped forward and started to speak in a strong voice.

"Marines of the 3rd Platoon, I have good news for you: we will see combat tomorrow morning."

The whole platoon cheered at that, with Greta being one of the loudest. Silence then fell back as Gomer continued.

"As you know already, our mission on this deployment was to deal decisively with the piracy threat to shipping around the coasts of Somalia. We are now off the

coast of Puntland, one of the regions of Somalia situated in the Horn of Africa and along the northeast coast of the country. Tomorrow, our objective will be the town of Harardhere, near the coastline. While Harardhere is little more than a hole in the middle of a semi-desertic area, it has the distinction of being nickname 'The piracy stock exchange center'. Believe it or not but in that town a number of so-called 'investors' buy and sell shares on the expected booty from upcoming pirate attacks on ships passing by the Somali coast. Beware that not all of those 'investors' are Somali. If you encounter Caucasian men wearing good quality clothes, carrying large sums in cash or gold and being possibly armed, then treat them as suspects and detain them. Also, there are strong rumors that many people taken hostages during ship boardings are being held there while pirate leaders negotiate ransoms with the families and employers of their hostages. Those hostages to date have been of varied origins, being either crewmembers or passengers from seized ships, owners of private yachts, humanitarian workers from international aid organizations or Kenyan citizens captured during border raids. Our problem is that our intelligence on both the armed thugs present in Harardhere and the locations and numbers of their hostages held in the town is limited and fragmentary. Our job will thus be made more delicate by the need to ensure that we don't blow up or shoot some of those hostages during our assault on the town. While we will respond with maximum force against the precise points from which we will encounter resistance, like a particular building or compound, we will have to be accurate in our shooting. This will definitely not be the time to simply spray bullets all around. So, I expect all of you to show a high level of marksmanship and control during the fight tomorrow. One other important point: the thugs we will face tomorrow, while unsophisticated, are heavily armed and possess plenty of anti-tank rocket launchers which can hurt badly our armored amphibians. Thus, don't expect a walk in the park and don't underestimate our enemy tomorrow. We will have to deploy tactically and use fire and movement to the utmost while fighting smartly. I will be blunt here: I will be quite surprised if we don't suffer casualties tomorrow. However, the lives of many innocent victims of those pirates and the safety of international shipping in this region will depend on the success of our mission."

One marine then raised his hand for a question, making Gomer look at him.

"Yes, Herrera?"

"Sir, what do we do if we face pirates using hostages as human shields?"

"A good question! Basically, our battalion's sniper platoon will follow closely our assault lines and will stand ready to blow the heads off of any pirates hiding behind hostages. However, under no circumstance are any of us to surrender our weapons when facing such a threat. That may sound bad for the hostages those thugs may be using but we are not going to let any of those pirates flee with their hostages. Hopefully, once our snipers will have dealt with the first pirates attempting to use hostages as human shields, then the other pirates will get the message and surrender. If pirates attempt to flee but are still armed, then they are to be shot down, no ifs or buts. While we will refrain from shooting on unarmed people, we will not be there to play nice. If someone is armed and does not immediately drop his weapons or fires at us, then he is to be shot, period! I have pinned a photomap of Harardhere and its surrounding area on our wall display board. If you will look at it now, I will give you a short explanation on how we will proceed tomorrow morning."

Lieutenant Gomer then waited a bit to give time to his marines to reform in front of the said display board and photomap before continuing his speech.

"Harardhere is situated a few miles from the coast proper, with a small fishing village on the coast linked to it by a dirt road. Our battalion will attack the town from three directions in the early morning. Alpha Company and our anti-tank platoon will first land at night to the North and South of the town and will establish barrages on the three main roads coming out of Harardhere, in order to block and annihilate any group of armed thugs trying to flee the town. They will land in PELICANs well away from the town and will then do a night march towards Harardhere, in order to keep surprise intact. As for our company and Charlie Company, we will land on the coast at this fishing village there, using our armored amphibians, and will prevent the occupants of the village from alerting Harardhere by phone. Marines from one platoon of Charlie Company will take care of that and will also destroy any boat or skiff found with weapons aboard them, then will confiscate any weapon found in that village. While they do that, the rest of Charlie Company and our own company will continue on at top speed towards Harardhere. While Charlie Company will assault from the East, along that road, our company will split up before getting to the town and will do a wide left flanking movement, in order to assault the center of the town from the South. That part of Harardhere is where we expect most of the hostages and prisoners to be held, so our part of the assault will be crucial for the success of our mission. I will now let you time to examine that photomap

before answering any questions you may have about our rules of engagement. In the meantime, I will brief our squad leaders on the details of our assault plan.”

Rose Muse, who had been watching from the sidelines with her cameraman, Bryan Makena, then approached Gomer to ask him a question.

“Lieutenant, we would like to accompany your marines on this assault tomorrow. My cameraman and I are overdue to produce something for CNN that would justify our trip with you on this ship.”

“You do realize that this will be very dangerous, Miss Muse. Those pirates don’t use peashooters.”

“We knew that this could be dangerous well before boarding this ship, Lieutenant. Me and Bryan are both Kenyan-Americans and we know plenty about the chaos and anarchy in Somalia. I will never prove myself as a worthy field correspondent if I avoid risky assignments.”

“Very well, miss. My battalion commander already told me to let you come if you asked so. Be ready to get up for four in the morning tomorrow, local hour: we will leave while it is still dark.”

04:33 (Somalia Time)

Vehicle Deck, U.S.S. GUADALCANAL

Twenty kilometers off the Somali coast

Rose Muse couldn’t help be impressed by the size of the tracked armored vehicle she was about to get in by its rear access ramp. The AACV-8A ALLIGATOR was about the size of a bus, but a bus with a boat-shaped hull and two wrap-around tracks. It also sported a turret armed with a 30mm cannon, two heavy machine guns and two missile launcher pods. While the AACV-8A was big on the outside, Rose was still surprised by the space available inside it. Sitting with Bryan in two of the seats near the front of the vehicle, she counted a grand total of 39 marines coming in the vehicle with them and taking place in the seats inside it. She then felt a mix of excitement and anxiety as the powerful engine of the armored amphibian started and the rear ramp closed up. There were only a couple of red lamps to let her see while enclosed inside the vehicle, so she could only rely on her ears and sense of motion to figure out what happened next. Her vehicle advanced a bit, then did a hard pivot before going down a

ramp. Forty seconds after that, the vehicle apparently splashed into the sea, bobbing up and down for a moment before the noise of the engine changed to high regime, with the armored amphibian quickly taking speed in the water. Rose looked at Greta Visby, sitting across from her on the other side of the troop compartment.

"This thing seems to float surprisingly well for its size after all, Greta."

"It better! It was specifically designed for this role."

"And how fast can it go in the water? In the war movies I saw, the marines used tracked vehicles like this one which were rather slow."

"The marines of World War 2 would have killed to have vehicles like this AACV-8A, Rose. It can actually speed around at up to 25 knots in the water, thanks to its two waterjets and its 1,500-horsepower engine."

Bryan Makena, who liked powerful cars, opened wide his mouth at that number.

"Fifteen hundred horsepower?! Why such a powerful engine?"

"To go fast in the water, of course! The slower you are while swimming, the better target you make for the enemy. Mind you, the Somalis should be completely taken by surprise by this vehicle: this is officially the first combat use of the AACV-8A in an amphibious operation."

"Oh!"

Both Rose and Bryan then fell silent while their vehicle sped in the water like a fast motor boat. It also bobbed up and down and sideways quite a lot, making Rose thank the fact that she was naturally resistant to sea sickness. Some thirty minutes later, Lieutenant Gomer shouted out a warning from his seat besides the turret basket of the vehicle.

"WE ARE ABOUT TO HIT THE BEACH, MARINES. HOWEVER, WE WILL STAY INSIDE AFTER IT ROLLS ON THE BEACH: WE ARE CONTINUING STRAIGHT TO HARARDHERE."

05: 14 (Somalia Time)

Small fishing village on the coast

Abdi had serious problems staying awake as he stood guard on the beach, next to the two skiffs which were due to leave in the morning in order to try to find a big, juicy target at sea. He had been on guard duty since ten last night and wished that he would

have some qhat²³ leaves to chew on to help him keep alert. The skiffs he was guarding had been loaded in advance with spare ammunition, including four RPG-7 rocket-launched grenades, plus some extra fuel cans for their engines. Somalia being Somalia, even would-be pirates had to guard against thieves. Following the crumbling of the central government a decade ago, Somalia had fallen into total anarchy, with a collection of warlords and criminal gang leaders then grabbing what they could to build up their fortunes and power. A couple of years ago, that situation had become even more chaotic with the apparition of groups of Islamic extremists who were even meaner than most Somali warlords, on top of being utterly fanatical in their religious beliefs. While those religious extremists didn't control this region yet, their influence and power kept increasing, worrying even big warlords like Abdi Hassan, who was presently controlling nearby Harardhere.

The wind suddenly started to bring some kind of engine noise from the sea, something that made Abdi shake himself awake and look at the sea. The night was still dark, with only a half moon to give him some light and he didn't see anything at first. Then, with the noise of approaching powerful engines becoming quite distinct, he then saw from the corner of one eye the white trail of a bow wave, some 200 meters away at sea. Grabbing his AK-47 assault rifle and arming it, Abdi then approached the waterline, walking with his bare feet on the white sand of the beach. He then spotted another white bow wave and became quite alarmed. Withdrawing to the two skiffs he was guarding, he then mentally tried to decide if he should go wake up his companions, who were sleeping in two of the huts nearby. Unable to take a decision due to his tired mind, he kept watching as more white bow waves approached the beach. Then, a huge dark mass started emerging from the water, rolling on tracks up the beach. By now close to panic, Abdi finally shouted out the alarm.

"ALI, THERE ARE BIG THINGS COMING OUT OF THE WATER! ALI! WAKE UP!"

Abdi, arming himself with courage, then raised his rifle and fired a ten-round burst at the nearest vehicle. However, his bullets apparently simply bounced on the vehicle with pinging noises. Overwhelmed, the young fisherman/pirate emptied his magazine on the steel beast, with no apparent results. However, the response of the big machine was

²³ Qhat : Plant whose leaves are used as a stimulant in many regions of Africa.

devastating for Abdi: an automatic cannon then barked with a noise that nearly deafened him. However, the cannon shells' bite proved much worse than their bark, exploding on impact and ripping apart both Abdi and the skiff he was leaning against. When Abdi's leader finally emerged from his hut, still-drowsy with sleep and holding his own assault rifle, he was instantly cut down by rifle fire from the more than thirty marines now running up the beach, supported by one AACV-8A. Only one of the would-be pirates managed to fire his rifle before being killed by a 30mm shell that exploded his head. The one fisherman who tried to call Harardhere on his cell phone was then killed inside his hut by a marine who caught him as he was about to speak in his phone.

All the while, the amphibians of Bravo Company and most of the vehicles of Charlie Company simply passed through the small fishermen's settlement and raced down the dirt trail leading to Harardhere. As their tracked vehicle rolled at high speed down the trail, Greta pointed to Rose a kind of small optics block attached to the roof near her seat.

"You can use that periscope to look around while we have our heads down in here. Use the knob on the side of it to orient it in direction and elevation."

Looking at the said periscope, a fairly small thing only ten centimeters in width and five centimeters in height, Rose saw that it effectively gave her a sort of small window on the outside. She also belatedly noticed that similar periscopes faced about every seat inside the armored amphibian. Grabbing the side knob of the periscope, she turned it and used it to make the whole thing pivot left and right while looking up at its optical lens.

"Wow! This is nice! I already feel less claustrophobic."

"There's that." replied Greta. "Those periscopes are also very useful for us to get a picture of the terrain and situation outside. If you turn the side knob a full circle, that will reverse the mirror and lens and you will then be able to see what is behind your back outside."

"Hey, that's neat! Thanks, Greta!"

"You're welcome!"

Both Rose and Bryan then kept using their periscopes to keep track of where they were going. The column of armored amphibians actually rolled for a few kilometers in the dark, following the dirt trail through a desertic landscape of rocks and sand sparsely dotted with small bushes and grass, before the vehicle carrying Rose split up from the

column along with five other amphibians, and headed to the left for a few minutes before starting a wide turn to the right. That prompted a question from Rose to Greta.

"Uh, where are we going now, Greta?"

"Our company, Bravo Company, is now conducting a wide flanking movement to the left in order to attack Harardhere from the South, while Charlie Company will assault it from the East. Presently, Alpha Company is already in ambush positions down the three roads linking Harardhere with the nearest towns, in case some of the pirates try to flee or if more thugs show up to help the town. Now, when us marines will leave this vehicle to assault the town on foot, you will have the choice of either following us outside or of staying in this vehicle and open one of the roof hatches in order to look and film around. I would strongly counsel that you stay in the vehicle: following our assault line on foot will be very dangerous for you and Bryan, as we expect some strong resistance, at least initially. CNN won't get your reports if you get killed on the first day."

What Greta didn't say then was that she would be truly pained to see the CNN reporter or her cameraman get wounded or killed here in Somalia. She thus hoped that her argument about sending reports to CNN would convince Rose to stay aboard the AACV-8A. Undecided at first, Rose exchanged a quick look with Bryan, then looked back at Greta.

"I want to be able to follow the action from up close while you will enter the town, Greta."

That made Greta sigh with clear disapproval. However, only a direct order from Lieutenant Gomer could force the CNN team to stay in the vehicle and she didn't want to insult Rose by stopping her from doing what was in essence her job as a war correspondent.

"Very well, Rose, but you were warned. Stay at least twenty paces behind our assault line during our advance on foot: you will be less tempting as a target for those Somali thugs. Have you ever been shot at before?"

"Uh, no!"

"Then, don't think of yourself as a coward if you freeze as the first bullets zip by: everybody who comes under fire for the first time will experience sudden, intense fear, even trained soldiers. Those who say they didn't are either liars or fools, or both."

Rose again exchanged a look with Bryan but didn't reply to Greta and fell silent while looking constantly outside via her periscope. It was now twilight and she was starting to be able to see things around. Then, without warning, her vehicle rapidly slowed down

before coming to a full stop. The big rear ramp then started to go down as Lieutenant Gomer shouted an order to his marines.

“DEBUS! DEBUS! DEBUS!”

“Debus?” said Rose to herself, confused. The marine closest to her, who was already getting up from his seat, grinned to her.

“That means ‘get the fuck out’, miss.”

“Oh!”

Rose, followed by Bryan, who was carrying on one shoulder his big video camera with zoom lens, let all 39 marines run out of the vehicle before following them. Once outside, she found herself in the middle of a flat, semi-desertic landscape, with a small town visible some 400 meters ahead of the line of six armored amphibians. The close to 200 marines who had exited the vehicles were now running and forming a long, extended line while keeping at least a few paces between each soldier. As soon as the line was formed, the order to advance was given by Captain Roberto Santiago, making the marines of Bravo Company advance at a trot, their rifles and machine guns at the ready. Seeing where Greta Visby was in the assault line, Rose then ran towards her and then followed behind her from a distance of some fifteen meters, while Bryan did his best to film while trying not to shake his camera too much. Nobody was shooting at them yet as the Sun started rising over the horizon. That allowed Rose to detail the town of Harardhere as she advanced on it with the marines. It wasn't much of a town, really, and was mostly composed of houses and storage sheds made from concrete blocks or clay bricks. There were no paved roads, the town roads being made of dirt and sand, and no street lights either. The only lights came from a number of windows in the still mostly dark town. Then, Rose heard the first noises of shots fired from the town. While the marines did not shoot back yet, they accelerated their pace, going from a trot to a run with their weapons raised. Soon, more shooters inside the town started firing at the marines, with a couple of bullets zipping over Rose's head and making her cringe with fear. While the marines did not fire back yet, probably waiting to be closer and thus to be able to pinpoint the shooters firing at them, the 30mm automatic cannons and .50 caliber heavy machine guns arming the assault amphibians opened fire in order to cover the marines on foot. With the vehicles equipped with sophisticated sights and powerful optics, their fire immediately started to make an effect. Bryan, stopping for a moment to steady his camera, took that occasion to film for a few seconds the surreal scene, with tracer bullets and cannon shells crisscrossing in the rising morning sky, sweeping the

houses and compounds from where enemy fire came. Shocked to find how powerful the firepower of their attackers was, the Somali sentries who had first reacted to the sight of the incoming vehicles hunkered down and started firing blind, raising their rifles above their heads and over low walls and window sills. Their accuracy was thus severely affected, with most of their bullets not even getting close to the marines running towards them.

With the AACV-8As still providing heavy covering fire, Greta and the three men of her fire team were able to arrive intact at the first houses of the town. Crouching for a few seconds behind the low wall of a compound containing two houses and a shed, she looked through the optical sight of her rifle and pointed it in succession at the windows she could see, searching for any visible enemy. She smiled to herself when she spotted a man firing a machine gun from an upper floor window, then aimed carefully and gently pressed her rifle trigger. The recoil from her .243 Winchester caliber rifle was mild and she was able to see with satisfaction the enemy machine gunner being projected backward and out of sight. Then, she felt her heart jump in her chest when a Somali gunman who had been hiding on the other side of the low wall she was using as cover popped up, startled by her presence as much as she was by his presence. However, Greta reacted faster than the man, who was holding an RPG-7 rocket-propelled anti-tank grenade launcher, and shot him dead with a single bullet to the head. As the man fell on his back, Greta jumped over the low wall and sprinted towards the nearby house in which had been the machine gunner.

"HANLEY, WITH ME! LET'S CLEAR THIS HOUSE! JOSHUA, TAKE A FIRING POSITION UPSTAIRS WITH YOUR MACHINE GUN AS SOON AS THE WAY IS CLEAR."

As the other two other fire teams of their rifle squad basically did the same, taking elevated positions in order to cover the advance of the rest of their platoon, the running Greta kicked open the flimsy wooden door of the house, then ran inside with her rifle leveled. Seeing a Somali gunman in the process of running down a staircase, she took a snap shot at him, hitting him in the legs and making him tumble down the stairs. Running towards the staircase, Greta shot in the head the wounded gunman in passing, then climbed the first few steps before stopping and pointing her rifle up. Another Somali then made the mistake of sticking his head in the floor opening, to see where she

was. That cost him his life, with him getting a single bullet in the head. That prompted a remark from her junior private, Mike Hanley, who was closely following her.

“You don’t seem to believe in automatic fire, Corporal.”

“I do but why waste many bullets when one will do? Remember the moto of the Corps: every marine a sniper. Okay, let’s go up!”

Both of them ran up the stairs and set foot on the upper floor and in a short hallway. Going to the nearest door, which was open, Greta took a quick look inside, finding a poorly furnished bedroom. She also saw that the machine gunner she had shot lay on the floor, the back of his head split open and his PKM 7.62mm medium machine gun at his side. Greta also saw two full 7.62mm ammunition belts on the floor, close to the window the man had used to fire.

“We just shot the three men of a machine gun team. Let’s check out quickly the other rooms of this house.”

Taking a minute to do so and finding nobody else on the upper floor, Greta then told her light machine gunner, Joshua Stern, to come up and take position at a window in order to cover the advance of her fellow marines. Seeing that there was another window of the upper floor that gave a view of the town in the right direction, Greta had an idea and she ran back to the room where the dead machine gunner lay.

“HANLEY, GRAB THOSE AMMO BELT BOXES!”

Greta herself grabbed the PKM machine gun and ran back to the window she intended to use to fire into the town. Thankfully, her unit’s regular training included familiarization courses on common enemy weapons, so she knew how to operate the Russian-made weapon. Taking a firing position at the window, she checked outside to see where the rest of her platoon was. She quickly spotted her squad leader, Sergeant Jeffrey Brown, crouched next to a building corner with four of his men and exchanging fire with a number of Somali gunmen hiding inside a house and firing their weapons as if they had an endless supply of ammunition at hand. Pointing her captured PKM and aiming it carefully, Greta fired a short burst that killed one of the gunmen as he appeared in a window to fire his rifle. A second short burst killed another gunman a couple of seconds later. That allowed Sergeant Brown and his four marines to run across the street and to storm into the house. Seeing two men, one of them armed with an RPG-7, run away from the house through a back door, Greta took a quick aim and fired a 20-shot burst, making the two Somalis crumble down in the middle of the street. Scanning quickly the

houses around through her window and seeing no other visible Somalis, Greta slung her assault rifle in her back and lifted her PKM from the window sill while shouting out loud.

“CHANGING POSITION NOW! LET’S RUN ACROSS THE STREET AND JOIN SERGEANT BROWN!”

“GOT IT!” replied her light machine gunner. Greta and her three marines then ran down the stairs and out of the house to cross the street, in time to be filmed by Bryan Makena, who had taken temporary cover with Rose behind the low wall of the compound. Rose opened her eyes wide on seeing the big machine gun handled by Greta.

“Yikes! Look at that big gun she now has. Let’s follow her! How are you doing, Bryan?”

“Me? I am filming some of the most exciting scenes I ever took with my camera. Our report should make a sensation on CNN.”

The two of them then ran after Greta and crossed the street as an intense firefight continued across this part of Harardhere.

Some 200 meters to the left of Sergeant Brown’s squad, Captain Roberto Santiago was leading a reinforced platoon towards his company’s designated main objective, a large, two-story, ‘U’-shaped building. That building, renamed ‘Objective Uniform’, had attracted the attention of the tactical reconnaissance drones launched yesterday by the U.S.S. GUADALCANAL, thanks to the level of activity around it and by the number of people seen entering and leaving it regularly. Santiago had thus good hopes to find some or all of the local leaders there and was thus pushing his marines towards it. Thankfully, while heavily armed and with apparently plenty of ammunition available to them, the militiamen and thugs defending Harardhere had proved up to now to be mostly fair to poor shots, relying instead on firing lots of bullets in long bursts of automatic fire. Still, Santiago had already seen at least two of his marines killed and half a dozen more wounded. While he was confident that his marines would win this battle, it certainly was no walk in the park. Looking at the building he was pushing towards, he suddenly saw something that he didn’t like: a high-end Range Rover all-terrain car escorted by two pickup trucks mounting heavy machine guns had just stopped in front of the main entrance of the building.

“Shit! I bet that the local head cheese and his friends are going to try to flee. No way, José!”

Keying the microphone of his radio headset, he then gave orders in an urgent tone to his unit.

“Bravo Two and Bravo Three, from Six Bravo: a Range Rover and two technicals²⁴ have just stopped in front of the main entrance of Objective Uniform. Advance swiftly and engage them. They are not to be allowed to escape, over.”

“Bravo Two, copy!”

“Bravo Three, copy!”

Next, Santiago urged his First Platoon forward, giving the example by leading the charge towards the main objective.

“FIRST SQUAD, YOU WILL COVER THE LEFT FLANK OF OUR ADVANCE ON OBJECTIVE UNIFORM. THIRD SQUAD, YOU WILL COVER OUR RIGHT FLANK. SECOND SQUAD, YOU WILL RUSH WITH ME TOWARDS THE OBJECTIVE. SERGEANT BROWN, DETACH ONE FIRE TEAM AND SEND IT TO THE MAIN ROAD TO BLOCK THE EXIT FROM TOWN.”

Having given his orders to his platoon, Lieutenant Kenneth Gomer sprinted across a street, followed by his Second Squad, attracting a burst of fire from one house some eighty meters away. The machine gunners of his First Squad immediately returned fire towards that house, with one M67 90mm recoilless rifle crew from Bravo Company's weapons platoon then aiming their weapon at the said house. Fired from well within its maximum effective range of 400 meters, the 90mm, three-kilo anti-tank shaped-charge round struck the house right in the center of the window from which rifle fire had been coming, penetrating inside before exploding and killing the three militiamen hiding inside the house. While satisfied by that result, Gomer still didn't yell in approval or grinned at that: his platoon had already suffered two casualties to the mostly inaccurate but dense fire from the town's militiamen and he may yet lose more marines in the coming minutes. However, that was the price one should expect to pay in battle: this was real life, not some Hollywood movie.

²⁴ Technicals: Nickname given by American soldiers to civilian-brand pickup trucks mounting heavy weapons, like heavy machine guns, recoilless guns and even light anti-aircraft cannons. 'Technicals' are very popular with militia forces around Africa and the Middle East.

As soon as he had run across the street behind his officer, Sergeant Brown, crouching behind a house corner, twisted his neck around to look at Greta Visby, who led his Fire Team 'B'.

"CORPORAL VISBY, TAKE YOUR FIRE TEAM DOWN THAT ALLEY TO THE RIGHT AND GO ESTABLISH A BLOCKING POSITION ON THE MAIN STREET'S NORTHERN EXIT. GIVE YOUR CAPTURED PKM MACHINE GUN TO FIRE TEAM ALPHA: I WANT YOU TO MOVE AS FAST AS YOU CAN."

"GOT IT, SARGE!"

Putting down her captured medium machine gun at the feet of Corporal Harrison Schmidt and telling Private Hanley to also drop the two 7.62mm belted ammunition boxes he was carrying, Greta then launched into a mad sprint down the nearest alley to her right, followed by her three marines. Despite being a woman, Greta could honestly brag that she could run as fast as about any man and had in fact been her school's champion female sprinter. Here three male marines thus had to give it all in order to keep up with her. Their sheer speed actually served them well, as the few Somalis who saw them pass had no time to aim their weapons before they would disappear behind a house or shed. Within two minutes, Greta and her fire team were crouching behind a house corner next to the dirt road going through Harardhere and some 250 meters from Objective Uniform. As the marines tried to slow down their breathing after their mad dash, Greta was shocked to realize that the CNN crew had followed her team and were also crouched beside the house's wall, gasping for air.

"Gee, Greta, you are one fast runner I must say." said Rose between breaths.

"Why didn't you stay with Sergeant Brown and his men, Rose?"

"Because where you go is where the action is, Greta. Also, we will now be able to film the whole scene of the assault from a safe distance, instead of staying behind the marines who will attack that big building and soaking up every lost bullet fired at them." Greta had to reluctantly recognize that Rose's logic was impeccable, so did not insist further about this and instead examined with her pair of small binoculars the three vehicles parked in front of the big building that was their main target.

"I now see two men wearing suits getting inside that Range Rover, along with two bodyguards in combat fatigues. One of the men, a black guy, is carrying a suitcase

and a bulging sports bag: I guess that the local Grand Poopa²⁵ is fleeing with his money and important papers. We need to get our hands on that suitcase.”

“And not on the bag full of money?” asked with a smile Private Hanley, making Greta throw a sarcastic look at him.

“You’re in it for the money, hey, Hanley? Then you should have taken a job that is better paid than that of a marine. Still, we need that suitcase.”

“What about those two men in suits?” asked PFC Joshua Stern, a good friend of Greta and also an excellent machine gunner. “Do we try to capture them alive?”

“Only if we can without taking more risks. For the moment, stopping those fuckers from fleeing is our main job.”

Greta then continued her observation as the small convoy of three vehicles started rolling while the two machine gunners of the escorting ‘technicals’ fired at the approaching marines of Lieutenant Gomer. While the 12.7mm DsHk heavy machine guns were powerful weapons to be feared, the pickup trucks on which they were mounted were Toyota trucks without any armor. The hail of return fire from Lieutenant Gomer’s marines quickly bowled out of their trucks the Somali machine gunners and killed or wounded their drivers, while their tires and steel bodies were turned within seconds into Swiss cheese. One pickup truck exploded in a fireball when its fuel tank was hit, while the other truck veered off the road and slammed into a house, its driver dead. That left the Range Rover to speed away from the big building while soaking up bullets as if they were simple peas. Greta understood at once why that was.

“THAT FUCKING RANGE ROVER IS ARMORED! JOSHUA, CONCENTRATE YOUR FIRE ON ITS TIRES!”

“ON IT!”

As Stern started firing short aimed bursts at the incoming Range Rover, which was accelerating quickly with a powerful engine roar, Greta took a quick decision and ran into the middle of the street, then resolutely faced the incoming car while aiming carefully her M1985A2 combo assault rifle and grenade launcher. Inside the Range Rover, Ali Hassan Abdo, the warlord who controlled Harardhere, snickered on seeing that lone American soldier standing in the middle of the road.

“That idiot American hasn’t understood yet that my car is bullet-proof? Omar, run him down!”

²⁵ Grand Poopa : Popular expression in the United States used to describe some important person, like a prominent politician.

"With pleasure, boss!" replied the driver as he pushed his accelerator to the floor, making his big V8 engine roar and pushing back Abdo and the other passenger into their seats. The Range Rover was some sixty meters from Greta and going at over eighty kilometers per hour while still accelerating when she fired her grenade launcher unit attached to her rifle. The severe recoil from the launcher pushed her torso back a few centimeters despite its long-recoil pneumatic buffer piston, while the 600-gram high-explosive fragmentation grenade flew out of its launch tube/container at a muzzle velocity of 110 meters per second. The carefully aimed grenade then hit the lower edge of the armored glass front windshield of the all-terrain vehicle and exploded, blowing in the windshield and sending inside a deadly hail of glass shards and grenade steel fragments. While the occupants were shredded to pieces by the pieces of shrapnel, the overpressure from the grenade's explosion would have been enough by itself to kill them instantly. Now out of control and with its cabin utterly wrecked, what was left of the Range Rover veered off the road and slammed into a nearby brick wall, crumbling it before the vehicle came to a full stop. Rose, who had been watching that scene while Bryan was filming it and recording the ambient sounds, excitedly commented it while recording her words on her own portable recorder unit.

"A DIRECT HIT! THAT WAS THE CAR CARRYING THE LOCAL WARLORD OF HARARDHERE, ALI HASSAN ABDO. THAT CAR, AN ARMORED RANGE ROVER, IS NOW TOTALLY WRECKED, WHILE THAT WARLORD WAS CERTAINLY KILLED. CORPORAL VISBY IS NOW RUNNING TOWARDS THAT WRECKED CAR, ALONG WITH ANOTHER MARINE, PROBABLY TO CHECK IT OUT."

Rose was about to follow Greta towards the wreck when Joshua Stern stopped her, grabbing her by one arm.

"DON'T FOLLOW HER, MISS! We don't want some bad guys associated with that warlord to learn thanks to your reporting that we were able to grab Abdo's documents."

"Er, right! Bryan, concentrate your camera view on the assault of that big building by the other marines."

By now, resistance inside Harardhere was starting to crumble, with the surviving militiamen either trying to flee in panic, hiding inside various houses and buildings or dropping their weapons and throwing their hands up to surrender. That allowed the marines led by both Captain Santiago and Lieutenant Gomer to storm inside the big,

two-story 'U'-shaped building that was their main objective in town. Inside, they encountered a number of gunmen who promptly threw down their weapons and surrendered. As one squad took care of searching and then handcuffing the prisoners, using plastic ties, Santiago dispersed the rest of his marines, sending them into a methodical search of the building. Going to the upper floor, Santiago quickly found what had to have been Ali Hassan Abdo's business office. He smiled on seeing the big map pinned to a wall and marked with a number of symbols and writing in Arabic.

"Bingo! This should interest to the highest degree our unit's intelligence section." Santiago, along with two of his marines, had just started searching in detail the office when Lieutenant Gomer entered the room at a near run.

"SIR, WE FOUND TWENTY HOSTAGES WHO HAD BEEN HELD IN THE BASEMENT! IT'S QUITE A MIXED BAG, ACTUALLY."

"Are they in good health?"

Gomer hesitated a bit before answering him.

"Most of them are, sir. However, one man was severely beaten, while five of the women claim to have been raped."

Santiago's jaws clenched together on hearing that but he kept his voice neutral as he gave orders to Gomer.

"Get our medics to check those ex-hostages out and treat them, then call in a PELICAN to evacuate them by air to the GUADALCANAL. We will wait until they are aboard our ship before interviewing them in detail."

"On it, sir!"

Gomer was about to run out when he nearly collided with Greta Visby, who excused herself at once.

"Sorry about that, sir. I had to come and bring in something that I believe would be important for Captain Santiago."

"What do you have for me, Corporal Visby?"

"A suitcase and a bulging sports bag I took from inside Abdo's Range Rover, sir. By the way, Abdo is dead. There was also another man with him on the back seat of his car...a white man. Here is the wallet I found on that white man, along with a pistol and shoulder rig he was carrying. As well, I took a wallet and all the papers and documents I could find on Abdo's body."

Letting Greta first put down on Abdo's large work desk the suitcase, sports bag, wallets, papers and shoulder rig with pistol, Santiago then opened first the sports bag, revealing

a large number of thick bundles of high-denomination U.S. dollar bills. He whistled at the sight of the money.

"Wow! I didn't think that piracy was so lucrative a business. This is prime criminal evidence. Lieutenant, get one of your men who is good at counting and is also of unimpeachable honesty to count this money before it is moved out of this office."

"Sir," cut in at once Greta, "may I suggest one of my fire team members for that job? PFC Joshua Stern is the son of a jeweler and is of impeccable character."

"I would concur with Corporal Visby's suggestion, Captain: PFC Stern is indeed a highly honest and dependable man."

"Then, have him come up here, Lieutenant. Corporal Visby, know that twenty hostages have been freed in this building. Some of them are women. We are going to evacuate by air to the GUADALCANAL. You will escort these hostages and do your best to reassure and comfort them. Five of the women claim to have been raped. Once they will have been taken care of on the ship, then you will return to your platoon here." Greta's expression became most serious at those last words and she came to attention, saluting Santiago.

"I will do my best, sir."

"You always do your best, Corporal. Dismissed!"

Greta then left, along with Gomer, leaving Santiago and his two marines alone in the office. Grabbing next the wallet that had belonged to that white man killed alongside Abdo, Santiago opened it and sifted through the various cards and papers inside it. What he found made him angrily throw down the wallet back on the desk.

"THE FUCKING BASTARD!"

Guided by one of the marines who had been with Lieutenant Gomer when he had found the hostages, Greta went down to a lounge on the ground floor that was now full of bullet holes. There, she found a small crowd of civilians sitting around and being examined by the three Navy corpsmen who had accompanied the marines on the assault. Greta was shocked to see that, on top of the men and women of various ages composing the group, there was also two preteen children: one boy and one girl. Going to the senior corpsman, a Petty Officer First Class, she waited for him to finish examining one of the men before speaking to him in a near whisper.

"Captain Santiago told me to escort these people to the ship and to do my best to comfort them. He also told me that five of the women were raped by those pirates."

She didn't like the somber look the corpsman gave her then.

"Make that six women, Corporal. Thankfully, the young preteen girl over there was left alone by the pirates, probably because she was still too young."

"Did they state their identities and nationalities, PO1?"

"We are still compiling a list of their names, nationalities and circumstances of capture, but I can tell you already that some of them were taken at sea while traveling on private yachts, while the biggest group in them is from a tanker ship seized two months ago. We also have a medical team from Doctors Without Borders, which was kidnapped in a raid against a Kenyan border first aid station. A PELICAN VTOL transport is due to arrive here in about twenty minutes."

"Good! I will accompany them aboard. In the meantime, I will go do some light conversation with these poor people. A feminine touch should help them relax further." That last remark seemed to amuse the corpsman, who looked up and down Greta, who was reeking of burnt gunpowder and had her weapons, armored vest and helmet on her.

"A feminine touch, Corporal? You look more like an amazon with guns to me." She pulled her tongue at him in response, making the man laugh, before going to the two children, who were staying close to a man in his mid-thirties and to a pretty brunette in her late twenties. She stopped in front of the small group and spoke in English to the man while taking out her notepad and pen.

"Good morning, sir. I am Corporal Greta Visby and I was assigned to accompany your group on its trip by air to our ship, the U.S.S. GUADALCANAL. First off: do you understand English, sir?"

"I do, miss! My name is Michel Blanchard and this is my friend, Jeanne Ruel, and my two children from my now deceased wife, Pierre and Ginette. We are French citizen."

"And how were you captured by these Somali pirates, sir?"

"I am an oceanographer, while Jeanne is a marine biologist. We were sailing along the coast of Kenya, close to its border with Somalia, doing some marine research, when we were attacked and captured by pirates. Unfortunately, our government refused to pay a ransom and we were kept here while the pirates tried to get our relatives and friends to pay our ransom."

Greta noted that down before inviting the young woman to step aside with her in order to speak in private.

"Miss, I am sorry to have to ask that, but I was told that some of the women here were raped in captivity and was asked to do my best to provide them some comfort. Were you...abused in any way?"

The brunette nodded her head while lowering her eyes, while tears rolled on her cheeks.

"Yes, I was...many times. The bastard who commanded those thugs did all the raping and treated the women and girls of our group like his personal harem."

"Well, if it could make you feel better, Miss Blanchard, I killed that bastard some fifteen minutes ago while he was attempting to flee the town."

"At least he paid for his crimes. What will happen to us now?"

"You will be flown to our ship, the U.S.S GUADALCANAL, where you will be examined in detail by a doctor, fed and given a cabin until we could fly you back to your country. The nightmare is over for you now, miss."

"Thank God!" said softly the woman before starting to cry. Moved by her distress, Greta led her back to her family, then went to the next group of ex-captives, six men who turned out to be officers and crewmembers from an American tanker ship, the M.V. GALVESTON. After taking their names and nationalities and listening to the story of how they had been captured, Greta went to a couple whose age difference struck her at once. For one thing, the young woman in her early twenties didn't show any family traits with the man in his mid-sixties sitting next to her. That woman also appeared to have suffered some strong mental stress and was sobbing nearly constantly.

"Will you be okay, miss? Can I do something to help you?"

"Yes! Get me out of this hell hole!"

"You will be able to fly out of here in less than half an hour, miss. May I have your name and nationality?"

"Of course!" replied the young woman, a very pretty blonde. "My name is Helen Cummings and I am from London. I was traveling with Sir Henry on his yacht when pirates attacked us."

"Sir Henry?" asked Greta while looking at the mature man next to the woman. That man nodded his head sadly as he answered her.

"Yes! I am Sir Henry Stanfield, Baron of Lumley. I had invited Helen for a cruise on the yacht I had rented in Mombasa but, despite my knighthood title, I was unable to protect her adequately. Those bastards abused her many times and there was nothing I could do then. I feel so worthless!"

Greta could only nod slowly at that story, understanding the feeling of helplessness the British man had to feel.

"Well, the good news is that the boss of those pirates is now dead and that you will be soon able to fly out of here and get to safety aboard an American warship."

For some reason, that made the man snicker.

"To be safe aboard an American warship... Please don't take that as ingratitude, miss, but I was a very young British sailor serving aboard the nuclear cruiser HMS TIGER when it was sunk off the coast of Palestine by none other than your famous Ingrid Dows. I was one of only three survivors from its crew of 900 men. But I have long forgiven her for that since, after I learned what had really happened then around Palestine."

"Wow! What a story! Sunk by Americans, then freed by Americans. Life can be quite ironic, sir."

"It sure can, miss. What is your name again?"

"Corporal Greta Visby, from the 6th Marine Regiment, based in Camp Lejeune, North Carolina."

To her surprise, the man noted that down on a piece of paper before shaking her hand.

"You are a brave woman, Corporal Visby, and I admire a lot brave women. The late Nancy Laplante, who died in 1941 while I was only eight-years-old, was my greatest heroine. By the way, your name sounds Swedish to me. Am I right?"

"I was effectively born in Sweden and lived there until the age of fourteen before my father emigrated to the United States. Why do you ask?"

"Because that little family over there speaks only Swedish, German and French. Be careful though while asking them questions: their teenage daughter was abused many times by the bastard leading the local pirates."

Greta threw a shocked look at the trio in question before bowing to the British man.

"Thank you for your information, Sir Henry. I hope that your young friend will be able to get over this tragedy soon enough."

While approaching the trio pointed to her by Sire Henry, Greta eyed them as discretely as possible. The man was in his late forties, while the woman was a blonde in her late thirties. As for the teenage girl, she was truly beautiful and had to be around fourteen or fifteen. Greta's heart hurt as she imagined what the pirates could have done

to her. Stopping in front of the trio and bowing her head to them, she then spoke in Swedish.

“Good morning to you! I am Corporal Greta Visby and I was told that you spoke Swedish but no English.”

The reaction of the trio was immediate, with the man and woman shooting out of their chairs to happily shake her hand.

“Thank God, miss! We were despairing of meeting someone who could understand us. As you were told right, we can speak German and French, apart from Swedish, but not English. I am Carl Bernadotte and this is my wife Agneta and our daughter Erika. We were going down the coast of Somalia, heading for Kenya, when pirates attacked our small yacht and sank it after capturing us.”

“Bernadotte, sir?” said Greta, feeling blood rush to her brain. “You are part of the Swedish royal family?”

“No! But my father was, until he decided to marry a commoner and thus lost the right to his royal titles. Thankfully, the Grand Duchess of Luxembourg then accepted him in her aristocracy, naming him Count of Wisborg. I myself hold the title of Count of Wisborg, like other Swedish royals who decided to marry commoners.”

Stunned by that, Greta, who believed in traditions, then put one knee down on the floor while bowing her head low.

“Being here and seeing that you and your family are safe warms my heart, milord.”

“Please, please, get up, miss! I may have a fancy title but, in reality, I hold no royal privileges and possess no lands. I am simply a business executive who dared defy traditional rules and married the woman I love.”

Helped up by Carl Bernadotte, Greta smiled to him and his wife.

“Sacrificing in the name of love is more meaningful to me than any aristocratic title, sir. I was told to accompany your group to our ship and to help you as much as I could. I certainly can do that by serving as your interpreter on the ship until I have to return to my unit here.”

“You will have to return to this town later on?” asked Agneta Bernadotte, dismay on her face. “Do you really have to?”

“Yes, madam! I am a marine and my place is with my unit and my men.”

“Your men?”

“Madam, I lead a four-person combat fire team and just fought with my unit to free you. In fact, I had the pleasure of killing Ali Hassan Abdo, the leader of the local pirates.”

“You did? Good for him!” nearly spat the young Erika. “The bastard was a monster and abused me multiple times. If that is possible, I would like to see his body, so that I could spit on it.”

“I must warn you that he is not a pretty sight right now, miss, but I guess that I could arrange for that to happen.”

After shaking hands again with the Swedish trio, Greta went to see the last of the ex-captives, a group of five doctors and nurses from the international organization Doctors Without Borders. To her surprise and delight, two of them turned out to also be Swedish citizens and she was able to speak more Swedish with them before going out for a few minutes with Erika Bernadotte, leading her to the wrecked Range Rover, in which the mangled body of Ali Hassan Abdo still lay. The teenage girl proved to have a solid stomach then and looked coldly down at the dead pirate leader before getting close to the car and spit inside it.

“Here, you bastard! May you burn in Hell for eternity!”

Greta gently patted Erika’s shoulder as she stepped back from the wreck.

“You are a strong girl, Erika. You will go far in life.”

“Not as strong as you, though, Greta. I will always remember you as a friend.”

“That will please me a lot, Erika. Let’s go back now: I see our incoming PELICAN approaching in the sky.”

14:28 (Somalia Time)

Tuesday, November 11, 1997 ‘C’

Harardhere, Somalia

FBI Senior Special Agent Bernard Cook and his three-person team nearly gagged and threw up at the sight and smell of the wrecked Range Rover car, in which four bodies were rotting inside.

“God! Talk about a stinking mess! What did that do to this armored car, Colonel?”

“A rifle grenade, courtesy of Corporal Greta Visby. She stopped it cold as Abdo was trying to flee town with this John Morehead. Morehead is the man sitting in the back

right position. Ali Hassan Abdo was sitting to his left, while a bodyguard occupied the front passenger seat.”

“Alright! Let’s photograph this and take fingerprints, people.”

Letting his three crime scene specialists work in and around the wreck, with four marines standing guard to keep the Somali civilians residing in Harardhere from approaching, Cook walked a few steps away with Lieutenant Colonel Paul Wilkinson to speak in private with him, keeping his voice low.

“So, we have the Vice President for Security of a big American oil company present in Somalia and accompanying the local warlord accused of organizing most of the ships’ hijackings off Somalia. The fact that he was armed proved that he was not a hostage and was here from his own free will. This could have some very serious legal implications for his company.”

“And do you have a possible explanation for his presence here, Agent Cook?”

“Yes, and one that is quite disgusting, Colonel. Basically, I believe that Morehead was here to negotiate a pact with Abdo: his pirates would refrain from attacking and seizing the oil tankers belonging to or chartered by his oil company, while at the same time providing Abdo with information of the routes and timings of tanker ships of other oil companies. That way, his company would avoid losses caused by piracy, while impeding the business of other oil companies.”

Wilkinson threw a disgusted expression at the FBI agent at those words.

“What a bunch of greedy bastards! You think that the FBI will be able to make that American oil company pay for that?”

“With the evidence your marines seized here, and with the positive identification of Morehead’s body, we should be able to light a blowtorch under the asses of those oil executives, Colonel. I also saw that Morehead had a laptop case next to him that looked reasonably intact. One of my agents is a specialist in computer technology who should be able to retrieve what is in that laptop.”

“Don’t forget the small bag full of cut diamonds found on Morehead. That was probably the payment meant for Abdo.”

“Yeah! That is a further nail in Morehead’s coffin, if I may say so. Overall, our case is promising to be a solid one.”

“Glad to hear that, Agent Cook. While you are here, I would like you to answer a particular legal question to you. Please follow me!”

Wilkinson then walked to a shed next to the big building that had served as Abdo's residence and headquarters, passing the two marines guarding its door and entering it with Cook. The FBI senior special agent sucked his breath in at the impressive pile of weapons sitting inside, next to an equally big pile of ammunition boxes.

"Wow! Talk about weapons galore! This was all seized from inside this town?"

"Yup! The NRA²⁶ would have been proud to have the citizens of Harardhere as members." replied Wilkinson, a facetious grin on his face. "My question to you about these weapons is this: would my marines have the legal right to grab some of these weapons as personal weapons. While most of the rifles and other automatic weapons in this pile are poorly maintained and near junk-status, many of the handguns we found are still usable. While my battalion holds its full regulated allotment of handguns, that allotment doesn't have enough handguns to equip all of my marines. Presently, only my officers and the servants of our heavy support weapons have service handguns. Those captured handguns would be very useful in providing extra backup weapons to my marines, thus would improve the security of my unit against Somali infiltrators and militiamen in disguise."

Cook scratched his head while thinking, his eyes still on the big pile of weapons.

"Well, technically these weapons are now the property of the U.S. Marine Corps, which captured them in a combat zone. You could thus redistribute these weapons as you see fit in order to improve the security of your marines, a very legitimate concern in this anarchic place. As for returning to the United States with some of these weapons, those weapons would then be considered by the ATF²⁷ the same way as imported weapons acquired out of country and could be kept by your marines as long as they register them and follow the gun regulations in place in their home states."

Wilkinson obviously liked Cook's answer and patted his back.

²⁶ NRA : National Rifle Association. Powerful American movement and political lobby opposed to any anti-gun regulation in the United States. It also advocates the rights of all Americans to own guns, including assault weapons.

²⁷ ATF : Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. A department of the U.S. Homeland Security administration in charge, among other things, of regulating the acquisition and use of firearms by American citizens, as per the laws regulating gun ownership within the various states of the U.S.A.

“Excellent! I will get some of my marines to sift through this pile and organize a display of the weapons worthy of being grabbed. Let’s call that a local gun fare for marines! That should help the morale of my men.”

The mention of morale made Cook throw a side look at Wilkinson.

“Talking of morale, did your unit suffer casualties while fighting to capture this town?”

Wilkinson slowly nodded his head at that question, while sadness came to his face.

“Yes! We suffered seven men dead and eleven more men wounded during the fighting for Harardhere. In view of the arsenal held by those Somali thugs, it is a miracle that our losses were not heavier. Thankfully, most of these Somali militiamen proved to be poor shots, something that saved many of my marines who got close calls. Well, let me organize something about these weapons, then I will show you Abdo’s office: it is full of very interesting information for both of us.”

15:50 (Somalia Time)

Captured weapons shed, Harardhere

Somalia

“My God! My no-good brother-in-law would have drooled at the sight of this.” Said with a grin Staff Sergeant Vincent ‘Mafioso’ Gambino as the eight marines he had chosen started separating the weapons and ammunition by category for either display or disposal. Of course, all explosive ordnance, like grenades and rockets, along with machine guns and recoilless guns, being illegal in the United States, were marked for future disposal at sea, while most of the assault rifles captured looked in poor state of maintenance, thus were of low value. That still left over 200 handguns and a few sniper rifles worthy of a look-over. Greta Visby, having volunteered for the job and having been readily accepted by Gambino, was part of his work party and was genuinely enjoying herself, having always been interested in firearms and also being an expert shot with both rifles and handguns. She was presently lining up of a series of table found in the big pirate headquarters the handguns of good quality and state found in the pile and placing boxes of the appropriate ammo type next to each gun, so that the marines of her battalion could come and chose a handgun for themselves. Up to now, that collection of handguns was proving to be a very eclectic one, with guns produced in dozens of different countries and varying in calibers and bullet capacities. As she was returning to

the pile to sift it for more handguns, she saw Private Mike Hanley take out a rifle of the lot, with the obvious intent on putting it with other rifles designated for disposal.

“WOAH, HANLEY! YOU’RE NOT GOING TO PUT THIS IN THE SCRAP PILE, ARE YOU?”

“WHY NOT, CORPORAL? AREN’T WE SUPPOSE TO SCRAP ALL THE RIFLES?”

“NOT ALL OF THEM! GIVE ME THAT SVD DRAGUNOV!”

The young marine shrugged and gave Greta the long rifle he was about to throw away. Staff Sergeant Gambino came to Greta as she was examining the captured 7.62mm Russian-made sniper rifle.



SVD DRAGUNOV 7.62 X 54R Russian Army sniper rifle.

“A nice-looking piece, Greta. It looks nearly brand-new.”

“It does, Sergeant. It must have belonged to one of the militia leaders here, who may have acquired it recently. The DRAGUNOV has a fine reputation as a combat sniper rifle and should make a good hunting rifle for me.”

Gambino nodded his head at that.

“It certainly is. A ten-shot semi-automatic rifle chambered in 7.62 X 54R, with a 4 X 24 telescopic sight good for up to 1,000 meters and with integrated illuminated night reticles. It is also a very nice-looking weapon. If you want it, it is yours, Greta.”

“Thank you, Sergeant!” replied Greta, most happy. “Thankfully, we captured quite a lot of 7.62 X 54R ammunition. I will see later if I can find match-grade ammunition for this baby in that ammo pile.”

“I hope you do find some, Greta. I’m now going to see if I can find something worth it for myself in our collection of handguns.”

Going to the line of tables supporting the dozens of handguns on display, Gambino started looking quickly at them with keen interest. While getting near the middle of the lineup, he suddenly froze, while his right hand went for a particular weapon.

“Ooh, ooh, ooh! A nickel-plated, six-inch barrel Colt Python .357 Magnum revolver! And it looks new! That thing goes for close to a thousand dollars in the States...if you can find one. Come to papa, baby!”



Cold PYTHON .357 Magnum revolver

Greta grinned at that scene: the weapons display set for tomorrow morning was already promising to become quite a popular attraction among the marines of her battalion. While she already owned and carried two handguns of top design and quality, the SVD DRAGUNOV she had just picked up promised to make a perfect hunting rifle for her once back in her father's home in Alaska.

11:09 (Somalia Time)

Wednesday, November 12, 1997 'C'

Flight Deck of the U.S.S. GUADALCANAL

Anchored off the coast of Somalia

Rose Muse and Bryan Makena, having come on the GUADALCANAL in order to edit and send their latest piece of reporting, were standing on the rear flight deck of the landing ship, near the open door of the aircraft hangar, when Bryan suddenly stiffened and then hurriedly raised his big video camera to his right shoulder.

“Heads up, Rose! Something is about to happen: the gun turrets have started pivoting.”

“Damn, you're right! What could be happening?”

“Shore bombardment fire support: that's what, Rose. I must film this. You better plug your ears now.”

Rose did so, just in time before one of the barrels of the four aft twin gun five-inch turrets of the GUADALCANAL boomed, spitting out a shell while pointing towards the coastline, some twelve kilometers away. The deafening detonation and powerful blast from that gun firing shook Rose, who had never seen in person an artillery gun fire. However, after waiting some ten seconds, she looked at Bryan.

“That's it?”

“Hell no! That was most probably a registration round, meant to confirm the point of impact of the shell. More are about to follow...lots more. You better start talking

in your microphone to describe this scene to our viewers before it becomes impossible to hear you.”

“Er, right!” replied Rose, who switched on her microphone and started speaking in it.

“Good morning, Atlanta. We are now on the rear flight deck of the landing ship U.S.S. GUADALCANAL, anchored off the Somali coast. The five-inch guns of the GUADALCANAL are now trained towards the coast and one fire registration shell has just been fired. We expect the guns of the ship to all open fire soon in order to provide fire support for our marines ashore and fighting pirates in Somalia. Our marines...”

BOOM

Rose grimaced and put a finger inside her right ear before continuing her report.

“That was a second registration shot as the gunners of the U.S.S. GUADALCANAL are adjusting the fire of their guns. We still don’t know against what kind of target the ship’s guns are firing, but the effect at the other end must be both impressive and devastating. Unfortunately for Somalia, there is no shortage of legitimate targets for our guns, be they pirate bases, warlords’ strongholds or parking areas for pickup trucks mounting heavy machine guns, called by our marines ‘technicals’. Against such targets, the GUADALCANAL is superbly equipped with a total of sixteen five-inch guns. However, for reasons of confidentiality, the maximum range of those guns cannot be disclosed publicly and...”

B.B.B.BOOM B.B.B.BOOM

Rose had to stop speaking and plugged both of her ears, while her long hair was seen rising and flying around from the blast overpressure as all eight five-inch guns on the aft part of the ship started pumping out eight-shell salvos every two seconds, with Bryan stoically standing his ground and filming the scene, his ears partially protected by his microphone headset. The intense firing went on for ten seconds before stopping, leaving the poor Rose temporarily deaf and with her ears ringing like crazy. Ignoring the pain from her ears, she resumed her reporting on camera.

“Dear viewers, if all the guns of the GUADALCANAL also fired the same fire mission, then whoever was at the receiving end just got a total of eighty five-inch shells on their heads and must be hurting mightily right now.”

In Somalia, at the road barrage established by Alpha Company on the road leading north from Harardhere, Captain Charles Snider had a mean smile as he contemplated what was left of the long column of armed pickup trucks and trucks full of militiamen which had been rushing south towards Harardhere, most probably with the intent of retaking it. That column was now reduced to a collection of burning wrecks and overturned trucks, while only a couple dozen men were now fleeing on foot in utter panic.

"Those fuckers are not about to try again after such a pasting. That's what I call first-class naval fire support."

Looking again at what was left of the column, he saw that some of the flags carried by the enemy vehicles were now lying down on the sand. Looking at his company gunnery sergeant, he then gave him an order.

"Gunny, take a squad with you and go collect some of those flags, along with whatever marked map or other interesting papers you can find. This will help us identify who just tried to attack us."

"I'm on it, sir!"

Some forty minutes later, Gunnery Sergeant John Marshall came back to Snider with two flags and an assortment of maps and documents in his hands.

"From the signs and symbols on those flags, I would say that those assholes were part of some Islamic fundamentalist group, sir. I also picked up one map with some interesting markings on it, including the possible location of their base, near the port of Eyl."

"Excellent! Colonel Wilkinson may just decide to go pay a visit there. Good job, Gunny!"

12:01 (East Coast Time) / 20:01 (Somalia Time)

CNN studios, Atlanta, Georgia, U.S.A.

"Good day to our viewers, ladies and gentlemen. This is the Noon Hour Report with Vanessa Brown, reporting from Atlanta. After getting some dramatic footage from Somalia thanks to our intrepid correspondent Rose Muse, who is following our marines fighting Somali pirates and terrorists, we are now able to show you more footage of the action in that anarchic country. What you will now see is a heavy bombardment by the

guns of the landing ship U.S.S. GUADALCANAL against a column of Islamic extremists advancing on Harardhere and approaching a road barrage held by our marines.”

The image on CNN then switched from the news anchor to the deck of a ship, with both Rose Muse and a pair of twin gun turrets visible behind her. A brief rotation of the camera then revealed two more twin gun turrets on the other side of the rear deck. The camera pointed back at Rose in time to show the second registration shell firing, cutting off Rose. Then, thirty seconds later, all hell broke loose, with the eight five-inch guns on the rear deck firing quickly in unison a salvo each two seconds, making for a very spectacular display of firepower. While the CNN news anchor couldn't know yet about it, that scene, widely watched around the United States, made old Marine Corps veterans from World War 2 scream enthusiastically inside their residences. Even Ingrid Dows, who was also watching the news at the Pentagon, was impressed, while every Navy and Marine Corps member seeing the report yelled in approval. Once the guns fell silent and rotated back to their original position, the news anchor resumed her reporting.

“That was a report from our correspondent, Rose Muse, and our cameraman, Bryan Makena, who were aboard the U.S.S. GUADALCANAL at the time those guns fired away. Our team is now back on the ground in Somalia and has resumed its work there alongside our marines. The previous footage from our team, taken during the assault on the pirate base at Harardhere, has by now inflamed the public opinion in the United State, with the huge majority of our viewers expressing support for our combat operations there. A scene in particular, when a female marine stood her ground in the middle of a street in Harardhere and destroyed an incoming armored car, has captured the public's imagination and, in particular, that of our female viewers, earning that female marine the nicknames of 'Calamity Jane' and of 'The Viking Shield Maiden', the last nickname being in reference to her Swedish ethnic background. Here is that scene again as it was filmed.”

In a house in Nome, Alaska, Bjorn Visby was having breakfast with a friend before departing with him on a hunting trip to the north of Nome when he saw the CNN report. Bjorn, who earned his living both as a hunter and as a guide for tourists who wanted to either hunt or simply visit the region, nearly applauded as he watched Greta calmly aim and fire her weapon while standing in the middle of the dirt road, in a scene worthy of the famous O.K. Corral gunfight.

“YES! THAT'S MY GIRL!”

23:45 (Somalia Time)**Area of the town of Eyl, Puntland, Somalia**

Lieutenant Colonel Paul Wilkinson, lying down at the top of a small knoll along with Captain Snider and Captain Santiago, examined for a long moment the walled camp set up close to the small coastal port of Eyl before lowering his night vision scope.

"This is the perfect setup for us: those assholes established their training camp and quarters inside that old ruined fort, well apart from the town itself, and which seems to contain no civilian houses. The guns of the GUADALCANAL will thus be able to pound that camp without risks to the local population. I had expected to find this camp close to empty, in view of the pasting our naval guns gave these assholes earlier this morning near Harardhere. However, it seems that those extremists received some reinforcements during the day, as I can see a collection of trucks and armed pickups parked inside that ruined fort. We will deploy our marines quietly to encircle that old fort and camp while staying at a safe distance, then I will call out a massive fire mission against the camp. Once it will be beaten up well enough to my taste, we will then advance on foot to clean up what is left of it, with our amphibians behind and ready to provide fire support. I will keep my command group here and direct our naval gunfire. You may now deploy your marines, gentlemen."

As Snider and Santiago crawled back down the knoll for a few meters before getting up and running away at a crouch, Wilkinson started speaking on his portable HF radio linking him to the U.S.S. GUADALCANAL, providing to the ship's gunnery officer the coordinates of the old fort and explaining to him what kind of fire support pattern he wanted. Once that was done, Wilkinson waited until his two company commanders reported that their troops were in position before calling again the GUADALCANAL.

"Mike Six to Golf November: fire registration round now."

"From Golf November: registration round on the way. Impact in twelve seconds." Wilkinson then patiently waited for that shell to land while watching the terrorist camp through his night scope. To his satisfaction, that first five-inch shell landed and exploded within the walls of the old fort. However, it was a bit off the center of the camp, so he ordered a second registration round to correct the aim of the guns of the GUADALCANAL. With that second registration round falling spot on the middle of the fort, Wilkinson then spoke again on his radio.

"Mike Six to Golf November: your fire is now dead on. Fire for effect!"

Some twenty seconds later, as Wilkinson was starting to see men appear out of the tents and huts inside of the fort and then running around in a disorganized fashion, a loud scream overhead announced the arrival of the first full salvo of five-inch shells. The first sixteen shells all exploded within the walls of the old fort, destroying parked vehicles, blowing away tents and sending deadly steel shrapnel fragments all over the place. However, that was only the start of the ordeal endured by the Islamists, with salvo after salvo landing and exploding inside the fort. By the time that Wilkinson called for an end to the naval gunfire, 320 shells had hit the fort, crumbling most of the old walls and filling the ground inside them with craters, with all the vehicles parked inside the fort now turned into flaming wrecks. Seeing a handful of men who had miraculously escaped the bombardment run out of the fort and towards the nearby town, Wilkinson grabbed the handset of his VHF tactical radio and called his two rifle companies.

"Mike Alpha Six and Mike Bravo Six, this is Mike Six: advance on the objective and clean it up now. Mike Bravo Six, send your callsign Three Bravo to the beach area of Eyl, to prevent any of the enemy from fleeing by boat, over."

"Mike Alpha Six, acknowledged!"

"Mike Bravo Six, acknowledged!"

Lieutenant Kenneth Gomer, who had deployed his platoon to the Northeast of the fort, close to the town, soon got the order via radio to rush to the beach area, some three kilometers away to the East. He in turn shouted out a brief order.

"THIRD PLATOON, GET BACK TO OUR ALLIGATOR! WE'RE MOVING TO THE BEACH!"

That prompted his 37 marines, plus Rose Muse and Bryan Makena, to run back to their AACV-8A armored amphibian, stationed behind them in overwatch position. Once everybody was inside the big vehicle, Gomer connected his vehicle intercom headset and spoke to his driver.

"Lewis, we need to get to the beach area as fast as we can."

"Can we simply drive through the town, sir? The streets there will allow us to roll at top speed and we won't risk losing or breaking a track because of some rock in the desert that we won't see at night."

Gomer was tempted to say that this was a crazy idea but, after a quick thought, he nodded his head.

“Go for it, Lewis, and go fast!”

“Your wishes are my commands, sir!” replied the driver of the amphibian as he started his powerful engine. Pivoting on the spot and starting to accelerate towards the town of Eyl, a sizeable agglomeration with about 20,000 inhabitants, Lewis then decided to drive with his hatch open and his head partially out, in order to better see where he was going and to prevent him from hitting some obstacles on the way. Low light level scopes were fine but their field of view was very limited and driving hatch-down at night would have forced him to slow down considerably. Getting on the main road going through the town and linking it with the beach, he accelerated to near the top speed of eighty kilometers per hour the AACV-8A was capable of, raising a cloud of dust and sand as he entered the town. Imitating many of the marines in the vehicle, Bryan Makena opened one of the roof hatches of the amphibian and stuck his head and his camera out, while the marines got ready to use their rifles if need be. There were still quite a few lights on in the town at this late hour, the more so because the deafening gun bombardment had awakened the whole population of Eyl, with many inhabitants peering out from windows or from the top of their house roofs. Those Somalis who saw the AACV-8A dash past them could only look on with both disbelief and amazement. Greta, who had also stuck her head out, smiled to Bryan and shouted to be heard from him.

“NICE TOUR OF THE TOWN CORPORAL LEWIS IS GIVING US!”

“YEAH! I MUST SAY THAT IT LOOKS LIKE A FAIRLY NICE PLACE, MINUS THE ARMED THUGS.”



The town of Eyl, Puntland, Somalia.

At one point, Lewis had to slow down in order to negotiate a sort of roundabout on the sides of which a number of civilian cars and trucks were parked, constricting the space available to pass by. That roundabout, being in the downtown area and being bordered by a number of shops, restaurants and even what looked like a hotel, was fairly brightly illuminated by the electrical lights of the buildings. That allowed Greta to wave and blow kisses to a woman with four small children who had gone out on their balcony to watch what was happening. One of the children, a little girl of maybe six or seven, timidly waved back at her, making Greta happy.

"Kids! They are the same all over the World. May God bless them all!"

Continuing to roll through the town while guided by Lieutenant Gomer, who was consulting his map, Lewis was soon out of it and driving towards the ocean. Following a dirt road running along the side of a half-dried river bed, the marines soon came into view of a small fishing village next to a large sandy beach. There, things started to get complicated, as someone in the village then shot at them with an automatic rifle. The reaction of Lieutenant Gomer to that was immediate.

"LEWIS, LEAVE THE ROAD AND STOP BEHIND THOSE BUSHES TO OUR LEFT FRONT! MARINES, PREPARE TO DEBUS!"

As the amphibian slowed down and veered off the road, Gomer looked at Rose Muse, sitting about one meter from him.

"Miss Muse, I would prefer that you not leave the vehicle right now: this is going to be a night fight inside a village and things will get quite confusing. If you go out with your cameraman, you risk being shot at in the dark. You however can still observe the action through a roof hatch."

"I'm going to follow your advice, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, miss. MARINES, DEBUS!"

The big rear ramp of the vehicle then dropped open and 38 marines rushed out into the night, watched by Rose.

"Such courage and determination. Our country should be proud of them."

Advancing quickly with her fire team on the left flank of her squad as the marines trotted towards the fishing village, Greta, using the night scope attached to the front of her helmet, did her best to locate the shooter who had fired at the amphibian. That

shooter, along with three more gunmen, then revealed his position when he came out from behind a hut's corner to fire a burst from his AK-47 rifle while holding it at hip level. That kind of shooting, especially when done at night, normally resulted into nothing more than a waste of ammunition but, as one of the rules of the infamous 'Murphy's Law' said, you should not worry about the bullet with your name on it but rather about the bullet saying 'to whom it may concern'. Stopping for a brief moment, Greta aimed her rifle with the use of her laser dot sight and waited for the gunman to pop out again. When he did so, it was to cry in pain and fall on his back, a .243 caliber bullet through his upper chest. As soon as the man was down, Greta hurried to return into the advancing line of marines. The accurate shooting from the Americans and their night scopes and sights quickly turned the night fight to their advantage. The dozen or so gunmen present in the fishing village were soon dead, gravely wounded or on the run. Those who tried to run away were mercilessly shot down, as they could present later a lethal threat if they decided to return and fight again. Following the shouted orders from Lieutenant Gomer, his marines then did a methodical search of the village to find any hidden weapons or gunmen. Finding none, Gomer then had Greta and her fire team go inspect the dozen or so boats and skiffs of various sizes beached on the sand.

Flanked by her three marines, Greta cautiously approached the first boat, in which a gunman could still be hiding. Arriving next to the boat, which measured about seven meters in length, she knocked the butt of her rifle against the wooden hull, then waited to see if that would attract some reaction. Getting nothing, she then straightened up and threw a quick look inside the boat. Seeing nobody inside it, she then looked again to check what was inside. She smirked at the sight of the grappling hook with long rope and telescopic aluminum ladder resting on the bottom of the boat.

"Not exactly your standard fishing equipment, hey?"

Before doing anything else, she spoke on her pocket radio and called her officer on the platoon's frequency.

"Bravo Two Three to Three Six: be aware that I am going to make holes in boats containing illegal gear, over."

"Go right ahead, Bravo Two Three."

With Gomer's clearance given to her, Greta then fired a rifle burst through the wooden hull of the 'fishing' boat, making a dozen holes in it.

"Good luck going to sea in that boat, you assholes."

She then went to the next boat lying on the sand and also looked inside it. That boat, much smaller than the first one, only contained a fishing net and a pair of paddles, so she left it intact and went to yet another boat. She repeated that process a number of times, finding that three more boats had grappling hooks and ladders in them and then shooting holes in them. She was about to return to the rest of her platoon when Joshua Stern suddenly spoke out, alarm in his voice.

"I see and hear a group of vehicles approaching with their lights out while following a coastal trail."

Snapping her head in that direction and using her night scope, Greta effectively saw what appeared to be a column of at least six vehicles approaching the fishing village.

"QUICK, FOLLOW ME!" she shouted as she started running towards a group of sizeable boulders next to the beach. At the same time, she keyed her radio microphone.

"THREE SIX, THREE SIX, THIS IS BRAVO TWO THREE! WE HAVE AT LEAST SIX VEHICLES APPROACHING FROM THE NORTH ALONG THE COAST WITH ALL LIGHTS OUT. AM GOING TO TAKE A POSITION TO BLOCK THEIR ADVANCE, OVER!"

"Understood, Bravo Two Three! To all callsigns three, take immediately defensive positions facing North. Be aware that Bravo Two Three will be to our front, so be careful about your shooting."

Greta, busy sprinting towards the group of boulders while watching the advance of the suspect vehicles, didn't pay much attention to the rest of the radio chatter that followed. Finally arriving at the boulders and crouching behind one of them, she examined the approaching vehicles with her night scope as her three marines arrived and crouched into positions on both sides of her.

"These are definitely not good guys, boys: I can now see that at least two of the leading vehicles carry heavy machine guns. I can also see large flags flying from many of the pickup trucks. This smells like a group of Islamist extremists to me."

"How would have they known that we would attack here tonight?" asked Mike Hanley, not sounding too steady.

"They probably didn't! This could well be simply a patrol group returning to its camp after a trip up the coast. When they heard and saw our naval bombardment from afar, they then must have decided to approach quietly to see what exactly was going on. Either way, our job is now to delay those vehicles as much as we can in order to allow

time to our platoon to redeploy. Joshua, you will sweep with your fire the vehicles at driver's level once me and Hanley will have fired one rifle grenade each at the enemy."

"Got it!"

The small team then waited nervously as the vehicles approached to within effective range of their grenade launchers. Then, Greta fired her own rifle grenade, followed a second later by Mike Hanley. While Greta's grenade hit its target and destroyed the engine of the leading vehicle, Hanley missed, with his rifle grenade exploding on one side of the trail. The surviving five vehicles of the convoy braked to a sudden halt, with men jumping out as Joshua Stern opened fire with his M1988 light machine gun, bowling a number of the gunmen before they could reach some cover. An intense exchange of fire ensued, with plenty of tracer bullets from enemy heavy machine guns zipping by Greta and her three marines. Despite causing significant casualties to their enemies, Greta's fire team soon found itself in a bind, with a double line of skirmishers advancing steadily towards them, jumping and running from cover to cover while their armed pickup trucks poured out a heavy fire which frequently forced Greta to lower her head for a moment. Still, she was able to load and fire a second rifle grenade that destroyed another of the armed pickup trucks. She was about to tell Mike Hanley to fire a second grenade himself when she watched with horror the head of the young marine explode, hit by a 12.7mm heavy machine gun bullet. Freezing for a very short moment, she then had to take a deep breath to regain control of herself and resume her firing. Soon, the attackers were within thirty meters of the fire team, making her take a decision when she saw that Joshua Stern's machine gun had jammed for some reason, with Stern making desperate attempts to clear that jam.

"FIX BAYONETS! PREPARE TO THROW A VOLLEY OF HAND GRENADES!"

Fixing her own long bayonet in place first, she then took out a hand fragmentation grenade from one of her cargo pockets and prepared to throw it. The thirty or so gunmen facing her then rose in unison and started sprinting towards her and her marines while yelling savage war cries.

"ALLAH U AKBAR!"

"THROW!" shouted in turn Greta, who then threw her own hand grenade, sending it rolling on the ground some twenty meters to her front. Its explosion and that of two other grenades blew big holes in the enemy line of skirmishers but the survivors kept running with fanatical resolve. By now, about everybody had empty weapons,

having fired away their bullets in the last seconds and with no more time left to load fresh magazines in place. Greta then surprised everybody, including her own marines, by suddenly getting up and stepping on her boulder before starting to charge her enemies with her bayonet pointing out while shouting as loud as she could.

“KILL THOSE FUCKERS! CHARGE!”

After a short moment of stupor, Joshua Stern and Dan Weatherly also got up and charged. The enemy gunmen facing directly the trio then hesitated, not having fixed their own bayonets and with their rifles empty. Greta then projected backward the gunman facing her, running him through with her twelve-inch-long bayonet. She quickly pulled free her blade, in time to deflect a rifle butt blow from another attacker and then planting her bayonet in his gut, making the man scream with pain. Dan Weatherly, now at her back, covered her by also impaling one of the attackers with his own bayonet, while Joshua Stern fenced with his empty light machine gun with a gunman armed with an equally empty AK-47. The Islamists still manning heavy machine guns aboard the pickup trucks were then caught in a dilemma, as they could not fire at the marines without at the same time killing their own men. Greta had time to impale a third man with her bayonet before the terrifying bark of a 30mm automatic cannon resonated in the night, with one of the armed pickup trucks then turning into a fireball. That made the surviving Islamists freeze in stupor for a moment, giving the chance to Greta to stab a fourth man to death. The remaining gunmen then broke in panic and started running away when a second pickup truck was turned into a sieve by 30mm cannon shells. Seeing that, Greta shouted to her two remaining marines.

“LOAD YOUR WEAPONS WHILE WE HAVE THE CHANCE TO DO THAT NOW.”

Putting a fresh magazine in place in seconds, she then resumed her shooting, picking one by one the fleeing gunmen with aimed shots, helped by her laser dot sight. Dan Weatherly imitated her, while Joshua Stern, still stuck with a jammed light machine gun, simply threw down his weapon and grabbed the revolver he had picked in Harardhere and started firing it. The surviving gunmen were suddenly swept down by a hail of rifle fire coming from their left. Greta blew air out in utter relief when the marines of her platoon then ran out of the night and killed the last remaining gunmen.

“Hell! That was a close call.”

“A close call?” replied Dan Weatherly in an indignant tone. “We had one foot firmly inside Hell if you ask me, Greta. You are decidedly one crazy girl.”

"Crazy people for crazy situations, I guess." she replied while catching her breath. She was still trying to calm down when Lieutenant Gomer approached her, concern on his face.

"Are you okay, Corporal Visby?"

"I am, sir, and so are Stern and Weatherly but Hanley is dead."

Gomer nodded grimly at that and looked down at her bayonet, still covered with blood.

"How many gunmen did you kill with your bayonet, Corporal."

"Four, I believe, sir. Everything happened in a blur."

Gomer nodded again and patted her shoulder in encouragement.

"You did well, Corporal. You may go retrieve Hanley's body while we clean up this place here."

"Yes sir! Joshua, Dan, with me!"

Gomer watched her for a few seconds as she walked away, then returned his attention to the bodies covering the ground around him.

Two hours later, while it was still dark, a PELICAN VTOL aircraft landed on the beach, near a waiting Greta, in order to load aboard the body of Mike Hanley. She, Joshua Stern and Dan Weatherly then saluted at attention as the aircraft flew off the beach with the body of their dead comrade. Rose Muse, who had respectfully kept her distances for that occasion, then approached Greta, Bryan behind her. However, the cameraman kept his camera slung down, at Rose's request. The latter stopped in front of Greta and spoke up in a subdued tone.

"I am truly sorry for the death of your comrade, Greta."

"I am too, but that's war. We may yet lose more good people before this mission is completed."

"And how are you doing right now?"

"Right now? I probably could use a strong drink...or two...or three. I don't know but I will survive this. Time will tell, I guess."

She then turned and looked at her two surviving comrades.

"Time to go clean our weapons, guys. We can do that on this beach, while contemplating the sea and the Moon. It will help us relax."

Rose watched the three marines walk tiredly away before looking at her cameraman.

"I hope that she will be alright in the long run, Bryan."

"I hope so too. However, she is a strong girl, Rose. She will be okay."

17:09 (Somalia Time)

Friday, November 14, 1997 'C'

Battalion command vehicle, Eyl

Puntland, Somalia

Now having all five of his company commanders with him inside his CAIMAN, the command and communications variant of the AACV-8A ALLIGATOR, Lieutenant Colonel Paul Wilkinson started his briefing next to a large map of Somalia fixed to a map board.

"Good news, gentlemen: the rest of our regiment has arrived and will start landing tomorrow morning. The Second Battalion will land in Bossaso, on the Somali northern coast with the Gulf of Aden, while the Third Battalion will land in Kismayo, near the border with Kenya. The Kenyans will assist us by concentrating much of their army along their border with Somalia, in order to prevent any pirates or Islamic extremists from fleeing across the border. As for us, we will continue our anti-piracy operations in the center of the country, along the eastern coast of Puntland. Since we have nearly finished sweeping Eyl for military-grade weapons, we will soon move to Hobyo, another frequent point of departure for pirates, to clean it up."

"Uh, what about Mogadishu, Colonel?" asked Major Richard Grady, the commander of the battalion's heavy weapons company. "It is by far the biggest nest of pirates, extremists and bloodsucking warlords in the country."

"True, but Mogadishu will stay off our list of objectives...for the moment. Trying to take control of it would necessitate a lot of troops and would cost us heavily in casualties. Its crowded urban environment, the presence in it of thousands of heavily armed militiamen and the fact that a large civilian population lives in it would make it a nightmare in terms of urban combat and we certainly don't want to simply flatten it and do a vacuum cleaning job in it. The Pentagon is still trying to figure out how best to deal with Mogadishu. In the meantime, we will continue with our job here, in the Puntland. Now, here is a photo-map of Hobyo and its area, taken by our tactical drones from the GUADALCANAL..."

Wilkinson ended up explaining his concept of operation concerning Hobyo to his company commanders for a good twenty minutes, discussing with them about the possible opposition they could encounter there and the problems they could expect.

With the battalion's plan finalized, the company commanders started leaving the command vehicle to return to their units. However, Captain Santiago, of Bravo Company, lingered on a bit in order to speak in private with Wilkinson, keeping his voice low so that the two radio operators sitting in the vehicle could not listen to him.

"Colonel, have you decided what you will do about Corporal Visby and the members of her fire team, after their crazy fight on the beach?"

"I have! I sent my recommendations concerning them up the chain of command last night. The ball will now be in the Pentagon's court. Hopefully, the bigwigs will agree with me. In the meantime, I am strongly in the opinion of promoting her right away to the rank of sergeant and put her in charge of the First Rifle Squad of your Third Platoon, in replacement for Sergeant Jenkins, who was wounded yesterday. What do you think?"

"I fully agree with that, Colonel: Visby is an intelligent, mature and courageous girl who has shown all the qualities expected from a rifle squad leader. She has amply earned a promotion through her actions and conduct in combat since we landed in Somalia."

"Then, have her come to my command vehicle first thing in the morning and I will pin her new rank insignias on her myself in front of our command post troops. That girl has truly earned it. As for PFC Stern, he will be promoted to corporal and will take charge of his fire team. I will also get two fresh men to fill back the ranks of his fire team."

"That would be great, sir. Thank you!"

"You're welcomed! Dismissed, Captain!"

08:42 (Somalia Time)

Saturday, November 15, 1997 'C'

Battalion command post area, Eyl

Lieutenant Colonel Paul Wilkinson smiled to Greta as he finished pinning the small rank insignias of sergeant to the collar of her combat shirt. There were only about twenty marines present for the short ceremony, all standing with the big armored command vehicle between them and the nearest houses of Eyl, in order to avoid the danger of a sniper using this occasion.

"Here you are, Sergeant Visby! I am certain that you will fully live up to your new rank."

"Thank you, sir!" replied Greta, who shook hands with Wilkinson before saluting him, with him saluting her back as the staff of the command post cheered up and applauded. Feeling as proud as a peacock, Greta then pivoted on her heels and walked towards Captain Santiago and Lieutenant Gomer, who were also applauding, stopping at attention in front of her company commander and saluting him.

"Sergeant Greta Visby, reporting for duty, sir!"

"At ease, Sergeant! I believe that your first task as a new squad leader is to go acquaint yourself with the members of your new squad. I will thus let Lieutenant Gomer lead you to them. Lieutenant!"

Gomer came to attention then, with both him and Greta saluting Santiago before walking away from the command post area. As they walked towards the positions held by the First Squad, Gomer smiled to Greta.

"Well, your old fire team should be in good hands with Corporal Stein in charge of it."

"It certainly will be, sir: Stein is a good man and a fine marine. Uh, how did the men of my new squad take the departure of Sergeant Jenkins due to a wound, if I may ask, sir?"

Gomer's smile faded somewhat then.

"To be absolutely frank with you, Sergeant Jenkins was not very popular with his men, Visby. Jenkins was a rather foul-mouthed NCO with some regrettable personal opinions and beliefs and he drove his men hard."

"Beliefs, sir? I heard that he was somewhat of a bigoted guy, but I didn't know if his reputation was truly justified."

"It was! To make matters worse concerning him, his squad is widely nicknamed 'The Ethnic Squad', something that you certainly heard before. I tried many times to have Jenkins mellow his views and comments on race but with little success. Knowing you, I am sure that this will not be a problem with you."

Greta did not reply to that, instead rehashing in her head one thing that she called 'the absent majority in the military'. Despite forming still by far the majority of the American male population, Caucasian men were barely more numerous to enlist and serve in the armed forces than those Americans from other ethnic backgrounds, be they Black, Asian, Latino or Native American. Too many American young men refused to volunteer and serve their country these days, instead counting on the minorities in the population

to fill the military ranks and go fight overseas in their place. In contrast, conscription was still in effect in Sweden and national service was a respected institution there.

After walking for some 200 meters, the duo arrived at the small check point manned by the First Squad and meant to prevent the inhabitants of Eyl from transporting military weapons out of town. Right now, most of the battalion was busy combing the town, searching for and confiscating the weapons they could find in order to lower the level of anarchy in Eyl. On an order from Lieutenant Gomer, the twelve men of the First Squad quickly assembled in front of him and Greta. One look at them by Greta reminded her of why they were called 'The Ethnic Squad': only three of them were of Anglo-Saxon origin. However, that didn't bother her one bit personally and she kept a smile on her face as Gomer spoke up.

"Men of the First Squad, I am happy to present to you your new squad leader, Sergeant Greta Visby, who has more than proved her valor and competence in combat during the last few days. I am confident that she will lead you well and also that you will obey her and will do your duty under her to the best of your abilities. I will now let Sergeant Visby get acquainted with you."

Waiting until Gomer had walked away, Greta then nodded her head once while eyeing her marines.

"Well, here I am, guys! Be assured that I will treat you all with equal respect and consideration. I am not the kind to swear constantly and push people around without reason. However, I will expect you all to do your jobs competently and to show dedication and fortitude in combat, the same way you will expect me to behave and fight. I will have two main things in mind while commanding you: for us all to fill our mission as best we can and to make sure that you all return home in one piece."

The dozen men seemed to like her words, with many of them visibly relaxing their attitude and stance then. Greta then continued.

"Before talking further with you in order to know you better, I will need two volunteers to continue to keep an eye out on this checkpoint while we discuss as a group."

Two of the marines, one a corporal, the other a PFC, raised one hand at once, making Greta nod in approval.

"Excellent! If you see someone approach this checkpoint, tell me at once and we will suspend our discussion in order to deal with it as one squad."

As the two volunteers stayed up near the sandbagged position built on one side of the dirt trail coming from the town and going north, Greta went to sit down on one of the inclined sides of a ditch running along the trail, with her remaining ten marines sitting down in front of her.

“Alright, I will start with myself. As you may have figured out by my name, I am a Swedish-American and was in fact born in Sweden from Swedish parents. My family was living at the time in the north of Sweden, in a small and fairly isolated community. I thus learned to live in the wilderness from a young age and hunted and fished with my father. At age fourteen, after my mother died, my father and I moved to Alaska, where my father had been offered a job as a guide for visiting hunters, and I continued growing up there, hunting, fishing and living close to nature. Then, at age eighteen, I saw an enlistment add for the Marine Corps and decided to sign up. I am a qualified rifle sharpshooter, a pistol marksman and I practice Krav Maga. I also love classical music and sports in general. So, here I am! Your turn now, starting with the first man on my left.”

That marine, a young corporal with Asian traits, then started speaking while smiling to her.

“My name is Ken Nakamura and I am the leader of Fire Team Bravo. I was born in Hawaii but my family, like all the other surviving citizens of Hawaii after the destruction of Honolulu by a North Korean nuclear bomb, had to be evacuated and moved to San Francisco, where I grew up. I joined the Corps two and a half years ago. I have an interest in computers and am a big fan of online gaming.”

When Nakamura finished speaking, the next man in line, a Caucasian with brown hair, took the relay.

“I am PFC Steve Anderson and am the light machine gunner of Fire Team Bravo. I was born on a ranch near Great Falls, Montana and love riding horses. I also love guns in general and have been shooting rifles and pistols since I was five. Without bragging, I believe that I am the best machine gunner in the platoon. My next goal in life is to find myself a great girl to live with.”

Everybody else, including Greta, laughed or giggled at the handsome machine gunner’s wish, which was common enough for the average young male marine. Next was another marine of Asian descent.

"Hi! I am Private Bruce Wong and I was born in New York. My family came from Hong Kong some 21 years ago, just before I was born. Up to now, I have not much to say about myself, apart from the fact that I like playing the violin."

"And how good are you with a violin, Private Wong?" asked Greta, attracting a timid smile in the young man's face.

"I am not too bad, but I still need a lot more practice before I can say that I play truly well, Sergeant."

"Well, as they say: practice makes perfect. Next!"

The marine sitting next to Bruce Wong had a dark brown skin and clearly originated from South Asia. He also sported a long moustache and a short black beard.

"My name is Jaghir Singh and my family emigrated from the Punjab, in India, some six years ago. We established ourselves in Seattle and I joined the Marine Corps the day after I got my American citizenship, in order to thank my new country for accepting us."

"That was a great gesture, Private Singh. Do you have special interests or hobbies?"

"Please don't laugh but my father is a very traditional man and he insisted on teaching me the ancient Sikh art of sword fighting. I am no master yet, but I can say that I could hold my own in a saber fight."

"Hey! That interests me!" exclaimed Greta enthusiastically. "Maybe you could teach me sword fighting."

"I would like to, Sergeant, but I don't have swords with me."

"Well, maybe we could hunt for some while here in Somalia. After all, the Arabic tradition is big on swords. With luck, we could find ourselves a pair of swords in a local bazar."

"That would be great indeed, Sergeant."

The next marine in line was a solidly-built Native American private with slightly slanted brown eyes and black hair.

"My name is John Kohana and I am a Lakota Sioux from Idaho. I always loved large open spaces and nature and joined the Corps with the hope of seeing plenty of new places. Unfortunately, I have found out that I am quite susceptible to seasickness, a definite drawback for a marine."

The group was laughing at that when one of the marines on guard at the nearby checkpoint spoke out.

"SARGE, WE HAVE A LONE PICKUP TRUCK APPROACHING FROM THE NORTH!"

"Alright guys, we will continue this once we will have checked out that truck. Disperse and take ready positions around while I join our two men at the checkpoint." Grabbing her combo rifle-grenade launcher and getting on her feet, Greta climbed out of the ditch and joined the two marines posted near the sandbagged position of the checkpoint. She spoke to them while taking out her small binoculars.

"Take position behind those sandbags, just in case."

"Understood, Sergeant!"

The pickup was still some 150 meters away when she raised her small but powerful binoculars to her eyes and started examining it.

"Okay! We have a lone man at the wheel and I don't see anybody else inside that truck. I also don't see any kind of load in the back. This may be someone coming to Eyl to buy stuff at the local market. I..."

Something then made her hesitate then and she concentrated her attention on the driver for a few seconds before suddenly shouting to her marines.

"SHIT! THAT GUY IS WEARING SOME SORT OF TACTICAL VEST! TAKE COVER!"

As the marines started running and dispersing, the driver of the pickup truck, probably reacting to their sudden moves, then gunned down his engine and started accelerating towards the checkpoint. Not taking the time to wonder what the driver's intentions were, Greta raised at once her rifle and aimed it at the incoming vehicle, then fired the high-explosive fragmentation rifle grenade already loaded in her grenade launcher. With the truck coming directly at her, that simplified greatly her aim and she achieved a direct hit on the front radiator of the pickup truck, with her grenade then exploding and destroying the vehicle's engine. Then, a fraction of a second after the explosion of her grenade, a much bigger and more powerful explosion followed, disintegrating the pickup truck. While Greta was luckily not hit by any of the debris or shrapnel caused by the explosion, which occurred some ninety meters away from her, the blast wave hit her hard, making her fly off her feet and projecting her a good four meters backward, with her falling hard on her back in the middle of the dirt trail. At the same time, she saw in a blur a large dark mass fly past her, barely missing her. With her ears wringing hard and trying to catch back her breath, she stayed lying on the ground, half-knocked out, for long seconds. Then, the concerned face of Corporal Nakamura appeared over her. While he

obviously was speaking to her, she couldn't hear what he was saying over the wringing in her ears. More of her marines then appeared around her and she was bodily picked up by her legs and arms and carried off the trail and into the ditch. Nakamura then tried again to speak to her but it took Greta a good minute before she could start hearing him properly.

"Sergeant...sergeant...are you alright?"

"N...not really. I feel like a steamroller passed over me and my ears are buzzing like crazy."

"We just called for help for you, Sergeant. That had to be a suicide car bomber. Your quick reaction actually saved us all."

Greta then tried to sit up but Nakamura gently stopped her.

"Please stay down, Sergeant. Our medics should be here in a minute or two."

"Where is my rifle? I need my rifle."

"Private Kohana is getting it, Sergeant. You were truly lucky: the engine block from that pickup truck flew past you, barely missing you. If it had hit you, you would then be dead by now."

Conscious that she had just barely avoided death, Greta stopped trying to get up and stayed on her back, taking some time to recover her wits. She then saw a marine light truck brake to a halt near her, with two medics jumping out and running to her with their medical kits. Both medics then proceeded in examining her but found no apparent wound or blood on her. Once they were done examining her, they loaded her on a stretcher and put her with her rifle in their vehicle, which then sped towards the first aid station established by the battalion just outside of Eyl. Corporal Nakamura and the rest of the First Squad watched the truck go, deadly concerned about Greta.

"My God! She had just become our squad leader and she has already saved us all, thanks to her quick reaction. I will follow her into Hell if need be."

09:13 (Somalia Time)

Battalion first aid station

Eastern limits of Eyl

Lieutenant Colonel Paul Wilkinson, mortally worried about Greta, arrived with Captain Santiago at the large tent sheltering his battalion's first aid station, where he

found Lieutenant Gomer already waiting outside the tent. The young platoon commander then stopped him with a hand up before he could enter the tent.

"Please wait a bit, sir: the doctor is presently examining Sergeant Visby and she is not fully dressed."

"How is she, as far as we go, Lieutenant?"

"She has no apparent wounds and she is conscious, but Doc Martin told me that he will need to watch her for signs of a possible commotion due to that explosion. She will have to rest for at least another 24 hours."

"What do you know about what happened at that checkpoint?"

"When a lone pickup truck approached it from the North, Sergeant Visby apparently saw something suspicious about it and fired a rifle grenade at it. Then, a secondary explosion occurred. That truck was most probably a suicide truck bomb, with the driver holding a dead man's switch while driving. When Visby's grenade killed that driver, he let go his bomb switch, making his device explode. If that truck bomb would have exploded beside the checkpoint, then my whole First Squad would have been wiped out."

"Suicide bombers..." said Wilkinson in a bitter tone. "Another thing to worry about for us. This had to be an act by the same group of Islamist extremists we have been battling with lately, which means that there are still more of those fanatics around despite the close to 400 we have already killed. We will have to find and kill the remaining of those bastards, and quickly, before they send us more of those suicide bombers."

"Agreed, sir, but how will we find them?"

"I am going to request more tactical drone flights over the region, concentrating particularly on the area north of Eyl, from where both that suicide bomber and the convoy of vehicles we destroyed two days ago came from."

Major George Martin, the battalion's doctor, then emerged from the first aid tent and went to Wilkinson, prompting a question from the latter.

"How is Sergeant Visby, Doc?"

"She will be alright but she was severely shaken and I will want to keep her under medical observation for at least another 24 hours, to make sure that she has not suffered a commotion. If no sign of commotion is detected after a day or two, then she will be able to return to duty."

"Thank God for that! Could we see her now?"

"Yes! She is now decent but is resting in one of our medical cots, so don't make her speak too much."

"Thanks, Doc!"

The three marine officers then walked into the large tent and went to the cot where Greta lay in a semi-sitting position. While her combat shirt was hooked nearby, she wore her khaki T-shirt and smiled weakly at Wilkinson.

"Thank you for visiting me, sir."

"It's the least I could do, Sergeant Visby. How do you feel?"

"I still have a bit of ringing in my ears and am also a bit woozy but, apart from that, I am fine, sir. Are all of my squad members alright, sir?"

Wilkinson nodded in appreciation at this concern she showed for her men.

"They are, Sergeant. In fact, you saved all of them from being blown up along with you. You can be proud of yourself."

"The important thing is that we didn't lose people because of that truck bomb, sir. I suppose that we now can expect more of those in the future, sir?"

"It is definitely a possibility with which we will have to deal with, Sergeant Visby. However, thanks to you, we are now aware of that threat and on guard for it. Now, rest, so that you can return to duty and to your men in a day or two. Get well, Sergeant."

"Thank you, sir!"

Wilkinson, Santiago and Gomer then walked out of the medical tent and stopped as a group a few meters away, in the open.

"Alright, let's pass the word around about this new threat. While you do that, I will contact the GUADALCANAL and ask for those extra drone reconnaissance flights. Dismissed!"

08:24 (Washington Time) / 16:24 (Somalia Time)

NC4 operations center, The Pentagon

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

Ingrid Dows frowned as she read the latest action report from Somalia, then looked at the commander of the NC4's morning shift, Brigadier General Curtiss Bledsoe.

“Suicide bombers? That is liable to cost us people in Somalia. Basically, any Somali could go around with an explosives vest strapped under his or her clothes and approach our soldiers.”

“And what would be the best counter-measure to those suicide bombers, General?”

“The only effective measure would be to avoid any close contacts with Somali citizens but then that would defeat the whole purpose of our presence in Somalia. We need to gain the collaboration of the Somalis and treating them as if they bore a contagious disease is certainly not the best way to do it. Our soldiers will have to be extra-vigilant, like this Sergeant Visby was, while staying polite and correct with Somali civilians.”

“Have you decided yet what we will do about Mogadishu, General? That place is about the worst nest of militiamen, warlords and extremists in Somalia.”

“Yes, but it is also a large city with a maze of narrow streets bordered by multi-story buildings full of innocent civilians: about the worst nightmare possible in terms of urban combat. We would lose hundreds of soldiers in there if we tried to clean up Mogadishu. No! We will only destroy the boats used by pirates and seize weapons in the villages and small towns along the coast, plus will destroy any concentration of militia forces and Islamic extremists we will find.”

With that said, Ingrid walked out of the NC4 operations center and returned to her nearby office in order to cut down a bit the ever-growing pile filling her ‘in’ basket. She barely had time to enter her office before the telephone on her desk rang. Hurrying to pick it up, she found the Secretary for the U.S. Navy, Charles Brubaker, on the line.

“What can I do for you, Mister Secretary?”

“Well, you won’t be surprised if I tell you that I am avidly watching those televised reports about the good work our marines are doing in Somalia, Ingrid. One of those marines, Corporal Greta Visby, has already distinguished herself in a number of actions during the recent past days and I am anticipating in a few weeks to receive a request for an award for her, for my approval and signature. In your view as someone who fought in so many wars to date, what kind of award would be commensurate with her acts in your opinion, General?”

Ingrid couldn’t help smile to herself then.

“I will have to correct you on one point, Mister Secretary: Corporal Greta Visby was just promoted in the field to the rank of sergeant by her battalion commander, for

leading a bayonet charge by her fire team against an attacking force of Islamic extremists. Then, barely minutes after being promoted and taking charge of her new rifle squad, she stopped a suicide car bomber in time to save her whole squad from being blown away. She was hit by the blast wave when the suicide bomber let go his dead man's switch but she was only severely shaken and not wounded. I read that this morning in our latest operational reports from Somalia."

"Wow! That girl is Hell on wheels! So, what would be appropriate as a reward for her actions in your opinion, General?"

"Mister Secretary, if you consider anything less than the Silver Star for Sergeant Visby, then we won't be on speaking terms anymore."

Brubaker briefly chuckled at those words.

"Message received and understood, General. Have a good day!"

"And a good day to you as well, Mister Secretary." replied Ingrid before putting down her receiver. Thinking for a moment, she then went to the television set placed along a wall facing her desk and switched it on, tuning it to the CNN channel and putting the sound volume low before returning to her desk to go through her paperwork.

13:46 (Somalia Time)

Sunday, November 16, 1997 'C'

First Marine Battalion command post, Eyl

Puntland, Somalia

"You wanted to see us, sir?" asked Captain Santiago, accompanied by Lieutenant Gomer, as they saluted Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson. The latter returned their salute before answering him.

"Yes! As you know already, we are due to start moving down to Hobyo early tomorrow morning. What I didn't know was that the Pentagon would throw us a curve, courtesy of the State Department. Basically, the State Department received an urgent request for help from the International Red Cross, with the Norwegian government supporting that request. In turn, our Secretary of State spoke to the President, who in turn told Secretary of Defense McCain to get on with it, or so I was told on our encrypted line with the Pentagon. So, we are the ones stuck with fulfilling that request for help."

"Sounds like typical Washington knee-jerk reaction, sir." said Roberto Santiago, making Wilkinson smirk.

"Exactly! However, that request won't oblige us to redirect much of our battalion's resources in order to do the job. That request is to provide on a temporary basis a protection force for a hospital run by the ICRC in the town of Galkayo, to the southeast of here. It appears that rival clans and militias in that town have starting fighting each other, endangering the international aid workers in Galkayo. The ICRC staff is especially worried that some warlord could decide to come steal the medical supplies and drugs stored at the Norway Hospital. By the way, that's the name of the place we will have to defend. The ICRC is also waiting to receive a convoy of food aid for the refugee camps dotting Galkayo. That convoy will also need protection from the local militias and warlords. So, I have decided to send to Galkayo a reinforced rifle platoon, with mission to protect the international medical staff and establishments there and also to ensure the safe arrival and distribution of that food aid. Lieutenant Gomer's platoon will go to Galkayo, reinforced by one medium machine gun squad from Bravo Company's weapons platoon and one heavy machine gun squad from the battalion's weapons company. Since our ALLIGATOR amphibians are big beast that would feel constricted in the narrow streets of Galkayo, Lieutenant Gomer's force will use wheeled ATVs²⁸ brought in by PELICAN VTOL transports. His force will also be flown in at the same time in order to accelerate the pace of this operation. I have already asked the GUADALCANAL to prepare eighteen UTVs and a good stock of supplies and to load the lot in PELICANs. The aircraft will arrive after nightfall, so that you could fly to Galkayo under the cover of darkness and land there with the maximum of surprise."

"And who will be our ICRC point of contact in Galkayo, sir?" asked Kenneth Gomer.

"Doctor Sven Gunnarsson, the head of the ICRC team in Galkayo. However, while you are to do your best to protect his people and installations, he will not order you around: I will! A small communications team from our battalion will go with you to Galkayo and will bring a satellite communications portable unit, so that we can stay in contact with each other."

"What will be the rules of engagement, sir?"

"They will be straight and simple: you have the absolute right to self-defense of you, your marines, the ICRC staff and their patients and local employees, plus you will take no bullshit from any local asshole. If anyone threatens you, give one warning, then

²⁸ UTV: Utility Task Vehicle. Small vehicle able to carry two to four men, plus a limited amount of cargo through rough terrain, forested areas and soft ground.

start shooting if that warning is not heeded. Know that the situation in Galkayo is one of total anarchy: there is no police and no official government and the town is awash with weapons.”

“Great! We’re going to Dodge City²⁹.” said Gomer with faked enthusiasm, making Wilkinson smile in amusement.

“An apt comparison, I must say, Lieutenant.”

²⁹ Dodge City : Famed small town of the 19th Century American West reputed for its lawlessness and high crime rate. The expression ‘Let’s get out of Dodge!’ comes from that bad reputation.

CHAPTER 15 – A NICE LITTLE CHAOTIC TOWN



The Somali city of Galkayo in better times, after the Somali Civil War.

23:50 (Somalia Time)

Sunday, November 16, 1997 ‘C’

The ‘Norway Hospital’, Galkayo

Central Somalia

Doctor Sven Gunnarsson felt deadly tired as he sat down on a chair of the small coffee lounge used by the medical staff of the humanitarian hospital he ran in Galkayo. His work seemed to him without end, with sick or wounded Somalis showing up continuously at the hospital in a nearly endless stream. His international team of doctors and nurses and the brave, dedicated Somali medical workers who worked with him at the hospital truly did their best but the conditions in and around Galkayo only kept getting worse. The town was already dotted with a dozen or so refugee camps filled with Somalis displaced by the civil war, persons who were desperately poor, had lost everything and were bordering on starvation, with only international food aid keeping them alive. Gunnarsson couldn't help sigh in exasperation when the noise of some kind of gunfight echoed from some distance away, in the direction of the demarcation line separating the north and south parts of the town, which were each controlled by opposing separate militias from the two main clans present in Galkayo.

“Those damn thugs are at it again! When will this senseless bloodshed end?”

Unfortunately, he already knew the most probable answer to his question: probably never.

He was getting up from his chair in order to make a last tour of the patients wards before going to sleep when he started hearing a growing noise he had not heard before. Curious, he went out on the porch of his hospital facing Hospital Avenue to see if he could locate the source of the noise. More hospital staff members soon joined him outside as the noise kept growing rapidly. Gunnarsson' heart jumped in his chest when he finally recognized the now loud noise.

"AIRCRAFT! WE HAVE AIRCRAFT ON APPROACH! HELP IS ARRIVING!"

His words made his staff members present cheer out loud, with the cheers getting even louder when the first aircraft appeared just over the roofs of the surrounding buildings, flying slowly towards the hospital. However, that aircraft was like nothing he had seen before: it basically looked like a flat, rectangular object with four large shrouded propellers attached to its sides. If anything, that aircraft looked more like a helicopter than anything else.

"What the hell is that?"

Gunnarsson then watched the strange craft as it landed vertically in the nearly empty surface of the street block facing the hospital, raising a big cloud of dust in the process. Then, he saw a second similar aircraft approach and land next to the first one, while another four aircraft started circling around, waiting for their turn to land. More cheers came from the hospital staff when dozens of soldiers and a number of small four-wheeled vehicles started coming out of the two landed aircraft. As soon as those soldiers were out of the way, the two aircraft that had landed first then took off, freeing the vacant space for two other aircraft to land. As the ballet of aircraft continued, with already over forty soldiers on the ground, one soldier came to Gunnarsson, who had walked to the edge of Hospital Avenue to greet the newcomers. That soldier stopped in front of him and saluted him in a military fashion.

"Excuse me, sir, but I am looking for Doctor Sven Gunnarsson, in charge of the Norway Hospital."

"That's me!" replied the doctor, who then shook hands with the soldier. "You don't know how happy I am to see you here, mister."

"Lieutenant Kenneth Gomer, of the United States Sixth Marine Regiment. We were sent here to provide protection to your hospital and your staff and patients."

"And how long are you going to stay here, Lieutenant?"

"That is still undetermined, Doctor Gunnarsson. We received the request for help from the ICRC only early this morning and things are still fluid. Right now, my most pressing need is to find a secure place to lodge my marines and park my vehicles. Do you have any space available in your hospital?"

"Unfortunately, my hospital is about as full as an egg right now, Lieutenant. We had to rearrange our own staff quarters in order to make room for more patients. However, there are two local hotels within a block from the hospital where some of my staff, including me, have relocated recently. I believe that there are still a few rooms available in those two hotels. As for your vehicles, they may park in the parking lot of the hospital, behind me."

"Hotels..." said Gomer, not sounding too enthusiastic about that solution. "How dependable and sanitary are they?"

"Well, I can vouch for their owners and their hotel staff, as I know them quite well: they have been suffering from this civil war as much as us and would be more than happy to receive more paying customers. Presently, the ICRC is paying for the room and board my staff members get there. What about you, Lieutenant? Is your government ready to pay those hotel owners?"

That question made Gomer smile.

"Don't worry about that, Doctor: the U.S. Navy Department pays a very honest sum for temporary accommodations overseas. They do accept American dollars here, I hope?"

It was then the turn of Gunnarsson to be amused.

"Accept? The mighty American dollar is king here, Lieutenant."

"Excellent! Could you show me that empty lot behind your hospital?"

"Sure! It is actually the designated parking lot for my hospital and is surrounded by a low brick wall, so you won't have to worry about someone simply stealing one of your vehicles and driving it off the lot. Follow me!"

With Gomer walking alongside him, Gunnarsson quickly went around his hospital, which was actually a collection of single-story buildings attached together. The parking lot he then showed to Gomer seemed to satisfy the marine officer.

"This will be perfect for our use. I am going to guide my vehicles to this lot now and will place permanent sentries here as well. Once that is done, if you could show me those two hotels you spoke about."

"Sure! Uh, how many soldiers do you have with you, Lieutenant?"

"I have 73 men and one woman with me, Doctor. However, they can easily crowd themselves a bit and sleep with four or five men per hotel room. Is the plumbing in those hotels in working order?"

"Yes! Despite the complete lack of government services here, the hotel owners, like all other owners of shops and businesses in Galkayo, have been paying out of their own pockets to have their systems maintained and repaired by local artisans and technicians, many of whom are officially unemployed. So, those hotel owners will be more than happy to receive your men...and woman. Is that woman a nurse, by chance?"

"No! She is one of my rifle squad leaders, and one of the best as well."

"Wait! Is that woman the one known on television news as 'the Viking Shield Maiden'?" asked Gunnarsson, grinning. That nearly made Gomer laugh.

"Wow! She is already this famous here? Yes, Doctor: Sergeant Greta Visby is the one who made the news recently. She was born in Sweden, by the way."

"That's great! A couple of my hospital staff members are Swedish. They will love to be able to speak in Swedish with her."

"Well, don't forget that she came here with me to help protect your hospital, not to start a Swedish group club, Doctor."

"Of course! I will wait here for you while you organize your people and direct your vehicles to here."

"That won't take long, Doctor." promised Gomer before walking away.

Effectively, the first four-wheeled vehicles started to roll inside the parking lot a mere two minutes later, with Gunnarsson counting a total of eighteen of them when they were all in. A group of five marines, one of them a woman, then apparently took charge of mounting guard on the parked vehicles. Intensely curious about her, Gunnarsson went to the female marine, a tall, athletic and young blonde with blue eyes, presenting himself to her in Swedish, which he could speak fluently.

"Sergeant Visby? I am Doctor Sven Gunnarsson, director of this hospital."

"Pleased to meet you, Doctor." replied Greta while shaking his hand. "You do speak a good Swedish, Doctor."

"I am Norwegian, Sergeant. I also have two of my staff who are Swedish and who will love to meet you later on. From where exactly are you in Sweden?"

"I am originally from Skaulo, a small village in the Lapland region of Northern Sweden. Skaulo is at the same latitude as Bodo, in Norway. I however moved to the United States with my father when I was fourteen and was living in Alaska before joining the Marine Corps."

"No wonder why they call you 'the Viking Shield Maiden' on American news. I..." The return of Lieutenant Gomer then interrupted his conversation with Greta and he faced the young officer, who had stopped and had politely waited in silence close to him.

"I will now show you the two hotels I spoke about, Lieutenant. They are the Al Jazeera Hotel and the Hotel Jubba. The Jubba is the closest and largest one of the two and is in fact just beside the lot where your aircraft landed."

"Then, let's go visit this Hotel Jubba first."

Leading Gomer around his hospital and crossing Hospital Avenue, Gunnarsson then veered a bit to the right and walked towards a large walled compound containing one two-story building and a number of smaller buildings and sheds. At the same time, he spoke to Gomer as they closed in on the hotel compound.

"The Jubba Hotel is owned by a man named Majeed-Hassan Mahmood. While a consummate businessman, he is also a most decent man and he also happens to be a cousin of the warlord who controls the northern part of Galkayo, Majeerteen-Omar Mahmood, so you shouldn't have problems with the local militiamen. You should like that hotel owner. By the way, I occupy a room in his hotel and I can certify that the toilets and showers in it work. However, you must tell your men to be scarce with their use of water, as the hotel gets its water from a private well which has a limited capacity."

"I will pass the word to my marines, Doctor. What about the local food? While we have brought our own field rations with us, would the local restaurants be safe to eat in if my marines decide to vary their menu?"

"Uh, they will have to be selective in their choices of restaurants if they go eat local food. Only a few restaurants around the hospital would pass the hygiene standards we would consider as minimal in our own countries. However, I can recommend to you the restaurant of the Al Jazeera Hotel, which serves good Arabic

food like couscous, rice, kibbe and shawarma, as well as the Forage Fast Food, which serves some good skewered grilled meat. My staff and I have eaten many times in both of those restaurants without suffering any gastro-intestinal problems.”

Gomer took the time to note all that information down as he walked with Gunnarsson.

“One last thing, Doctor. I have been authorized by my commander to hire and pay at least one local person who could serve as interpreters for us. As you may have guessed already, none of us speak Somali, while I have one man who can speak Arabic.”

“I can definitely help you with this, Lieutenant. My hospital staff already employs a small number of local people as interpreters and would have hired more if my limited budget allotted by the ICRC would have allowed me to do so. How many such translators would you need?”

“I would say four at a minimum, Doctor. However, we will need to have good confidence in those translators, for obvious reasons.”

“It shouldn’t prove to be a problem to find such local interpreters, Lieutenant: there are plenty of young, well-educated people around Galkayo who are unemployed or have only poorly paid menial jobs at present. Some of them are in fact the kids of some of my local medical staff, so should be quite reliable.”

“Excellent! Your help is proving to be quite useful, Doctor.”

“And the presence of your soldiers will take a big weight off my shoulders, Lieutenant. My hospital has already been looted once by militiamen who took all our drugs in order to resell them on the black market. One of my local staff members who tried to protest was then murdered.”

“I am truly sorry to hear that, Doctor. My marines will do their best to protect your hospital while we are here. While I don’t know yet how long we will stay, I expect to be here for at least three to four weeks, maybe longer. It will all depend on the decisions taken in Washington about Somalia.”

While Gunnarsson didn’t reply to that, he mentally wished then that Gomer could stay for at least a few months, but frankly had low expectations about that happening.

When the duo entered the lobby of the Jubba Hotel, they found it half-dark and lit by only a handful of electrical lamps, probably in order to save on electricity. There was also a lone young man sitting behind the reception counter, looking bored. He however regained his focus on seeing Gunnarsson enter with Gomer.

“Doctor Gunnarsson, what were these strange helicopters which landed near the hotel a few minutes ago?”

“They were American aircraft bringing in American soldiers tasked with protecting my hospital, Aziz. Lieutenant Gomer, this is Aziz, one of the sons of Majeed-Hassan Mahmood. He customarily is on the reception’s night shift. Aziz, this is Lieutenant Gomer, the leader of the soldiers who just arrived by air. Could you please wake up your father? I believe that he and the lieutenant will have to discuss some serious business together.”

The word ‘business’ seemingly acted like a catalyst on the young man, who then quickly disappeared through a door at the back of the counter. While waiting for his return, Gomer looked around at the hotel lobby. While the furniture was fairly old, the place was reasonably clean and had been swept recently. After a couple minutes of waiting, the young Aziz returned with a tall, thin man with graying hair and wearing glasses. The newcomer then went around the counter to shake hands with Gomer while speaking in a fair English.

“Welcome to the Jubba Hotel, sir. I am Majeed-Hassan Mahmood, owner of the hotel. So, I gather that you would like rooms for your soldiers, right? How many soldiers do you have with you?”

“I have a total of 73 men and one woman with me, Mister Mahmood. Of course I don’t expect you to have 74 rooms available at this time, but I was planning to pack four men or more per room, as we only need place to sleep and wash. How many rooms do you actually have available in your hotel tonight?”

Majeed-Hassan had to restrain himself from showing his glee then: business for his hotel had been next to non-existent for months, until the arrival of the ICRC medical team had filled at least a few of his rooms. If those American soldiers were ready to pay even a minimal rent for his remaining rooms, then it would allow him to at last make a profit and be able to put money aside for some much-needed repairs and renovations.

“Right now, I have a total of nineteen rooms available, sir, all with a private bathroom. I gather that the American government will be ready to pay for their rent?”

“You gather correctly, Mister Mahmood. Do you accept American dollars?”
That question made the hotel owner grin widely.

“Sir, the American dollar is king here! However, you will need to pay cash, as we don’t have the electronic connections needed to accept payments via credit cards.”

"That will not be a problem, Mister Mahmood. I will take all of your nineteen rooms that are available. How much would you charge per night for them?"

The owner made a quick mental calculation in his head before quoting a number while smiling.

"I would be ready to let them go as a package deal for a thousand dollars a night, sir."

"Hum, that makes roughly an average of 53 dollars per room per night: still well within accepted DOD commercial accommodation rates. You have a deal, Mister Mahmood."

"And for how long will you need those rooms, sir?" asked Majeed-Hassan, whose smile had just widened to a grin.

"I still don't know for how long my mission here will be, but it will be for a minimum of at least a few weeks."

"Excellent, sir! If you would like for some extra services for your soldiers, I have good contacts that could provide your men with special services."

Gunnarsson hid his face with his hands, while Kenneth Gomer smiled, having guessed what kind of 'special services' Mahmood was alluding to.

"Thanks for the offer, Mister Mahmood, but we won't need special services. My marines have to stay focused on their duties while in Galkayo."

"Very well, sir. Since your soldiers will be three or four per room, I will give you two keys per room and will let you distribute them as you wish."

As Mahmood was sifting through his key press behind his reception counter, Gomer took out of a cargo pocket a large envelope full of cash that Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson had given him before his departure from Eyl, then counted out 7,000 dollars on the counter. When Mahmood turned around with his hands full of keys and returned to the counter, his eyes lit up at the sight of the pile of big denomination American dollar bills.

"Here is the payment for the first week of room rental for my marines, Mister Mahmood. Could I bother you to provide me with a signed receipt in English for that payment?"

"Of course, sir!" replied the happy hotel owner as he dropped his keys on the counter, then quickly counted the dollar bills before producing a receipts pad. He filled a form, then signed it and applied his business stamp on it. He gave to Gomer the signed receipt before pocketing the cash money and shaking hands with the marine officer.

"It is a pleasure for me to do business with the American government. I wish you and your soldiers a nice stay in Galkayo, sir."

"Well, that will depend on others than me, I guess." replied philosophically Kenneth Gomer while smiling.

10:06 (Somalia Time)

Monday, November 17, 1997 'C'

Market place, three street blocks from the Jubba Hotel

Galkayo

Having completed the first duty shift for her rifle squad in Galkayo and having slept a few hours, Greta had decided to go explore the area around the hospital and, since the orders were to never wander around alone, had taken Private Jaghir Singh with her. Despite the obvious generalized poverty permeating the town, the market place they found some three street blocks to the Southeast of their hotel was a surprisingly busy place, prompting a remark from Singh.

"Where do they get their money for buying stuff here, Sergeant?"

"I don't know, but I suppose that black market activities are part of the answer. Still, this place is quite a colorful one."

"Indeed! It actually reminds me of a few places I saw in the Punjab."

Greta was not surprised to see that she and Singh were attracting a lot of curiosity to them from the Somali merchants and their customers in the market place. However, she didn't see or feel outright hostility towards her and Singh, just a mix of curiosity and surprise. Passing by a mixture of mobile stands and of more permanent shops occupying actual brick buildings, they came to one particular shop that instantly attracted Greta's undivided attention. For one thing, its front display was full of weapons.

"A gun store? I guess that I should have expected to find one in an anarchic place like this. How about visiting it, Private Singh?"

"I am certainly curious about it, Sergeant."

They were about to enter the shop when Greta spotted a large sign bearing the words 'MARWAN GUN STORE' in English, Somali and Arabic. There was also a long sentence in Somali written under the name of the store. Curious, Greta approached what appeared to be an employee of the store that was keeping an eye on the weapons

displayed in the front counter. That employee also happened to be armed with a pistol tucked in his belt.

"Excuse me, sir. Do you speak English?"

"I do, miss! What can I do for such a well-armed woman today?"

"I was wondering what was written under the name of the store."

"Aah, that!" said the man, smiling. It is my favorite moto for my business. It says 'If it can kill a man, we have it'."

Greta couldn't help shake her head at that, while Singh briefly laughed.

"That's what I would call the right spirit for this kind of business, Sergeant."

The shopkeeper raised an eyebrow on hearing the word 'Sergeant' directed at Greta.

"You command male soldiers, miss? That's unusual, I must say."

"It is still a bit uncommon in the United States but I earned my rank in combat, mister. Uh, I realize that your business probably concentrates on weapons that go 'BOOM' or 'BANG', but I was hoping to find an old sword, preferably a saber. My soldier here is also an amateur of blade weapons."

"A perfectly understandable interest in what were true warrior weapons, miss. While I have an assortment of bayonets in my store, I don't have swords. However, my brother owns the boutique next door and he specializes in antiques. I know for a fact that he has a varied collection of swords on display inside his store."

"Yes! I will certainly go visit him next. Uh, do you mind if I look inside your store, out of curiosity, mister?"

"Please do, miss!" replied the old shopkeeper, smiling. "May I ask in turn what kind of weapon you have, miss? It looks quite interesting...and unusual."

"Of course! I can show it to you but I can't let you handle it. Sorry but it is against regulations."

Greta then unslung her combo rifle-grenade launcher and held it in front of her to let the shopkeeper look at it.

"This is a Winchester M1985A2 assault rifle, the standard rifle of the United States Marine Corps. Its caliber is .243 Winchester, or 6.2mm, and it is fed by a 25-round box magazine. What you see under the rifle barrel, inside an integral handguard, is a single-shot grenade launcher able to fire a variety of rifle grenades."

"An impressive weapon, I must say, miss. If you will follow me, I will give you a quick tour of my humble shop. MARWAN, COME AND WATCH THE FRONT DISPLAY WHILE I LEAD THOSE CUSTOMERS AROUND THE STORE."

"COMING, HADID!"

Soon, Greta and Jaghir were following the old man around the shop, which was literally filled with firearms and weapons of all kinds, going from the simple pistol to the rocket-propelled grenade launcher and hand grenades. There was also a variety of bayonets on display. One model of bayonet, which looked at first quite ordinary, had something different that attracted Greta's attention. She thus pointed it to the shopkeeper.

"That bayonet looks a bit different to the others. It also has Russian markings on it."

"Aah, it looks different because it is different, miss. This is a very special knife used by Soviet special forces soldiers during the war in Afghanistan. A Somali mujahedeen who fought the Soviets there brought this back and sold it to me. It is actually a spring-loaded blade knife able to project its blade and kill a man from a few paces away."



"Really?" said Greta, instantly interested, while Jaghir Singh also eyed the Soviet knife with renewed interest. "Can you show me how it is used?"

"Of course, miss! Watch that thick wooden beam: I will stick that blade into it from two paces away."

Watched with intense interest by Greta and Jaghir, the shopkeeper grabbed the knife from its display and took it out of its scabbard, then pointed it at the wooden beam before pressing on a hidden button which was part of its handle. The razor-sharp steel blade then flew out at an impressive velocity and planted itself deep in the beam with a resounding 'TONK'. Going to the wooden beam, Greta tried to pull the blade out but had to use a good part of her strength before she could extract it from the beam. She was grinning with glee as she eyed the steel blade she now held in her hands.

"I want this! How much, mister?"

"For you, my American friend, I will let it go for sixty dollars."

"Sold! I may empty my wallet for this, but it is worth it. Show me how to reload the blade and operate the knife, please."

As the shopkeeper explained the functioning of the knife to Greta, Jaghir watched on, a bit jealous.

“Damn, I wish that you had a second one like that, mister.”

“Unfortunately, this is a rather rare piece, mister. Maybe you could find one in another weapons shop in the city but I doubt it.”

Another five minutes and the two marines left the weapons store, with Greta having already attached the Soviet ballistic knife and scabbard to her web gear. However, the shopkeeper insisted on guiding them to the antiques store owned by his brother, speaking briefly with him in Somali before returning to his own store. The owner, a man in his fifties with a long beard, bowed to Greta.

“I am honored to get your visit, miss. You are looking for old swords?”

“Yes! I do hope that I have enough cash money left on me for it, but I would like to find an old Arabic scimitar, while my friend here is looking for a saber.”

“I can loan you some cash, Sergeant: I have hardly spent any money in the last few weeks and my wallet is quite full.”

“You would? Thanks! I will remember that. Let’s see what we can find in this shop.”

“Follow me, please.” said the shopkeeper. “I keep my sword collection in the back. I must say that, with all the various conquering armies which went through Somalia in the past and with Somali warriors returning from wars in other countries, I have been able to accumulate quite a varied collection. Some of the older swords are however understandably no more in perfect conditions.”

“That is understandable, mister.” replied Greta, feeling some excitement as she followed the man towards the back of his store. Soon, she and Jaghir stopped in front of a wall display where over twenty different types of swords were suspended. As the eyes of both marines opened wide at the view of the sword collection, the shopkeeper went to one sword and unhooked it from the wall before presenting it to Greta.

“Here is a recent copy of a scimitar sword, as it was used during the Crusades, some 800 years ago. I do have an authentic scimitar in my collection but, being a certified antique piece, goes for a lot more than this copy and is also quite rusted out. This sword has been sharpened, by the way, so be careful while handling it, miss.”

Greta made a grimace when she cautiously passed a finger along the cutting edge of the sword.

"It is indeed sharp. How much?"

"I will let go for one hundred dollars, miss."

Greta in turn looked at Jaghir, who nodded his head before taking out his wallet and handing a hundred dollars to her. As Greta was paying for her scimitar sword, which came with its own scabbard, Jaghir went down the sword display, to soon stop in front of a highly curved saber.

"That one looks really nice, mister."

"Aah, a kilij, an Ottoman sword from the end of the 19th Century. A redoubtable weapon that could cut a whole pig in two with one single blow."

"Really?" said Jaghir, a bit incredulous, making the shopkeeper nod his head once.

"If you sharpen it carefully, yes!"

"Then, I'll take it! How much?"

As Jaghir and the shopkeeper started to haggle about the price in celebrated Arabic fashion, Greta also reviewed the swords display but decided that she already had bought enough for today. Anyway, her wallet was now close to empty and she already owed a hundred dollars to Jaghir, so she left the shop after he had paid for his kilij and had also bought a knife sharpening kit from the shopkeeper. Both of them wore proudly their new swords hooked to the back of their tactical vests as they continued to tour the market place. Seeing a small coffee shop with a few tables at which customers could sit down and drink a cup, Greta pointed a table with two chairs to Jaghir.

"Let's have a nice cup of strong coffee to celebrate our new acquisitions. I am tired of this brown water from our field rations that they call 'coffee'."

With apparently every shop and commerce in town having at least one employee or owner who could speak a passable English, she had no difficulty ordering two cups of Turkish coffee for herself and Jaghir. The first sip of the strong coffee made her close her eyes in delight while she also sniffed her cup.

"Hmm, this is what I call real coffee. I think that I will come back here on a regular basis."

"Me too, Sergeant. Well, if the next days to come are all like this one, we should be fine here."

"Well, don't count too much on that, Jaghir. This is no paradise, remember."

08:33 (Somalia Time)
Wednesday, November 19, 1997 'C'
Displaced Persons (DP) camp
Southern districts of Galkayo



On their arrival at one of the displaced persons (DP) camps dotting the peripheral districts of Galkayo, Greta could only look around her with horror and sadness, utterly appalled and shocked by what she was seeing. Private Nguyen and Private Singh, who had come with her to escort Doctor Gunnarsson and his senior nurse on a working visit to this DP camp, were both as appalled as her. The so-called camp was in reality a large and tightly-packed collection of rudimentary huts built out of old blankets, dead tree branches, rocks and various materials collected from trash dumps. The refugees visible in the camp mostly consisted of young children and women, all thin from malnutrition, with the few men visible being old or sick. In contrast, young men shone by their absence in the camp. The place was bone dry, while the stench from human waste nearly made Greta gag.

“My God! How could people live in such hellish conditions?”

“How?” replied Senior Nurse Agneta Larsen. “Because they have lost everything they had and have nowhere else to go to live. This is one of the worst sides of this civil war, apart from the killings and atrocities. And if you were about to ask about the absence of young men and teenage boys in this camp, it is because they were either killed in the war or forced to enroll as militiamen by the various warlords who have ruined this country by their greedy search for power and money. Talking of warlords, we are now in a district of South Galkayo which is controlled by the local Hawiye Clan warlord, who in turn is at loggerheads with the Darod Clan warlord controlling North Galkayo, where our hospital is. We will have to be very careful while here.”

“Why so, miss?” asked Private Nguyen Van Minh, a young, baby-faced marine who was on his first mission overseas.

“First, because that Darod warlord, a man named Omar-Gidir Sa’ad, is a brutal psychopath who doesn’t think much of anything except for money and power. Second, he has been fighting with the warlord controlling North Galkayo, Majeerteen-Omar Mahmood, for years now, trying to wrest control of pieces of the town from Mahmood.

Third, because the militiamen of that Omar-Gidir Sa'ad were the ones who attacked and looted our hospital two weeks ago.”

“I've heard enough!” then said Greta. “Keep your eyes open for any armed man who could approach us, guys. If anyone tries to threaten or attack Doctor Gunnarsson or Nurse Larsen, then we will teach him or them good manners.”

The beat-up pickup truck driven by one of the Somali employees of the Norway Hospital soon stopped in the middle of the camp, where an empty space with a hut in its center seemed to act as an unofficial meeting place for the occupants of the camp. As soon as the vehicle had stopped, a crowd of refugees gathered around it, begging with hands extended in Somali to Gunnarsson and Larsen as they stepped out of the pickup truck. Greta also stepped down from the rear box of the vehicle while giving an order to her two marines.

“Stay up in this truck and watch around for armed men while I escort Doctor Gunnarsson around.”

“Got it, Sarge!”

Going inside the small hut built out of corrugated steel, cardboard and cloth and situated in the center of the space, Gunnarsson and his nurse started seeing and examining a long line of children and women, helped by their local Somali employee, who was acting as a translator. As for Greta, she stood just outside of the hut, doing her best to ignore the pleading children around her while keeping vigilant about possible attackers. She had been standing guard for about twenty minutes when Private Singh shouted a warning to her from the top of the pickup truck.

“HEADS UP, SARGE! WE HAVE TWO TECHNICALS WITH HEAVY MACHINE GUNS AND WITH A DOZEN MILITIAMEN ABOARD APPROACHING.”

Swearing about the trouble those newcomers could cause, Greta ran back to the pickup truck and climbed into its rear cargo box, where she used her binoculars to examine the two approaching vehicles. What she saw didn't please her.

“Those guys look like trouble for us. I will go towards them and stop them before they can get too close from here. Nguyen, Singh, you each target one of the two machine gunners and get ready to shoot them down the moment they become too aggressive. We can't afford to let these assholes start firing heavy bullets around this crowded camp. Take proper firing positions and aim carefully.”

Before her marines could protest about the risks she was about to take, Greta jumped out of the pickup truck and walked quickly towards the two approaching trucks, her rifle at the ready. Once some one hundred meters from the medical hut, she stopped in the middle of the trail snaking through the makeshift huts of the camp and raised her left hand, signaling the trucks to stop. The drivers of the 'technicals' tried at first to ignore her and pass by her but Greta held her ground firmly, forcing them to finally stop mere meters from her. Seeing that some of the militiamen traveling in the pickup trucks were about to jump out, she raised and aimed her rifle while shouting at them in English.

"STAY IN YOUR TRUCKS AND TURN AROUND! YOU ARE NOT WANTED HERE!"

One militiaman who was sitting in the cab of the first vehicle and who seemed to be the leader of the group, stuck his head out by the passenger's window and shouted back at her in accented English.

"THIS IS THE TERRITORY OF OMAR-GIDIR SA'AD! YOU ARE THE ONE WHO NEEDS TO LEAVE. GET OUT OF OUR WAY, WOMAN, OR WE WILL SHOOT YOU!"

The man then shouted an order in Somali that made the gunner of the first truck arm his big 12.7mm and point his weapon at Greta. Her reaction then was to speak briefly in her radio headset she wore under her helmet while firming her grip on her rifle.

"Nguyen, Singh, fire now! We're killing those fuckers."

Less than two seconds later, two rifle shots rang and the two Somali machine gunners were either bowled out of their vehicles or crumpled down in the rear box of their trucks. Immediately after that, Greta opened fire, shooting the militia leader in the head, then shooting the driver of the first truck through his windshield. Using her sharpshooter skills in rapid aimed fire, she next started to shoot down the militiamen carried by the first truck, killing all three of them in mere seconds before they could either return fire or jump out of their vehicle. The militiamen in the second truck didn't fare better, taken under fire by her two marines aiming semi-automatic shots at them. Approaching the first truck with her rifle still pointed once all the militiamen were down, Greta went first to the dead militia leader and opened his door, making the dead man roll out and fall in the dirt. Seeing a small handheld radio antenna sticking out of one of the cargo pockets of the dead man, she opened that pocket and grabbed the radio, which was switched on: it could prove useful in the future to monitor the transmissions between the militiamen of

this local warlord. While she was quickly checking out the other militiamen to make sure that they were dead, Private Singh joined her at a run.

“Nguyen stayed in overwatch in the truck, Sarge. What do we do next?”

“Extract and pocket the breach blocks from their rifles while I do the same with their machine guns: I want their weapons to become useless. Do the same with any pistols they may be carrying and take any grenades that are on them.”

“On it, Sarge!”

Greta then climbed into the rear box of the lead truck and opened the breach cover of the heavy machine gun resting on a pedestal with swivel mount, then removed the ammunition belt and the one round inside the gun before extracting and disassembling the big breach block. First breaking the firing pin, she then threw the separate pieces of the breach mechanism as far as she could, dispersing them around the camp. With that done, she jumped out and went to the second truck, where she repeated that process. Seeing that Singh was still disassembling the AK rifles lying around in the dirt, she went to help him, also pocketing the hand grenades carried by the dead militiamen. When she returned to the body of the militia leader to finish disarming him, she found out that the man had been carrying nothing less than a gold-plated DESERT EAGLE pistol in caliber .44 Magnum, making her whistle in appreciation.



“Wow! This guy either had expensive tastes in handguns or, more probably, he stole it from somebody else. I’m taker!”

Slipping the big pistol in a cargo pocket of her tactical vest, she also grabbed the three filled spare magazines and the pistol’s holster she found on the dead man. With that done, she enlisted the help of the refugees who had been watching her and Singh and loaded the bodies of the dead militiamen in the rear boxes of their trucks, rewarding the helping refugees with the cash money found on the dead militiamen. She then told her marine to get behind the wheel of the second truck before herself taking place in the first truck. Followed by Singh, Greta drove her truck out of the camp as fast as she safely could, finally abandoning it behind a ruined shed before jumping out of it.

“ABANDON THAT TRUCK HERE! WE ARE RETURNING TO THE MEDICAL HUT.”

As they started running back into the camp at a moderate pace, Singh grinned to Greta.

"Decidedly, you don't do things halfway, Sergeant."

"Hey, the colonel told us to not take shit from anybody. Those guys were talking shit, so I gave them their just dues. Besides, I am sure that they richly deserved it."

"I can't agree more with you on that, Sergeant."

When they arrived back near their own vehicle, they found a worried Agneta Larsen waiting for them.

"Did you really have to kill those gunmen? This could attract trouble on our hospital."

Greta threw in return a dubious look at the Swedish nurse.

"You would have preferred that I get shot by them or that they would have stolen your medical supplies, Nurse Larsen? You don't play the sheep when confronted by wolves. If you do, you only end up being eaten alive. Besides, if that local warlord decides to play stupid with us, he will then learn the hard way who is the new kid on the block."

She then left the dumbstruck nurse and went inside the hut, where she quickly told Doctor Gunnarsson about what had happened. The Swedish doctor nodded his head in response.

"You did what needed to be done, Sergeant Visby. As for Nurse Larsen's criticism, ignore it: she is still a bit naïve about how to react to the local thugs and warlords. I will have a serious chat with her tonight."

"Thanks, Doctor! How long will you still need to be here in this camp today?" Gunnarsson let out a discourage sigh at that question.

"I could stay here all day and all night and would still have patients to examine and treat. However, I understand that we should not wait for that warlord to react to the killing of his men before leaving this camp. I will finish treating this pair of kids, then we will return to the hospital."

"Thanks for your comprehension, Doctor." replied Greta, relieved by his approval of her actions.

"And thank you for protecting us, Sergeant. You and your marines are doing a great job."

To Greta's relief, they were able to leave the camp and return to the hospital some thirty minutes later, without seeing a reaction from the local militiamen to the

shootings. The frequency of gunfights in town had probably made such shootings routine to militiamen, making them slow to react to distant gunshots. Her first business on arrival back at the hospital was to go report to Lieutenant Gomer, who was with Staff Sergeant Gambino at the time. After noting down the details of Greta's story, Gomer smiled to her in an encouraging way.

"Good job, Sergeant Visby. This may indeed attract some adverse reaction from this Sa'ad, but we are not in the business of playing sheep, nor are we here simply as spectators. I will make sure that we are well prepared to respond to any hostile move on his part. Tell your marines that we will double our sentries around the hospital tonight. Anything else?"

"One thing, sir, which could interest you."

She then put down on the desk used by her officer the pocket radio she had confiscated from the dead militia leader.

"I took this radio from the leader of these militiamen, sir. It is tuned to the frequency used today by the men of this warlord and it could help warn us about any impending attack from that Sa'ad asshole."

"Now, that was one smart move on your part, Sergeant. I will have my assigned translator monitor this radio, so she could warn me about any suspicious radio traffic. Again, well done, Sergeant."

"I have also something else, sir, but it would mostly interest Staff Sergeant Gambino. I confiscated something else that could turn him green with envy."

Greta then took out the gold-plated DESERT EAGLE she had taken from the dead militia leader and held it up, making Gomer's and Gambino's eyes pop wide open.

"Jesus!" exclaimed Gambino while staring at the big pistol. "I AM jealous! Any chance that I could buy it or trade for it?"

"Not one, Staff Sergeant!" replied Greta, grinning. "This baby is mine to keep. In fact, it will make the perfect sidearm for me when I will go back to hunt in Alaska on my next leave time."

"Decidedly, you are in the process of becoming a walking arsenal, Sergeant Visby." remarked Gomer, amused.

"And that's the way I like it, sir."

11:17 (Somalia Time)

Platoon command post, Norway Hospital

Lieutenant Gomer had just finished a radio conversation with the battalion command post, now established in the coastal town of Hobyo, when the teenage Somali girl he used as a translator approached him, looking worried. Aisha Hammadi was a most beautiful and also quite intelligent girl of seventeen who happened to be the daughter of one of the Somali nurses employed by the ICRC team, so was considered by Gomer to be quite dependable.



“Yes, Aisha?”

Aisha Hammadi, Somali girl

“Sir, there is now a lot of talk on that small radio you asked me to listen to. Sa’ad’s men have discovered the bodies of the militiamen your marines killed in the refugee camp this morning and their boss is furious about it.”

Gomer immediately gave her all his attention and made her sit next to the desk he was using.

“Are they saying anything about possibly attacking us, Aisha?”

The teenager was about to answer him when more talking in Somali came from the small radio she held. Signaling her to listen closely to the radio, Gomer then sat closer to her and put a notepad and pen near her, so that she could take notes. He waited patiently as Aisha listened to the radio and scribbled down a few lines. After a good three minutes of listening, Aisha looked at Gomer with a mix of concern and fear in her eyes.

“Sa’ad just ordered his men to concentrate at his compound and prepare for a night attack on this hospital and on the Jubba Hotel. He wants to attack your marines while most of them will be sleeping. However, no specific hour was mentioned.”

“That is still more than enough information to help me prepare against that attack. Please continue monitoring that radio and report immediately to me any new information you will learn about that planned attack. You’re doing a great job, Aisha.”

“Thank you, sir! How are you going to defend the hospital against Sa’ad’s men? Sa’ad is reputed to have hundreds of militiamen and also has many heavy weapons.”

“Like they say, Aisha, a man warned is worth two men. Be reassured: Sa’ad will be the one losing the battle tonight, not us. Again, thank you for your warning.”

Aisha bowed her head briefly to salute him, then left the small room of the hospital that Gomer used as his command post. Now alone, the marine officer thought for a moment

while looking at his map of Galkayo, then went to his VHF tactical radio switched to his platoon's frequency and spoke in it.

"All callsigns Three Bravo, this is Three Bravo Six: I want to see all the squad leaders at my location immediately. However, don't run in and look as if you are on routine business: spies in the neighborhood could be watching us."

His next move after that was to call back his battalion command post on his encrypted radio set: arranging in advance some air support for his small unit would indeed be a prudent thing to do. Some defensive stores and a little more ammunition would not hurt either.

22:01 (Somalia Time)

Third Rifle Platoon command post, Norway Hospital

North Galkayo

"Here they come, Lieutenant!"

Kenneth Gomer, looking over the shoulder of the forward observation officer sent by the battalion, nodded his head as he watched the long convoy of 'technicals' and trucks loaded up with gunmen rolling northward along the Wadada Gabdinassir Avenue, the main street in Galkayo. It passed by both the hospital and the Jubba Hotel and thus had been the most obvious avenue of approach for the Hawiye Clan gunmen intent on attacking his marines. What these gunmen and their warlord didn't know was that they would not possess the element of surprise they expected to have and that they were being watched closely from the air, with two tactical reconnaissance drones from the U.S.S. GUADALCANAL presently flying overhead, both silent and invisible as they flew at an altitude of 3,000 meters in the night sky. As well, the U.S.S. GUADALCANAL was ready to unleash its awesome firepower in support of the Third Rifle Platoon, with its strike missiles targeted on the mansion-fortress where Omar-Gidir Sa'ad lived.

"There is a shitload of militiamen coming at us. I count no less than twelve technicals with either heavy machine guns or recoilless guns and eighteen trucks full of gunmen. This looks like a locust invasion coming at us."

"Indeed!" replied the captain who had flown in with a drone command and monitoring portable station just after noon, using the same PELICAN that had brought in extra ammunition and defensive stores, all hidden amidst a shipment of humanitarian

food and medical supplies. "I estimate the enemy force at no less than 600 men. This is going to be a tight battle, even with our air support assets."

"Well, my marines have been preparing some nasty surprises for those assholes since the Sun went down and the radio traffic we are still monitoring gives no indications that the enemy is aware that they lost the element of surprise. But you are right: this promises to be intense."

"When do you want the GUADALCANAL to fire missiles at the base of these gunmen, Lieutenant?"

"Let's wait until these thugs will be fully committed to their attack, when they will be advancing on foot. The confusion from losing their command link will then be greater. Is Charlie Company in place?"

"Their PELICAN transports landed twenty minutes ago in the desert some thirty kilometers south of this city. You will only need to call the cavalry in and they will be here in minutes."

"Excellent! I will now go take my position on the roof. Keep me posted via radio about the advance of those thugs."

"Will do!"

Kenneth Gomer still felt some trepidation as he made his way to the roof of the hospital's main building: while highly confident in the fighting abilities of his marines, the enemy still outnumbered his men by a factor of at least eight to one. Both the air support provided by the U.S.S. GUADALCANAL and the defensive preparations done by his marines in the last few hours, under the cover of darkness, were going to help decide the outcome of this battle. As for the consequences of losing this fight, he preferred not to think about that. Once on the roof, he walked at a crouch to the low sandbagged position hastily built at the southeast corner of the building, where a heavy machine gun crew had already set up its big .50 caliber Browning M2. Kneeling behind the low sandbag wall and taking out his night scope, he started observing towards the South while talking on his tactical radio.

"All units, this is Six! The enemy column is approaching along the Wadada Gabdinassir Avenue and should be here in about ten minutes or less. Stand ready but do not fire until I give the go, over."

He then received in succession an acknowledge from the squads forming his force, including from Staff Sergeant Gambino, who had been put in charge of the defense of

the Jubba Hotel, the other location targeted by the enemy. With that done, the young marine officer took a deep breath to calm himself down a bit: the lives of his marines and of the hospital staff were going to depend on the outcome of this battle.

On the roof of the tallest building located close to the hospital, across the Wadada Gabdinassir Avenue, Greta Visby reviewed quickly the positioning of her rifle squad and of the medium machine gun crew reinforcing it. All of her marines had established low sandbag positions on top of the only three-story building situated in this part of town and had a splendid overview of all the approaches from the Southeast of the hospital. For better security of her sub-unit, her marines had also barricaded the ground entrances of the building they were in and had also placed a few nasty surprises next to those entrance points. Along with the use of their night scopes, they would enjoy some decisive advantages over the militiamen who were about to attack the hospital and hotel. Hearing a column of vehicles approaching from the Southeast, Greta looked through her rifle's night scope and saw the first of the 'technicals' coming in along the Wadada Gabdinassir Avenue.

"BE VIGILANT, MARINES: THE ENEMY COLUMN IS NOW LESS THAN 200 YARDS AWAY. HOLD YOUR FIRE UNTIL I SAY OTHERWISE."

Some two minutes later, she saw the enemy column stop briefly, time for it to disgorge hundreds of gunmen who then started dispersing and advancing along the few narrow streets and alleys leading towards the hospital. However, part of the gunmen stayed aboard their trucks and continued to roll behind the armed pickup trucks, probably intent on going to the Jubba Hotel to attack it. Greta had already her rifle sighted on the gunner of the lead technical when she heard Lieutenant Gomer give a brief order on the radio.

"To all units: open fire!"

"SQUAD, FIRE AT WILL!"

The medium machine gun attached to her squad was the first to open fire, just before Greta could fire herself and shoot dead one of the Somali heavy machine gunners. With her marines ordered to carefully aim their shots and not fire in automatic mode, except of course for the medium machine gun crew and for her three light machine gunners, a murderous fire hit the first vehicles of the enemy column, bowling over the Somali heavy weapons gunners and killing or wounding their drivers. At the same time, the Somali gunmen advancing on foot along the narrow alleys and streets of the town encountered

in the dark barricades made of multiple rolls of so-called 'razor wire', a type of barbed wire made of razor-sharp steel ribbons with blades that looked like actual razor blades and which caused deep and painful cuts to anyone attempting to pass through it. As the Somali gunmen cried out in pain while trying to find a way through the razor wire, Claymore directional mines judiciously placed to cover the alleys and streets blocked by the rolls of razor wire were command-detonated on order of Lieutenant Gomer, sending out tens of thousands of steel fragments in tight arcs and digging bloody holes in the packs of militiamen trying to advance. The survivors from the first wave of attackers understandably panicked and reversed their advance, emerging from their alleys and onto the streets running parallel and southeast to Hospital Avenue. Their various leaders, who had conveniently stayed behind the front line of gunmen, started swearing at them and ordering them to resume their attack, only to be taken in the flank by the dense machine gun fire coming from Greta's building. Those gunmen, having already lost in mere seconds half of their numbers, then broke into utter panic and fled the way they had come, pursued by the marines' fire, which picked them up one by one as they ran away: for the sake of the hospital's safety, the marines could not and would not allow large numbers of those militiamen to escape and be able to fight another day. The marines thus were following an important rule in warfare: you didn't play fair with an enemy that respected no rules at all.

This however still left a number of armed pickup trucks to continue their advance at top speed towards the Jubba Hotel, pursued by rifle fire from Greta's squad. As these pickup trucks started firing their heavy machine guns at the hotel, Staff Sergeant Gambino and his squad of marines defending the hotel opened fire, starting with a salvo of seven 60mm rifle grenades. While three of the grenades narrowly missed the pickup trucks, the three others hit their targets, exploding on impact, killing the occupants of the vehicles and overturning one of them. Now down to only two intact vehicles, the Somali crews of those vehicles decided that discretion was the better part of valor in this present case and tried to turn around and flee. However, those two pickup trucks then became the targets of concentrated fire from six light machine guns and a dozen rifles and could make only fifty meters or less before veering out of control and crashing against either a wall or house, their drivers killed or gravely wounded. With those pickup trucks now neutralized, Greta ordered her marines to shift their fire back to the gunmen trying to flee on foot.

The ordeal of those surviving militiamen was not over, though. As they reached their waiting trucks and climbed into them, a series of powerful explosions lit up the night sky to the South, marking the utter obliteration of Omar-Gidir Sa'ad's compound by six GPS-guided long range strike missiles fired from the U.S.S. GUADALCANAL, each of them carrying a 500-kilo high-explosive warhead. The radio command frequency used by the gunmen then fell silent at that precise moment, leaving the surviving militiamen both confused and leaderless. With less than 200 out of 600 gunmen having survived their failed attack on the hospital and hotel, the truck drivers then decided on their own to turn around and flee, not realizing yet that their base camp did not exist anymore. They were able to roll for less than one kilometer along the streets of South Galkayo before hitting the roadblocks just established by Charlie Company, whose marines had flown in and landed just after the start of the battle. Those fleeing trucks thus hit walls of machine gun fire and 90mm recoilless gun fire and were quickly transformed into flaming wrecks, with most of the Somali gunmen aboard them being killed in the process. Those who still managed to jump out were then mercilessly pursued by rifle fire and gunned down to the last. When the sound of gunfire quieted down on Galkayo, Omar-Gidir Sa'ad and his force of thugs were no more.

"IS EVERYBODY ALRIGHT?"

To her great relief, Greta found out that only one of her marines had been lightly wounded in the face by flying debris from a heavy machine gun bullet hit on the ledge of the roof the marines were on. As that marine received first aid treatment from his comrades, Greta keyed on her radio, calling Lieutenant Gomer.

"Six, this is One Three Bravo: one lightly wounded man to report. He is now being treated and is in no danger. I request permission to come down to street level in order to start cleaning up the mess down there, over."

"Six, acknowledged! Permission granted! All other callsigns, report your situation, over."

Anxiously listening to the reports given on the radio, Greta soon felt immense relief wash over her: her unit had only suffered a total of three men wounded, with no fatalities. Considering the size of the attacking enemy force, that could be called a miracle. However, she corrected herself quickly: this was the result of good intelligence, careful tactical planning and superior technology and training, opposed to ineptly led thugs with

poor training. Whatever the reasons for this success, it meant a totally different possible future for the people of Galkayo and hopefully a better one as well.

09:44 (Washington Time)

Friday, November 21, 1997 'C'

White House Situation Room, Washington, D.C.

U.S.A.

"So, to recap the latest developments of the last few days in Somalia, the towns of Harardhere, Eyl, Hobyo, Galkayo, Eyt and Berbera have by now been cleansed of the pirates, militiamen and warlords responsible for either conducting or supporting pirate activities along the coasts of Somalia. As for the port city of Kismayo, near the Kenyan border, our marines are still encountering resistance there despite their initial successes. Our losses to date in Operation Jolly Roger total 27 marines killed and another 58 wounded, Mister President."

Ross Perot nodded once, his expression sober.

"These losses, while comparatively small in view of our successes in Somalia, are still sad ones to me. However, our marines have done a top-notch job, particularly the ones from our First Marine Battalion, who have been doing the bulk of the fighting to date."

"Thank you, Mister President. I will soon be able to forward to Secretary of the Navy Brubaker a list of awards recommendations for our marines."

"And you can be assured that I will support fully that list, General. Yes, Secretary Inouye?"

The secretary of state, appearing quite pleased by the situation reported by Ingrid about Somalia, spoke out with clear enthusiasm in his tone of voice.

"Mister President, I believe that our successes have opened the way for something more than anti-piracy operations in Somalia."

"Something more?" said Perot, raising an eyebrow at the same time as Ingrid stiffened, alarmed.

"Yes, Mister President! I believe that we should use this golden opportunity to help put in place a viable central government which could then finally put an end to the chaos and anarchy reigning in Somalia. We should..."

“NO!”

All heads around the conference table turned towards Ingrid Dows, who had just shot up on her feet, looking furious. When she continued speaking, it was while starring hard at Daniel Inouye, who had been taken completely off balance by her loud reaction.

“Haven’t we learned our past lessons well enough about this business of ‘nation-building’, Secretary Inouye? Before the First Korean War, we tried to impose our views on what we believed to be the ideal government for the Korean people and ended up suffering a humiliating defeat there when we were forced to withdraw from the Korean Peninsula. Next, we nearly repeated the same stupid, misguided mistake when parts of the then American government wanted to put in place in Vietnam what turned out to be a petty, corrupt and unpopular political leader, for the simple reason that he was quote ‘a good Catholic who was a friend of the United States’, unquote. Only my warnings to President Dewey prevented us from repeating the same disastrous mistake that cost our country over 50,000 dead and an ignominious defeat in another parallel history. Now, you want us to engage in ‘nation-building’ in a deeply tribal country divided along multiple ethnic lines? A country that never was and never will be united out of the free will of its own people? Did you forget that there was a brutal dictator in place in Somalia before the start of this civil war, a dictator who used violence to impose his will on the Somalis but still ended being thrown out and killed? Do we want to repeat the same mistakes that the British did while forming and then trying to hold on to their now defunct empire? Mister President, I am totally opposed to what Secretary Inouye is proposing and urge you to keep to the present goal of our Operation Jolly Roger: eliminating piracy along the coasts of Somalia in order to ensure the safety of our citizens and commercial vessels.”

“Wait a minute, General Dows!” protested Inouye, stung by her criticism. “You may be our top military leader, but I am in charge of our foreign policy. Your job is to help execute our policy, not decide it. I have been in the business of diplomacy for over a decade now and...”

“And I have both formulated foreign policies and lived through the consequences of foreign policy mistakes for close to 7,000 years, Secretary Inouye. My soul was once that of the most successful Chinese emperor ever, Wou-Ti, who built the biggest empire China ever had. Let’s forget this arrogant notion that the United States is superior to everything else on this planet and that its ‘exceptionalism’ entitles us to impose our beliefs and ways on other people. Yes, Somalia is divided and anarchic by our

standards. Why is it so? Because it was never a homogenous country or people to start with. Rather, it is a collection of tribal clans and ethnic groups that distrust each other, while what we call Somalia was created by invading European powers who understood or cared dick about the realities of the place. I am not ready to sacrifice the lives of the men and women in uniform who are bravely serving our country just to satisfy the wishes of well-meaning but misguided politicians.”

“YOU ARE GOING TOO FAR, GENERAL! YOU...”

“ENOUGH!”

All heads then turned towards President Perot, whose face had hardened.

“First off, while General Dows was less than diplomatic about her stated opinion, she is right, as History amply supports her. Second, I have no wish to engage our country in what could well turn into an endless and probably futile and costly foreign adventure. We started our operations in Somalia with the goal of eliminating the threat from piracy against our commercial shipping and international commerce. Let’s continue focusing on our original goal here. Now, let’s pass to the next item on our agenda...”

When the NSC weekly meeting ended, Secretary Inouye threw a black look at Ingrid before leaving the Situation Room. Ignoring him, Ingrid was also about to leave the room when President Perot intercepted her near the stairs leading up to the ground floor of the White House.

“General, I would like to speak with you in private. Please follow me to the Oval Office.”

Ingrid, not regretting one bit her outburst directed at Inouye, followed Perot up and to his Oval Office, where he invited her to sit down on one of the sofas of his coffee corner. Perot looked at her in silence for long seconds before starting to speak.

“First off, don’t worry about your present command position, Ingrid: you simply said a truth that needed to be told. I am first and foremost a businessman, rather than a politician, and I know too well that wars are not good in the long run for the national economy, or for the national psyche. A few may benefit from such wars but most Americans do not, especially those young men and women stuck with fighting them. With this said, you may just have made enemies of some powerful politicians in this country, including Secretary Inouye.”

“I don’t care about making enemies, Mister President. My only concern is to give you my best advice possible, based on what I believe to be the best for our country.

When I replied to Secretary Inouye, I was and still am ready to pay any personal price for stating what I deeply believe in.”

“And I fully believe you about that, Ingrid. You have now been a precious presidential advisor for numerous past Presidents since 1947, both Democrats and Republicans, and have proved again and again your absolute honesty and care about protecting our nation...sometimes from itself. Be assured that, in turn, I will have your back, General.”

“Thank you, Mister President!” said Ingrid while getting up from her sofa at the same time as Perot. The President then shook her hand firmly while smiling to her.

“I am the one who needs to thank you, for the priceless service you have been providing to our nation. Keep up the good work.”

Ingrid, coming to attention, then saluted Perot before pivoting around and leaving the Oval Office, a big weight off her shoulders.

CHAPTER 16 – A WELL-EARNED VACATION



Nome, Alaska. Population: 3,500 in 1998.

16:25 (Alaska Time)

Tuesday, March 3, 1998 'C'

Nome Airport, Alaska, U.S.A.

Greta surprised the other passengers disembarking from the small twin-turboprop aircraft that had brought her to Nome from Anchorage by rolling in the snow covering the tarmac of the small airport while screaming with joy. When she got back on her feet, one of the passengers, a mature woman with native Inuit features, smiled to her.

“Let me guess, miss: Nome is your home and you missed it a lot.”

“That is correct, madam. I also missed snow a lot: I just spent four months in Northern Africa.”

“North Africa?! I would probably die from the heat over there, miss.”

“You could die from a lot of things in Somalia, madam, including from the heat.”

“Somalia? Dear God! That place looked like Hell in the news. What were you doing there? Humanitarian work?”

“Of sorts, madam.” replied Greta, not wanting to publicize the fact that she had been fighting in Somalia as a marine. She was actually hoping that her three-week vacation time, apart from allowing her to see her father again, would bring her some much-needed peace and rest after the killing and fighting she had done in Somalia. Grabbing back her big backpack and her rifle case, she walked to the entrance of the airport’s terminal, which was part of an aircraft hangar building used by Bering Air, the

airline company she had just used. Once inside, she went right away to the main entrance, heading for the taxi station outside. Luckily, she was able to grab the second and last taxi present at that station before it could be commandeered by another passenger from Anchorage. The driver, well enveloped in warm winter clothes in order to stave off the minus sixteen degrees Celsius cold, smiled to her via his mirror.

“Where to, miss?”

“My family home, at the northern end of Steadman Street. It will actually be the very last house on the street.”

“Steadman Street it is!” pronounced the driver while starting his engine and rolling out of his parking spot. As the taxi started driving down the snow-covered streets of Nome, Greta looked around her with delight: Nome actually looked a lot like her native village of Skaulo in Sweden, one reason her father had come to live here after leaving Sweden in order to forget the loss of his wife, who had died from a cancer. However, with a population of 3,500 persons, half of whom were native Inuit, Nome was much bigger than Skaulo had been but its economy was nonetheless based mainly on subsistence activities like fishing, hunting and trapping, like in Skaulo. Excitement grew gradually in her as her taxi approached her father’s house and then stopped in front of it. Leaving a good tip to the driver, Greta nearly ran with her two pieces of luggage to the front door of her family house and knocked on the door, her heart beating fast in her chest. After half a minute or so and another series of knocks by Greta, the front door opened, revealing her father, Bjorn Visby, clad in a turtleneck sweater and dark trousers. Both screamed with joy at the same time while throwing themselves in each other’s arms. After hugging Greta for long seconds, her father then opened his door wide and signaled her to come in.

“Come in, Greta, so that you could be warm inside our house.”

“Let me just grab my two things first, Father.” replied Greta before taking hold of her backpack and rifle case and carrying them inside. Bjorn Visby closed and locked the door behind her, then hurried to help her with her backpack.

“Let me carry this to your room upstairs, Greta.”

“Thanks but no, Father. In the marines, we have a saying: one man, one kit. I will manage.”

“As you wish, Greta. In the meantime, I will heat up a pot of strong coffee for you.”

“That I won’t mind, Father.”

She removed her snow-covered boots before climbing the wooden stairs leading to the upper floor, where the bedroom she had used as a teenage girl was. It wasn't a very big room but, compared to the accommodations she had to use aboard the U.S.S. GUADALCANAL and in Somalia, it felt like a near-palace to her. Taking the time to strip off her winter coat, tuque and gloves, she then quickly emptied her backpack, dispersing its content inside the drawers of the big chest set against one wall and inside the clothes closet of the bedroom. Once she had finished with that, she sat for a moment on the big bed, appreciating its comfort, then went back down the stairs, finding her father in the kitchen. Approaching him from behind, Greta then put her arms around his torso and hugged him, her right cheek glued to his back.

"It is nice to be back home for a while, Father."

"After those months in Somalia? I bet! How long will you be able to stay in Nome?"

"I have a three-week-long leave pass but I will have to take a plane back to Camp Lejeune on Saturday the 21st of this month."

"More time with you would have been nice but I will have to take what you can offer, Greta. The coffee is ready: fill yourself a cup and then we will talk about your experiences in Somalia, if you are willing to talk about them. I know that some soldiers prefer to keep their more difficult experiences about war to themselves."

"Some parts of my time in Somalia were indeed quite violent but I was not traumatized by them, Father. I will be happy to share my stories with you."

"Good! You reassure me."

Soon, she had poured herself a cup of steaming coffee and went to sit in the living room with her father. There, Bjorn patiently let her tell him her stories at her own rhythm, not pushing her for details. She spoke for a good half hour, concluding in a sober tone of voice.

"Overall, I believe that my experience in Somalia was a positive one, Father. While I had to fight and kill many times, I ended killing men who richly deserved death, while my actions and those of our marines made life better for thousands of poor civilians who had been suffering greatly from that obscene civil war. It was particularly gratifying for me when we were able to free a large group of hostages, many of them Europeans, from a pirate warlord. By the way, I personally killed that warlord."

Those last words made Bjorn grin.

"I know! I saw you on television, standing firm in the middle of a dirt street while aiming your rifle at an incoming car. You have become quite a celebrity here in Nome, Greta."

"Really?" said Greta, amused. "What else did you see about me on television?"

"Oh, there was that small ceremony in Somalia when your battalion commander awarded you with the Silver Star for gallantry. That earned me multiple pints of beer from the other patrons of the saloon where I saw that ceremony on television."

"Hey, maybe I should visit that saloon during my stay."

"You certainly would be most welcome at the Board of Trade Saloon, Greta. So, what would you like to do during your stay here?"

"I would very much like to accompany you on some hunting, fishing or trapping excursion during my vacation, Father: I miss Alaska's nature, especially after all these months in a desertic country with very few trees. Are you due to go on such an excursion soon, either for yourself or as a guide for some visiting tourists?"

"I am! While we are still too early in the year for the legal hunting seasons on most types of big game, I was due to guide in four days a group of three visiting tourists from New York who want to visit the old ghost town of Council and do some photo hunting."

"Tourists from New York?" said Greta, amused. "And I suppose that you will have these greenhorns³⁰ spend one night in the old Ophir Saloon?"

"Of course! Every tourist who visits Council wants to see the Ophir Saloon. You are of course most welcome to accompany me on that excursion, Greta."

"I would be most happy to come, Father. Talking of ghost towns, I brought back from Somalia a couple of war booty pieces that you may find interesting and which I intend to pack for that excursion to Council. Let me just get my rifle case upstairs."

A bit intrigued and certainly curious, Bjorn waited while Greta ran upstairs, coming back down a minute later with her rigid rifle case. She smiled to her father while putting down the case on the low coffee table of the lounge and opening it.

"Warning: you may become envious about those two pieces, which could prove useful on hunting trips around Nome."

³⁰ Greenhorn : Popular (and derogatory) term in the American West to describe visitors from East Coast cities who are felt to be soft.

Bjorn effectively opened his eyes wide when Greta opened her rifle case, revealing her SVD DRAGUNOV sniper rifle and her gold-plated DESERT EAGLE pistol inside.

“My God! And you really found such marvelous pieces in a hole like Somalia?”

“Somalia may effectively be a hole by American standards but it is awash in weapons from all around the World. Both this rifle and the pistol were taken by me from dead Somali gunmen. This SVD DRAGUNOV is actually the standard sniper rifle of the Russian Army and is chambered for the 7.62 X 54R cartridge, thus is powerful enough to legally hunt a moose with it. Its scope’s reticle can be illuminated, making it effective in dark environments, and I was able to consistently hit a man-sized target at 800 meters with it. As for this DESERT EAGLE, it is chambered in .44 Magnum caliber and, with the correct type of ammunition, would be suitable as a self-defense sidearm against grizzly bears. Feel free to examine them, Father.”

“I certainly will, Greta.” replied Bjorn before gently grabbing the DRAGUNOV and then examining it from all angles.

“This is a really nice rifle. Many of my hunting friends will be jealous of you.”

“And I am dying to be able to hunt with it while in Alaska.”

Putting the rifle back in the case, her father then took the DESERT EAGLE, admiring its gold-plated looks and its impressive bulk for a pistol.

“The .44 Magnum is effectively considered a legal caliber for hunting bears and boars. However, using it against a charging moose could prove to be a costly mistake. Well, with this rifle and pistol, you will be properly armed for that excursion to Council.”

“I still would like to visit a local gun store in order to find the proper sort of hunting ammunition for them, Father.”

“We can do that tomorrow, Greta...after I pay you a pint of beer at the Board of Trade Saloon tonight.” said Bjorn in a definitive tone.

20:09 (Alaska Time)

**The Board of Trade Saloon
Front Street, Nome, Alaska**



Greta went along her father's suggestion that they walk together down Steadman Street to Front Street, the shoreside main street of Nome, to get to the Board of Trade Saloon, with the reasoning that if they drank too much beer there, then they would not have to drive under the influence and risk a severe ticket if caught. Nome being a small town, that represented a walk of only a few hundred meters and, for Greta, walking out in the Alaska cold air was something she had been missing. When they arrived at their destination, Bjorn showed with visible amusement to Greta the sign under the name of the Board of Trade Saloon.

"Headquarters for the sin city of Nome, Alaska. Before you left and joined the marines, you were still too young to legally drink in public. It is now time for you to be initiated to the sinful ways of Nome, Greta."

"Uh, I am okay with a beer or two, Father, but I am not a big drinker and I hate to wake up in the morning with a pounding headache. So, please show restraint towards me tonight."

"What?" exclaimed Bjorn in a falsely indignant tone. "A marine who doesn't like to drink? That's blasphemous! Okay, okay: I will go easy on you tonight. Let's go in!"

Entering the saloon via its old, battered front door, the duo walked into the main hall, finding it half-lit and somewhat obscure, even though it was nearly full with customers drinking and conversing at tables or along the bar's counter. The moment Greta was in, nearly all the men present snapped their heads towards her, throwing lecherous looks at her. Ignoring the looks, Greta followed her father to the bar, where he spoke to the barman.

"Two beers on tap for me and my daughter, Jim."

"Your daughter?" replied the barman while fetching two mugs. "The one we saw fighting in Somalia?"

"I do have only one daughter, Jim, remember?" said Bjorn sarcastically, making the barman smile with embarrassment.

"Of course!"

The barman then filled the two mugs with blond beer and put them in front of Bjorn and Greta, smiling widely to the latter.

"And one beer for Sergeant Calamity Jane!"

"Sergeant Calamity Jane?! They have a new nickname for me now, Father?"

"Well, you got promoted to sergeant, right? So they had to promote your nickname too."

"Uh, right!" could only say Greta before taking a first sip from her beer.

08:43 (Alaska Time)

Saturday, March 7, 1998 'C'

Nome Airport

"Aah, here they are!" said Bjorn Visby, who had been waiting with Greta inside the terminal of the Nome Airport for his three customers. He then went to the small family of three, composed of a couple in its mid to late forties and of a young man barely out of his teens.

"Mister and Misses Riley? I am Bjorn Visby, your guide for your excursion to Council."

"Pleased to meet you, Mister Visby." replied James Riley, a solidly-built man with some graying hair. "This is my wife Denise and my son Richard. We came to Nome mostly for Richard's benefit: he studies photography and wanted to do a photo safari in Alaska. Mind you, I am myself an occasional hunter and I do like nature, like my wife. I was told that this corner of Alaska has some particularly beautiful vistas."

"The whole of Alaska has beautiful vistas, Mister Riley, but the region around Nome is definitely worth the look. Oh, I was about to forget to present my daughter Greta to you."

The Riley's then shook hand with Greta. Bjorn didn't miss the mutual spark of interest that appeared then in the eyes of Greta and of the young Richard Riley. To be honest, most girls would definitely find Richard Riley, an athletic blond boy with blue eyes, more than handsome. Denise Riley also noted the exchange of sparks but didn't say a word about it, simply smiling instead. Bjorn then looked at the few sports bags and backpacks the Riley family had brought with them.

"Let me and Greta help you with your luggage. My car is parked in front of the terminal. Once all inside it we will start our journey to Council: it is connected to Nome by a 57 miles-long gravel road."

"And what kind of car do you have, if I may ask?"

Bjorn beamed with pride as he answered James Riley.

“A Ford EXPEDITION, Trailhawk-Edition. It is the civilian variant of the U.S. Army 4 X 4 TRAILBLAZER utility vehicle. The EXPEDITION is the perfect vehicle for outdoorsmen wanting to go through rough terrain. It has extra-large tires, high ground clearance and great robustness. It also has plenty of space for up to five persons and plenty of kit. Follow me, please.”

As the group started walking towards the terminal’s main entrance on the town side, Denise Riley started speaking with Greta, who had grabbed one of Denise’s bags.

“So, Greta, you hunt and trap with your father?”

“Uh, not really, Misses Riley. I am presently on vacation to visit my father and just completed a tour of duty in Somalia. I am in the U.S. Marine Corps.”

Those words had the effect of a lightning bolt on Richard Riley, who grinned while eyeing Greta.

“Somalia? You aren’t by chance the one they nicknamed ‘The Viking Shield Maiden’?”

Greta hid her exasperation at this nickname business but kept smiling as she answered Richard.

“Yes, it’s me but I would much prefer that you simply call me ‘Greta’. The marines who fought with me were all worthy of admiration and respect.”

Denise Riley nodded her head at that, appreciating Greta’s modesty.

“Our marines truly did some fine work in Somalia, cleaning up this nest of pirates.”

Snow, pushed by a fairly strong and decidedly freezing wind, greeted the group when they emerged outside of the terminal, on the parking lot side. Thankfully, they were all clad in winter clothes made for arctic weather. Opening the rear hatch of his Ford EXPEDITION, Bjorn then loaded inside the kit brought by his customers. As for his own kit and that of Greta, it was already in his vehicle. The five of them sat in the 4 X 4, with Bjorn taking place in the driver’s seat, and they then rolled out of their parking spot. As Bjorn was driving towards the town of Nome, situated about four kilometers from the airport, he spoke to his customers, looking at them via his rear-view mirror and giving them some information about their planned excursion.

“As I said before, the ghost town of Council is about 57 miles from Nome, to the East. It counts 25 buildings built at the end of the 19th Century as a gold mining center. When the gold was all gone after a few decades of exploitation, the town was then

abandoned. A handful of persons still lived in the town until a few years ago, living off the land, but the last of them have either died or left by now. Once in Council, we will lodge at the old Ophir Saloon during our stay there. By lodging, don't expect comfortable bedrooms with beds and room service: the Ophir Saloon, while still in surprisingly good condition for its age, is utterly empty, like the other buildings in the town. However, it still will help us a lot by sheltering us from the snow and the wind. We will thus erect our tents inside the Saloon, where we will be able to use the old fireplace there to warm ourselves and cook our meals. When using that fireplace, you will have to be careful about not starting an accidental fire that could burn down the building. That old wood is dry and will burn easily."

"Talking of meals," asked James Riley, "you told us in your emails that we didn't need to bring our own rations with us. What will we eat during our stay in Council?"

"I have a large thermos crate in the back that is full of meat, canned stuff and dried rations, Mister Riley. We will have plenty for our stay. I also brought with me some fishing equipment and a panoply of rifles of various calibers in order to hunt if need be. While we are presently out of hunting season for most big game species, subsistence hunting and fishing is allowed for the local residents of the region, within reasonable limits of course."

"Of course! I must say that, while my son Richard was dying to come and take pictures of the nature here, I was myself anxious to come as well. I always liked the outdoors and miss it a lot in Manhattan."

"I can understand that perfectly, Mister Riley. Me and Greta lived in the North of Sweden before emigrating to the United States, hunting, trapping and fishing for a living. I also guided the occasional visitors to our region and worked part-time as forestry warden for the authorities of the Lapland Region. When I came to Nome, I also acted here as a nature conservation officer and am still licensed in that capacity. It doesn't pay much but, with the revenues I make from fur trapping, I manage to live decently. Living with nature is actually my biggest payback: I could never survive living in a big city. And you, Mister Riley? What kind of job do you have, if I may ask?"

"Me? I am a bank executive in Manhattan and am one of the vice-presidents of my bank. I make quite a lot of money but life in New York can be expensive and the stress of the job can be high. I am hoping that this Alaska excursion will help me decompress from my financial work."

"You certainly came to the right place for that, Mister Riley."

“Please, let us drop the ‘mister’ thing: let’s go simply by our first names.”

“That’s fine with me...James.”

Driving through Nome, they soon started rolling on a simple gravel road covered with snow and ice. Bjorn slowed down, then stopped when they approached a large sign by the side of the road, so that the Riley’s could read it. Denise opened wide her eyes as she read the warning on the sign.



“Travel beyond this point not recommended... If you must use this road, expect extreme cold/heavy snow, carry cold weather survival gear and tell someone where you are going. Wow! You won’t see that kind of sign around Manhattan.”

That made the other passengers and Bjorn laugh briefly in amusement, with Bjorn adding his comment to that.

“That’s Alaska for you, Denise.”

“Let me get out for a moment and take a picture of this road sign, please.” pleaded Richard Riley. He then got out with his professional grade digital still camera and took three shots of it before returning into the car.

They ended up stopping another three times along the way, first to let a huge bull moose, then a whole herd of caribous and, finally, a mama black bear and her two cubs cross the gravel road. An ecstatic Richard profited from these encounters to take numerous pictures of the animals. He also was able to take distant pictures of a pair of rare Muskox and was a truly happy young man by the time that the Ford EXPEDITION approached Council. With the gravel road now running along one side of the River Niukluk, Bjorn slowed down to a near crawl, in order to let Richard take pictures of the few derelict wooden houses and buildings they passed by. However, his father had something else in mind than old buildings as he examined the nearby river.

“Are there fish in this river, Bjorn?”

“Certainly, James! I come here often to hunt, trap and fish. You have plenty of Northern Pikes in there, which are considered a nuisance because of their tendency to eat all the other fish, and you can catch as many as you want. There are also a lot of Whitefish, whose fishing is not regulated. Unfortunately, it is still too early in the year to fish Salmon. We certainly can try catching some fish in order to vary our menu during our stay. The local species of fowl and ducks are also open to hunting year-long. With luck and good aim, we may be able to savor a nice stew or grilled fowl.”

“Now, that would be really nice.” replied James Riley with a big smile.

Getting to what seemed to have been the center of the ghost town, Bjorn stopped and parked in front of an old, two-story building made of logs. He then pointed proudly at it to his customers.

“Ladies and gentleman, welcome to the Ophir Saloon, the best saloon in Council. Let’s unload our stuff and install ourselves inside.”



The Ophir Saloon in Council, Alaska, circa 1907.

“Wow! It actually looks fairly nice, considering its age.” said Denise Riley while eyeing the old wooden structure.

“I helped that a bit by boarding up with plywood or covering with clear plastic sheeting the windows which were broken, so that the wind wouldn’t push snow inside and make the wooden structure rot from the inside. With our tents assembled in the

upper rooms and with the old pot-bellied cast iron stoves I installed in those rooms to provide some heating, we will be quite comfortable...as Alaskan standards go, of course.”

“Uh, what about the toilets? Do they work?” asked rather naively Richard, making Bjorn grin.

“Of course not, for the good reason that they never installed toilets in Council. However, the outhouses still work perfectly well. The winter cold is even making them more bearable to use, as the shit at the bottom of the sewer pits is frozen and stinks less.”

Everybody then laughed at the face the poor Richard made at those words. However, Bjorn gave a reassuring smile to the young man.

“Don’t worry about needing to freeze your butt while relieving yourself, Richard: the Ophir Saloon still has a well-equipped bathroom with an old-fashioned bathtub, no water pipes included, a counter with two wash basins and a pierced chair with a bucket under it, plus a wood stove right in the bathroom if you want hot water for your bath. However, if you use the pierced chair, you will then have to go out to empty it in the outhouse situated behind the saloon.”

That made James Riley laugh even more.

“God! I really needed this to forget about my paperwork in Manhattan.”

Emptying the big Ford EXPEDITION of its kit and supplies and bringing the lot inside the old saloon took the group a half-hour, with their tents taking another half-hour to assemble and erect them inside two of the upper floor rooms. With that done, Bjorn rubbed his hands together while smiling to his customers and guests.

“Well, what do you say about going to the river and try our luck there with our fishing poles, to see if we could catch something fresh for lunch? In the meantime, Greta could go hunt for small game and bring Richard along, so that he could photograph the nature and fauna at the same time.”

“That sounds like a great idea, Bjorn. Let’s get our fishing gear.”

With Richard, who already had his photo equipment with him, following her, Greta went to her own kit bag and backpack, in order to select her weapons and equipment for their short hunting and sightseeing excursion. She ended up picking her binoculars, a thermos full of hot coffee, a first-aid kit, a big hunting knife, a .22 caliber bolt-action rifle for hunting small game like hares, a pump-action 12-gauge shotgun for birds and, finally,

her big gold-plated DESERT EAGLE for self-protection. Added to that was a small pocket radio, which she switched on before placing it in a cargo pocket of her winter parka.

"That's so that we stay in communication with my father, who has his own radio. In the wild of Alaska, it is always a good idea to keep in contact with someone else, if at all feasible, in case of an accident or misadventure."

"Uh, what kind of misadventure could happen to us, Greta?"

"Oh, you could fall and break a leg or sprain an ankle, or we could be attacked by a famished bear. Bears are in fact in the process of coming out of their winter hibernation and they will then wake up mightily hungry and will attack about anything edible they will find."

"Oh, I see! And this huge pistol, it can stop a bear?"

"If you know how to aim it correctly, yes! However, don't miss your shot or simply wound the bear, or you will have it doubly angry at you. By the way, bears run faster than a man can."

"Oh!" could only say the poor Richard, with his facial expression making Greta giggle.

"You're ready? Then let's go!"

Leaving together the old saloon, Greta led Richard towards the nearby river but went to the opposite direction of the one taken by her father and Richard's parents. Walking rather quickly for the first 200 meters, she then slowed down her pace while scanning the surrounding landscape, stopping briefly from time to time in order to use her binoculars. At one point she stopped and put one knee down, motioning to Richard to do the same before pointing something to him in the distance.

"Use that big zoom lens you have on your camera and look in that direction: there is a hare some 400 feet away. That hare's fur is white, so it won't be evident at first."

Rising and pointing his digital camera and adjusting the focus on his zoom lens, Richard was able to spot the hare after quite a few seconds of searching for it.

"Damn! That hare is really difficult to spot with its white fur over the white snow. You have an excellent vision indeed, Greta."

"Thanks! Is that hare close enough for you to be able to take a good picture of it?"

"Uh, it is still a bit far for that. If we could get to within 200 feet or less of it..."

"I doubt that it will let us get that close to it, Richard, but we will try to approach it slowly. If it spots us and flees, then I will have to shoot at it then: we do need to catch something for lunch, after all."

Somehow, maybe because the hare thought that, by staying immobile it would not be spotted, Greta and Richard were able by advancing very slowly at a crouch to get to about 200 feet of it.

"Here is your chance to take pictures of it, Richard, but be careful to move as little as possible. Once you will have taken your pictures, I will take a shot at that hare." As Richard started snapping pictures of the small animal, Greta prepared her .22 caliber rifle, which had a scope on top of it, and carefully adjusted the range setting on it. Once Richard declared himself satisfied, she slowly raised her rifle and aimed it, then gently squeezed the trigger. The shot produced a dry, brief sound in the crisp air. Richard, who was observing the hare through his camera lens, nearly shouted when he saw the animal drop dead on the snow.

"You got it! Nice shot!"

While happy to have hit her target, Greta did not feel real joy at having killed that hare: contrary to the gunmen she had faced in Somalia, it had not attacked her, nor had it represented any danger to her or Richard. However, this was the nature of subsistence hunting: if you wanted to eat in Alaska, then you had to kill, unless you could afford the outrageously-priced vegetables, fruits, meats, fish and dairy products flown in from way South. Getting up on her feet, she walked to the dead hare and grabbed it by its ears before taking out her hunting knife, prompting a question from Richard.

"What are you going to do with that knife?"

"I will eviscerate and bleed it on the spot, to prevent the meat from going bad. Once that is done, we will see if we can catch something else for lunch."

Richard, who was of gentle character, couldn't look directly as Greta quickly used her big knife to open and empty the hare. She noticed that but didn't comment about it, understanding perfectly his feelings about this: after all, he had not been hunting, trapping and fishing for years, like she had been doing since the age of six. Sealing the hare carcass inside one of the large plastic bags she was carrying in a pocket, she put that bag in the haversack that contained her thermos bottle and her first-aid kit and resumed her hunt. Her luck proved to hold and she was able some twenty minutes later

to shoot a pair of grouse with her shotgun. Her haversack now well filled and with Richard having been able to take many good pictures, she headed back to the saloon. There, they found that James Riley, guided by Bjorn to a good spot on the iced-up river, had been able to catch a huge, fifteen-kilo Northern Pike, which the banker proudly showed to his son.

“Look at this big pike, son. It is one of the biggest fish I ever caught.”

“Impressive indeed, Dad. On my part, I took some really nice pictures of the local landscape, while Greta was able to shoot one hare and two grouse. I believe that we will eat well, today.”

“Indeed!” said Bjorn, more than satisfied. “I will now show you my talents as a cook: I know a small game stew that you should love. As for that pike, it will make a really nice grilled fish for supper.”

After lunch, the group went out again, this time together and with the goal of visiting the other abandoned buildings of the town. That tour took the good part of four hours and allowed Richard to again take some good pictures, while his parents were fascinated by the buildings and objects which had been made during the time of their own grand-parents. James Riley even managed to find in an obscure corner of what had been the sole ‘bank’ in town an old precision weight scale that had been used to measure the amount of gold dust and nuggets brought in by the town’s prospectors and miners. James carefully wrapped that priceless historical find and carried it back to the saloon, promising himself to give it the place of honor in his Manhattan bank office. After a copious supper of grilled northern pike, the group chatted for a couple of hours in front of the large fireplace of the saloon’s main hall while drinking the beer that Bjorn had packed with his supplies, before going to sleep in their sleeping bags, the Sun having already gone down quite a while ago.

07:11 (Alaska Time)

Sunday, March 8, 1998 ‘C’

The Ophir Saloon, ghost town of Council

Alaska

Greta, wanting to leave early on a day-long hunting excursion, had some difficulty in convincing Richard to get out of his warm sleeping bag and dress for their

excursion, finally winning him over by promising him some magnificent vistas to photograph. While he grumbled a bit about the cold while dressing up, he did show up down in the main hall in a reasonably short time.

“Uh, do you mind if I go take my last precautions at the outhouse before we go, Greta?”

“Go right ahead, Richard.”

As Richard left by the back door of the saloon, Greta made a last check of her equipment and supplies she was going to carry on her excursion. Since they were going to walk to a sizeable distance from the town in order to augment her chances of encountering some game, she had packed her backpack, adding a small tent and her sleeping bag to it. Finally satisfied, she was in the process of closing back her pack when Richard came back inside at a run while shouting in panic.

“THERE WAS A BEAR OUTSIDE! HE’S AFTER ME!”

Just behind him a big dark brown mass entered the saloon as well, barely fitting through the back door and running after Richard.

“Shit!” could only say Greta, taken completely by surprise by the bear’s apparition.



However, because of her military training and combat experience, she chose fight over flight and grabbed the nearest weapon she had: her DESERT EAGLE pistol in its belly holster. As Richard started climbing at record speed the stairs of the old staircase leading to the upper floor, the brown bear, which had to weight at least 200 kilos, decided to charge Greta instead of going after Richard. She barely had time to draw her pistol and aim it as the animal opened wide its mouth and roared ferociously while charging her. Controlling her fear as best she could, Greta fired one shot from her pistol, aiming at the open mouth of the beast, then rolled out of the way, just in time to avoid being slammed by the charging bear. As she got back up, with one knee still on the ground and with her heart pounding hard like a machine gun, she aimed her pistol for a second shot as the bear turned around to face her again. It however did it rather slowly and in a wobbly way: she may have wounded it seriously with her first shot after all.

Aiming her pistol at the big head of the bear, Greta shot a second time, this time piercing one of the bear's eyes and sending her .44 Magnum bullet through the beast's brain. The huge animal froze as if it had received an electrical discharge, then fell dead on the floor of the saloon. Taking a few seconds to breathe deeply in order to slow down her heart rate and calm down a bit, Greta then shouted out loud while still pointing her pistol.

"IT'S DEAD! IT IS SAFE TO COME DOWN!"

The first one to rear his head over the guardrail of the upper floor gallery was her father, holding his .338 Lapua bolt-action rifle.

"ARE YOU OKAY, GRETA?"

"YES! YOU MAY COME DOWN NOW."

Bjorn did so at a near run, followed next by James Riley, who was also holding a hunting rifle. Bjorn cautiously checked out the immobile bear before relaxing and straightening up.

"It is effectively dead. It's a big beast but also appears to be on the thin side: it must have just come out of hibernation and was famished, so Richard looked to it like a bag of fresh meat on two feet. It was probably attracted here by the smell of the fish leftovers and entrails from last night. I see that you shot it in one eye. Where did you aim your other shot, Greta?"

"In the mouth. I shot it from a distance of at most six paces, so it was hard to miss."

"Still, you showed a lot of coolness while being charged at. Great job, Greta!"

"And thank you for protecting my son from that bear, miss: if not for you, he would now be dead." added James Riley.

"Talking of Richard, where is he?" asked Greta. That was when Richard stuck his head over the guardrail of the upper gallery.

"I'm here, Greta."

"Well, you wanted to take nice pictures of the local fauna and flora, so come on down and take a picture of our mutual friend: you won't get too many occasions like this."

Reassured and convinced at the same time, Richard climbed down the stairs with his camera in his hands and positioned himself in front of the dead animal, some ten meters away from it.

"Wait!" said Greta before he could take his first picture. She then sat astride the dead bear's neck and, holding her DESERT EAGLE, rested her pistol over the beast's

head. Instead of grinning like an idiot, like too many amateur hunters did, she adopted a resolute attitude while looking straight at the camera, making Richard smile.

“Great! Don’t move!”

As Richard took a few snapshots of Greta and the bear, Bjorn grinned to James.

“Hey, maybe your son could title these pictures as ‘Showdown at the Ophir Saloon?’”

Greta sucked air in on hearing that.

“YES! That would be perfect! It will surely make the front page of the NOME NUGGET³¹.”

When the group returned to Nome six days later, that picture effectively made the front page of the local newspaper. Two days later, it was appearing on the main television news channels and in most of the major newspapers across the country, earning a tidy sum in royalties for Richard and the NOME NUGGET. The base newspaper at Camp Lejeune added to the picture of Greta and the dead bear a new title that said ‘Marine, one, bear, zero’, which made Lieutenant Kenneth Gomer burst out in laughter.

³¹ The Nome Nugget : The oldest newspaper in Nome, Alaska.

CHAPTER 17 – A PARADISE LOST



08:50 (Hawaii Time)

Thursday, May 21, 1998 'C'

Flight Deck of the cruiser U.S.S. MONTANA

Off Honolulu, Oahu, Hawaii

"Everybody is ready?"

"Yes, General!"

"Then, let's start this show!" said Ingrid in a calm voice before starting the engines of the UH-5 medium helicopter she was going to pilot off the deck of the cruiser U.S.S. MONTANA, cruising off the island of Oahu. In reality, she was feeling a mix of strong emotions right now: dread at what she and the team of nuclear survey specialists accompanying her would find on Oahu; hope that things would prove to be better than she feared; sadness at what she was certainly going to see on Oahu. It had now been nearly 23 years since a three-megaton thermonuclear bomb hidden by North Korean

leaders on a Soviet cargo ship had exploded at quayside in Honolulu Harbor, completely destroying the city and its suburbs and also rendering unlivable the whole of the Hawaii Archipelago. The disaster had also severely damaged or sunk the warships present in Pearl Harbor and had effectively destroyed the whole base complex and its surrounding civilian communities. Over 400,000 people had died that day in and around Honolulu and Pearl Harbor, with 300,000 other people being seriously wounded. Then, the survivors had started falling sick from the radiations created by the bomb, adding gradually to the casualty count over the weeks and months following the explosion. What had made things even worse for Hawaii was the fact that, when another bomb meant to destroy New York had been intercepted, discovered and disarmed in time, it had been found that the Chinese-made thermonuclear bomb sent by the North Koreans had been placed in a sea container that had then been packed with highly radioactive nuclear waste material, making it an extremely 'dirty' nuclear weapon. The intent of the North Korean leaders for doing this had been clear enough: to render the target area unlivable for many decades and poison as many Americans as possible. For that, those North Korean leaders had paid heavily once their scheme, meant to put the blame on China, had been unmasked. However, that had not changed the fact that the whole of Hawaii had to be urgently evacuated, with the surviving Hawaiians then forced to resettle along the American West Coast after losing everything they had.

Lifting her helicopter from the flight deck of the cruiser, Ingrid then sped at low altitude towards what had been Honolulu and its port. Even from many kilometers away, the damage the city had sustained 23 years ago was plainly evident to the naked eye. The bomb explosion, which had occurred right next to one of the quays of the port, had created a four-kilometer-wide and 460-meter-deep crater, half of it on land and the other half in the seabed. Thus, a huge mass of seawater and of sediments, rocks and other materials had been instantly vaporized by the bomb's fireball and transformed into highly-radioactive fallouts. The tons of nuclear waste products which had been packed around the bomb inside its container had at the same time tremendously increased the radioactivity of this fallout material and also increased the average half-life of it in terms of radiation hazard. Some of those nuclear waste isotopes had in fact half-lives measuring in the millions of years. Thus, while hoping for the best, Ingrid was clearly

expecting the worst. Captain Mary Dunham, the NBCW³² survey specialist from the Space Corps who led the team traveling in Ingrid's helicopter, was also pessimistic about what they would find on Oahu and grimly looked at what remained of Honolulu, which was little indeed. Without even considering the long-term effects of the lingering radiations, the ground-level explosion of a three-megaton bomb created a fireball with a radius of 1.95 kilometers, within which everything would be instantly vaporized. Within a radius of 3.14 kilometers, the blast wave would have destroyed concrete buildings, while most residential buildings made of wood or bricks would be destroyed or would collapse within a radius of 6.6 kilometers. Windows would also be broken within a radius of 17 kilometers, their shards causing hideous wounds to house occupants standing in front of them. Finally, the thermal radiation produced by the explosion would have instantly caused third degree burns within a radius of 17.1 kilometers and would also put on fire most wooden structures and vegetation. What Mary Dunham was looking at as the helicopter approached Honolulu from the direction of the sea was unfortunately looking as bad as she had expected. One detail that she could spot with her binoculars then made her frown even more.

"General, I can't see a single sign of vegetation growth within at least two miles from Ground Zero³³. In Japan and in the various Pacific atolls we used in the past to conduct nuclear tests, vegetation had started to appear again and grow after a few years. Here, there is nothing visible after nearly 23 years. This is not a good sign at all."

"Agreed, Captain! That is probably due to the heavy presence of long-life radioactive detritus in the ground and water. The waters around Oahu are probably still highly radioactive, like the ground matter around Honolulu. Once we will be over the center of the bomb crater, we will dip our radiation meter in the water and measure the radiation levels there."

Mary Dunham nodded at that, hiding her growing anxiety and fear. All of them aboard the helicopter, including General Dows, wore protective suits and masks, plus had extra anti-radiation plates inserted in pockets of their suits which covered the parts of their bodies most susceptible to radiations. Glancing at the onboard fixed radiation detector situated in front of her made her clench her teeth.

"We are still over a mile from Ground Zero and flying at an altitude of 200 meters and I am already reading a Gamma radiation level of 2,600 milirems/year. That is over

³² NBCW : Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Warfare.

³³ Ground Zero : The epicenter of a nuclear explosion.

170 times the maximum dosage deemed acceptable for the people living around our nuclear waste depository site in Yuma.”

That announcement made Ingrid cringe.

“That is a lot! If it continues like this, we may not be able to stay very long on Oahu if we want to avoid absorbing too much radiations.”

The more the helicopter got closer from Ground Zero, the more Captain Dunham looked uncomfortable. As Ingrid was stopping her helicopter in a hover some fifteen meters above the center of the crater, Dunham spoke up, her eyes starring at her radiation meter.

“General, I am now getting a reading of 9.2 rems/year at our present altitude.”

“Record all our readings carefully from now on, Captain. Lieutenant McAllister, start lowering our dunking radioactivity meter.”

“Yes, General!”

McAllister then opened the hatch in the center of the cabin’s floor and started lowering the meter hooked to the winch that had originally supported a dunking sonar head. As the detector head approached the surface of the water, Mary Dunham nervously watched the indications they were getting.

“The dunking detector head is about to touch the surface and is giving a reading of 13.4 rems/year... The detector head is now ten feet under the surface and the Gamma radiations level has risen to 15.1 rems/year... The detector head is now at a depth of fifty feet and shows 47 rems/year. Shall we continue, General?”

“Yes! I want to know how bad it is at the bottom of this crater. Dunk our detector head to its maximum depth of 200 feet.”

“Understood, General! McAllister, lower the head to the maximum depth.”

“Yes, Captain!”

Some forty seconds later, the young Space Corps lieutenant spoke again.

“Detector head now at a depth of 200 feet. It can’t go lower than that.”

“What kind of readings are you getting now, Captain?” asked Ingrid. Dunham then looked at her with haunted eyes.

“I now read a Gamma dosage of 420 rems/year, and we are still over 500 feet above the bottom of the crater. It must be a true radioactive hell at the bottom.”

“A radioactive hell which will undoubtedly continue to poison the waters around Oahu for the centuries and millenniums to come.” added Ingrid, her voice bitter. “We

have seen enough here. Lieutenant, reel in our dunking detector head: we will now go take measurements inland.”

“Right away, General.”

Once the detector head was back inside the helicopter, Ingrid stopped hovering and took some speed towards what had been the center of the city of Honolulu. What they found there was a field of blackened ruins, with no trace of vegetation to be seen. With her survey team taking both radiation measurements and pictures from the helicopter, she again stopped to a hover at an altitude of a few feet over what had been a park.

“Throw out our first detector-transmitter!”

At her command, one member of the team opened the port side sliding door of the helicopter and, pushing a button on the side of a sort of small spherical object, then dropped that object down, where it rolled before stopping when its small cruciform legs stabilized it in a vertical position.

“The detector is now transmitting, General.” announced Lieutenant Steve McAllister. “It shows a reading of 705 rems/year at the surface of the ground. That’s way too high, even for short visits.”

“I concur! The whole of Metropolitan Honolulu will have to be declared as a permanent no-go zone. We will now fly westward, towards the airport and the naval base at Pearl Harbor.”

While she flew westward, her team let drop at intervals a few detector-transmitter units, so that they could continue monitoring the local radiation levels in the months and years to come. As they approached the Honolulu Airport, which shared runways with the military airbase of Hickam Field, the team photographed the darkened, melted aircraft debris littering the airport and dropped another detector-transmitter unit. Ingrid threw a sad look at the destroyed aircraft around the main tarmac: hundred of men and women had been killed here when the bomb had exploded. However, what was possibly the saddest and hardest part to watch for her was still to come. After another minute of flying, the UH-5 arrived over the naval base of Pearl Harbor, or rather what was left of it. While the blast damage from the nuclear explosion had been fairly minimal, the thermal radiation had triggered large fires all around the base, with the Navy’s fuel tank depot in particular having been hard hit. Of the various ships at quay or

at anchor that had not sunk, their radar antennas had been ripped away, while the paint on their hulls had burned, leaving the ships blackened and scorched. Once over the base, Ingrid flew directly towards the huge hulk of the nuclear aircraft carrier U.S.S. ENTERPRISE, anchored next to Ford Island, itself situated in the middle of the harbor. Captain Mary Dunham looked questioningly at Ingrid as it became evident that the latter wanted to land on the derelict carrier.

“You want to visit the ENTERPRISE, General?”

“Yes! I need to do a couple of things there. Its flight deck will most probably be radioactive, so I will understand if you choose to stay inside the helicopter while I enter the ship. However, if you choose to accompany me, then do it for the right reasons and not simply to follow me.”

“Er, understood, General. I will leave my team aboard the helicopter.”

Ingrid nodded her head at that, knowing that Dunham had not taken that decision out of cowardice: Ingrid was well known through the United States to possess healing abilities which allowed her to survive situations where other people would be at grave risk of death. Landing smoothly on the darkened, debris-littered flight deck of the aircraft carrier, Ingrid then grabbed a small haversack next to her pilot’s seat and jumped out of her helicopter, landing smoothly on both feet.

Cautiously making her way through the destroyed aircraft littering the flight deck of the carrier, she soon entered the island command structure, situated along the right side of the ship. Up to now, she had not seen a single human body on the deck but she could guess why. Her guess proved correct when she entered the big aircraft hangar of the carrier, situated under the flight deck and connected to it by four aircraft elevators. The hangar itself



had been ravaged by fires but seemed to have been partially swept of debris some time after the disaster had struck. The reason for that became evident when Ingrid stumbled on a section of the hangar where over three thousand human shapes rested on the deck, each covered by a wool blanket and carefully lined up in rows after rows along the deck. With emotion nearly overcoming her, she approached one of the covered shapes and gently raised one corner of the blanket covering it. She cringed as she contemplated the skeletal remains of a man still wearing a rotting sailor's uniform. Putting back down the blanket, Ingrid straightened up and came to rigid attention before militarily saluting the long rows of corpses, tears rolling on her cheeks.

"May you all rest in peace, men and women of the U.S.S. ENTERPRISE."

Then taking a few steps back, she took out of her haversack a digital still camera and took a few pictures of the rows of covered bodies and of the inside of the hangar before walking out of it and going to one of the decks situated below the hangar. Having studied the deck layouts of the ship before coming on this mission, she had little problems finding the suite that had belonged to the captain of the U.S.S. ENTERPRISE. She found the skeletal remains of the latter carefully tucked in his bed and covered with a blanket. Next to the body, on a night stand, she saw a sort of large notebook and, picking it up, opened it, careful not to damage the old pages inside it. It turned out to have been the captain's personal diary and the last entry in it dated from six days after the explosion that had destroyed Honolulu. Passing a radiation detector on the diary, she found it to be only minimally radioactive, thus was safe for a short handling. She thus put the diary in her haversack, then saluted the dead captain before leaving his cabin and going up to the air control bridge, near the top of the command superstructure island of the carrier. Going out on one of the open bridge wings, Ingrid concentrated and started levitating off the gallery, flying up towards the mast which had supported the ship's flag. Soon arriving at the level of the flag platform, she landed on it, then pulled down the burned out remains of the American flag still attached to the flag rope. Untying the burned flag and leaving it on the platform, as it proved to be highly radioactive, Ingrid took out of her haversack a brand new giant American flag and tied it to the flag rope before raising it to the top of the mast. She saluted the new flag as it floated in the wind, close to tears again.

"Goodbye, U.S.S. ENTERPRISE. Goodbye to all the valiant ships and crews lost here nearly 23 years ago. You will always be remembered."

09:35 (Washington Time)

Monday, May 25, 1998 'C'

The Oval Office, The White House

Washington, D.C.

Ross Perot was struck at once by the somber expressions on the face of Ingrid Dows, Secretary of Defense John McCain, Secretary of the Navy Charles Brubaker, Secretary of the Interior Joe Lieberman and General Colin Powell, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Perot understood at once that the news about Hawaii had to be bad. Inviting them all to go sit with him around the low coffee table sitting in a corner of the Oval Office, he waited for Ingrid to start speaking first: after all, she was the one who had personally led the teams sent to survey the Hawaii islands.

"Mister President, while there are still many analyses of samples and radiation data to be completed, we are ready to present to you a preliminary assessment of the state of the Hawaii islands. Basically, it is not good. Here is my preliminary report of our findings. In short, while the radiation levels have dropped considerably on the islands of Niihau, Maui and Hawaii, the waters around them are still radioactive, making them unsafe for fishing, while the little vegetation that has grown there since 1975 contains traces of radioactive elements, thus making those islands economically non-viable and unsafe for long-term occupation. As for the islands of Molokai, Kahoolawi and Kauai, the radioactivity levels on them make them safe for only short-term stays of only a few weeks or months, while the waters around them are even more radioactive than the waters around Niihau, Maui and Hawaii. As for the island of Oahu, on which Honolulu was, it and the surrounding waters are still violently radioactive. Any person visiting Oahu now would accumulate a lethal radiation dose within a few weeks at the most, and that stands for the points of the island furthest from Honolulu. As for the region of Honolulu itself, it must be declared as a permanent no-go danger zone."

"And how, uh, permanent would this stay a no-go zone, General?" said Perot, nearly too afraid to ask. Ingrid's expression was grim indeed when she answered him.

"Oahu will stay unsafe for any human occupation for at least the next few thousand years, Mister President, while the other islands of the archipelago may be reoccupied within a couple of hundred years. I am sorry to have to say so, Mister President, but we lost Hawaii for good. Even a very thorough cleanup will not be enough to save them. As for the fishing grounds around it, they will have to be closed off and

tightly watched, in order to prevent any unscrupulous fishing company from catching and then selling radioactive fish from there.”

“My God! I was hoping so much for better news than that. What am I going to say to the American people about this?”

“The truth, Mister President.” replied at once and in a firm voice Ingrid. “Nothing else will cut it.”

18:09 (Washington Time)

Ingrid Dows' residence, Aurora Hills

Arlington, Virginia

Ingrid, feeling deeply depressed, walked into her home with a nearly lethargic pace and suspended her uniform's service cap, then served herself a stiff drink of scotch before going to sit down heavily on her favorite sofa in her living room. She then switched on her television set and started watching the news for a few minutes before switching it off: listening to the comments made about the President's address concerning Hawaii only depressed her even more, as some in Washington were already making crass attempts to exploit the bad news to their profit. Sitting quietly in her silent living room, Ingrid reflected mentally on the 57 years of military services she had already consecrated to the defense of the United States and of its people. The horrible sights she had seen in Hawaii had reminded her that, despite all of her best efforts, things had gone wrong a number of times in the past for the United States and still could somehow go wrong. However, she was not going to be able to continue to serve forever, mostly because of political and administrative reasons which were out of her control. With both Russia and China now militarily defanged and no more able to present credible military threats to the United States, what other major military threat was left now? The short answer was: none. Basically, she had helped create a sort of 'Pax Americana' around the World, not by invading other countries or creating military coups but by eliminating the worse of the heads of states, tin pot dictators and fundamentalist leaders who had been the cause of so many of the wars and atrocities that had afflicted the World. Now, she had to decide if she was going to leave military service of her own volition or if she was going to wait until pushed out for political reasons. After all, she held her present position at the President's pleasure. President Perot's second term would end in about two years and she could not know the kind of man who would then replace him in the

White House. During her decades of service, she had made plenty of political enemies, enemies who would be too happy to get rid of her if they could. While she had always been a fighter and didn't let anyone push her around, she was truly tired of both war and political intrigue. Ingrid dearly wished that her children, particularly Nancy, could be here with her tonight in order to help her decide about her future, but they were presently studying in either New York or Boston. A gentle male voice then made her snap her head around towards an impossibly handsome young man who was now standing in the doorway of her kitchen, wearing a golden robe.

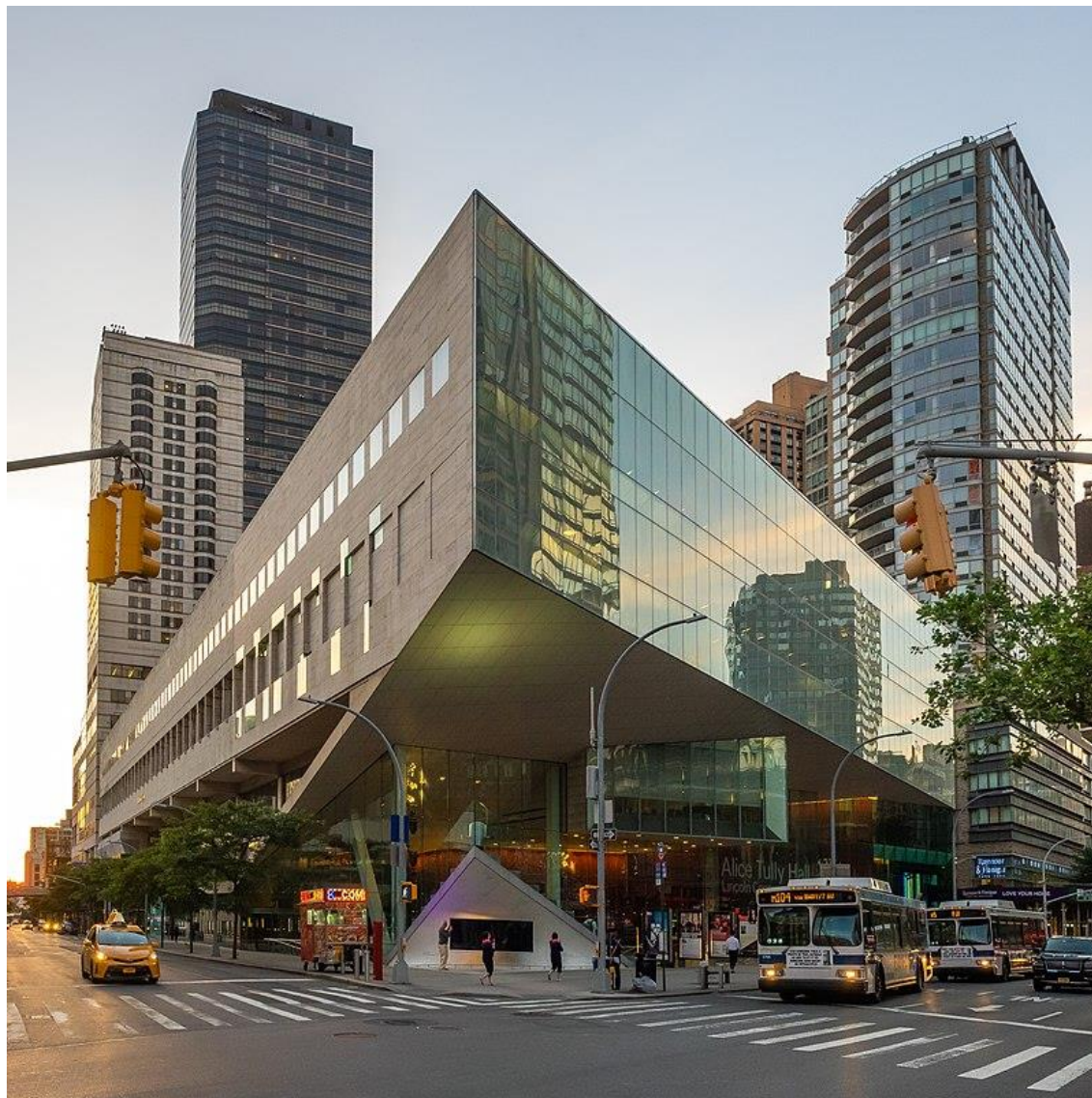
"I am here, Ingrid, if you want my advice concerning your future."

"Michael?" said Ingrid before jumping on her feet and running to the archangel, who received her in his opened arms. After a few seconds of embracing him, Ingrid looked up at him with expectation in her eyes.

"I really could use your advice about what I could now do of the rest of my life: while I still love flying and wish to be able to continue to fly, I am dead tired of seeing death and destruction around me, even if I haven't caused those deaths myself."

"I perfectly understand your feelings about that, Ingrid: even the most dedicated warrior eventually needs to rest. Let's go sit down on that nice sofa of yours, so that we could talk."

CHAPTER 18 – GRADUATION



The Alice Tully Hall at the Juilliard School of Music, Manhattan, New York City.

10:53 (New York Time)

Friday, May 14, 1999 'C'

The Alice Tully Hall, Juilliard School of Music

West 65th Street, Manhattan, New York City

U.S.A.

The spectators watching the graduation ceremony at the Alice Tully Hall of the Juilliard School of Music warmly applauded as Nancy, whose turn had come, received

her diploma from Doctor Joseph Polisi, the president of the school. On his part, Polisi enthusiastically shook her hand while handing her her rolled diploma.

“Congratulations, Miss Dows! This must be the first time that we have the honor to graduate a student who already won a Grammy Award as Best New Artist of the year.”

“Actually, Doctor Polisi, I could not have won that award without my band members. They deserve as much credit as me for that award.”

“Very true and also very modest on your part, Miss Dows. I wish you and your band a great professional career in music.”

“Thank you, sir!” replied Nancy before walking off the stage with her diploma, leaving her place to Sarah Weissman, who was next in line to receive her diploma. She was met at the bottom of the stage’s stairs by Ingrid, who hugged her for long seconds.

“Nancy, if you knew how proud I am of you.”

“Thanks, Mom! This is a truly happy day for me in my life. I am also happy that I could graduate along with my band members. We have great hopes for our band, now that we have our diplomas and have gained lots of recognition thanks to our Grammy Awards performance last March. In fact, the sales and revenues for our two albums have increased tremendously following the Grammy Awards Show.”

“I know! Will you girls stay in New York after this graduation?”

“Why not? First off, New York is THE place, along with Los Angeles, for a musical band. Second, the girls and I love this city: it has so much life and energy in it.”

“That it does! Look, I just spoke with the parents of Sarah, Erika and Carmen and we all agreed to go eat together as a group at a good restaurant. Then, we will all go to your apartment to continue celebrating. What do you say to that?”

“That it is a great idea, Mom. Aah, here is Sarah. Lucy will be next.”

Ingrid also greeted with a hug her other daughter Lucy and the three other girls forming the ‘D.C. Five’ band with Nancy. With the parents of the three other girls also congregating with their small group, they then decided on which restaurant they wanted to eat at before loading up in four cars and rolling away from the Juilliard School of Music. Nancy let out a sigh as the school’s building disappeared from her sight.

“I will miss that place: we had some fun times in there. Right Lucy?”

“You can say that again, Sis.” replied her sister by adoption. “Uh, what was that big news you told us that you had for us yesterday, Mom?”

"I have decided to retire definitely from the military at the end of June and will then switch to purely civilian life."

"WHAT?" shouted in unison Nancy and Lucy, both surprised and shocked. Ingrid smiled while continuing to drive her convertible Pontiac FIREBIRD TRANS AM.

"You heard me well, girls: I am taking off my uniform for good this June."

"But why?" asked Lucy.

"Simple: I am tired of war and of killing. Now that all of the main enemies of the United States have been defanged, I will now be able to retire while knowing that the United States will be safe even without me."

"And what will you do then, Mom?" asked Nancy. "You are not going to quit flying as well?"

"QUIT FLYING? HELL NO! Actually, I intend to do more flying than ever."

"You're not going to become an airline pilot, I hope, Mom? They are a dime a dozen, while you are unique."

"Thanks for the compliment, Lucy. No, I have something a bit more exciting in mind than becoming a simple airline pilot. After all, I have a doctorate in aerospace engineering and I don't want to waste my talents by leaving that domain. What I intend to do is to become a civilian test pilot and head designer for an aircraft manufacturer who is impatient to hire me."

"Wait! Are you talking about the Hiller Corporation, the one which made billions selling your Aircar and Airbike designs?"

"The one exactly."

"But they are based in California. What will you do with our house in Arlington?"

"It depends. I could give it to you, Lucy and Leo...or I could sell it. It actually is getting a bit old since I bought it some 44 years ago, although I always maintained it well. You could even follow me to California with your band and start your professional career in Los Angeles."

"Wow!" said Nancy, sitting back in her passenger seat. "That's a lot to think about, Mom."

"I know, but life is what we make of it, Nancy."

CHAPTER 19 – PUTTING ON A SUIT

13:28 (Washington Time)

Friday, June 25, 1999 'C'

The East Wing, The White House

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

“And here you are, dear CNN viewers: the most famous and also the most decorated soldier in American history is living her last day in uniform. General of the Army Ingrid Dows is now retiring after serving 57 years in an American uniform. General Dows started as a very young fighter pilot with the Filipino Air Corps in 1941, fighting the Japanese in World War 2 and quickly becoming the top American fighter ace in history before being accepted in American service in 1942. She then formed, trained and led the first ever American female combat unit, the famous 99th Composite Group, nicknamed ‘The Fifinellas’. In turn, the Fifinellas quickly became one of the most effective air units in the Pacific and even fought on the ground against marauding Japanese troops trying to take their airfield in Guadalcanal. When World War 2 ended, then Colonel Ingrid Dows had accumulated over a hundred air victories and was by far the deadliest fighter ace on the Allied side. After studying aeronautical engineering after the war, she then was recalled to active service and led the Fifinellas, now a full-sized wing, during the First Korean War. She and her female unit again distinguished themselves with great success despite the odds and despite the often-poor performances of the other American units in that war. After that war ended in defeat for the United States, Colonel Dows was recalled to Washington, where she became an advisor for Interim President Joseph Martin and was also put in charge of directing the development of new aircraft for the American forces as we entered the Jet Age. In that task, she performed brilliantly, leading and often contributing personally to the development of many new planes which proved to be far in advance of the planes developed at that time by other countries. Those new planes were then put to the test in combat during the Indochina Conflict, when General Dows led an American expeditionary force in Vietnam that stopped cold



attempts by the Soviet Union and Communist China to invade and take over the country. Furthermore, she showed remarkable diplomatic acumen by convincing the Vietminh to cease its hostilities and to even help American and French troops to repel a huge Chinese invasion force. It was during that conflict that another extraordinary aspect of that remarkable young woman was revealed: her ability to remember her past incarnations and her possession of a number of fantastic paranormal powers, including telepathy, the ability to fly by herself, touch healing and super-strength. From Indochina, General Dows then flew to Palestine with part of her air wing, where she commanded the American Interposition Force there and helped create peace between Israeli Jews and Arabs. Her next assignment was in Western Europe, where she took command of our air units based in Germany in 1955. Again demonstrating extraordinary talents of leadership and military strategy, she devised on the spur of the moment a winning air plan that stopped cold the surprise invasion of Poland and of the Baltic States by the armies of Stalin and inflicted a stinging defeat on the Soviets. After her tour in Europe was completed, General Dows was posted back to the United States, accompanied by a little Vietnamese girl she had adopted in Indochina. She was again put in charge of developing new American aircraft and also of initiating a national space program. Again, she fulfilled those tasks brilliantly and became the first person ever to fly in orbit around the Earth. From there, the American space program kept growing in leaps and bounds, culminating into the landing of an American spacecraft on the Moon in 1959 and the building of a permanent Moon base. In 1971, General Dows took command of our first ever interplanetary spaceship, the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION, and flew to Mars for a space mission that went on for two and a half years and during which the first Humans set foot on Mars, where they discovered life forms there. After her return to Earth, General Dows fought in the China-Taiwan-USA War, then in the Second Korean War, where she personally dropped one of the few nuclear weapons the United States then employed to put an end to the North Korean regime and the war. By now in charge of the newly-created U.S. Space Corps, General Dows again left Earth orbit in 1980, in command of the spaceship U.S.S. PROMETHEUS, and headed towards Jupiter and Saturn on an exploration mission. During that nearly five-year space mission, the crew of the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS found alien life forms on the moons Europa, Enceladus and Titan. During that long space mission, General Dows also gave birth to a girl she named 'Nancy'. However, little Nancy proved to be no ordinary baby as, according to her mother, her father was in fact an angel, thus making her half-Human and half-Celestial,

with superpowers to go with that. Those superpowers were subsequently revealed publicly when little Nancy, now five years-old, saved a young school comrade and friend from gangsters who had kidnapped him. Jumping forward to 1993, General Dows, after spending five years on reserve status, was recalled to active duty by President Perot, promoted to the rank of General of the Army and put in charge of all our fighting units. Three years later, in 1996, General Dows commanded the American forces in yet another war, the Caucasus War, fought against the Caucasus Islamic Republic, and personally flew combat missions during that conflict. Only a month after winning that war, General Dows fought a war against Communist China, which had committed acts of terrorism against American civilian airliners. Again, the United States was victorious, in great part thanks to her strategic military leadership. Finally, in the last war to date to be fought by the United States, General Dows directed our counter-piracy operation against the pirates operating from Somalia. Now, after 57 years of service, including fighting in seven full-scale wars and two regional conflicts, this extraordinary woman is now retiring for good and turning to civilian life.”

13:35 (Washington Time) / 18:35 (Universal Time)

Bridge of the Imperium ‘C’ time cruiser CROWN PRINCE WILLIAM

Landed on the surface of the Moon

Commander Lara Beltram, captain of the Imperium ‘C’ time cruiser CROWN PRINCE WILLIAM, ended the video recording of the American televised reporting from the White House and looked at her senior officers sitting around the table of her ship’s conference table.

“Comments, anyone?”

Her second in command, Lieutenant Commander Arthur Murray, was the first to speak up.

“This Ingrid Dows is certainly a formidable opponent and a woman worthy of respect. One cannot but admire her courage and her command abilities.”

“I agree with you on that, Arthur.” said Lara, a typical Imperium citizen measuring over two meters and with six digits per finger, while the total absence of body hair had made her bald from birth. “I wouldn’t mind meeting her, even though I would still end up having to kill her. You all know too well by now that we are the only ship of the Imperium to have been able to escape the vanishing of everything we knew, including our families,

comrades and our whole world we knew as the Imperium, all that thanks mostly to the actions of this Ingrid Dows. By her military prowess and her influence on American politics, she made the United States the preeminent power on Earth in the 20th Century, and this at the expense of the British Empire. In turn, that caused the decline of the British Empire and prevented it from eventually becoming our own Imperium through a nuclear war that was supposed to destroy the United States and eliminate it as an opponent of Great Britain.”

“But why center our efforts at recreating our Imperium on killing that woman?” asked Lieutenant Commander Janet Holt, the ship’s chief-engineer. “She may be a formidable woman but, surely, she could not be the sole cause or even the main cause of the vanishing of our Imperium. We shouldn’t forget that this damn Time Patrol has been pursuing us and trying to catch us for over two years now, forcing us to stay in deep space in order to avoid detection. Even when we jumped back to World War 2, the Time Patrol was somehow able to detect our jump and pursue us. We then escaped only because we jumped to a position far away from Earth.”

“Which proves to me that the Time Patrol has some kind of spacetime jump detection network in place around Earth, with stations hidden from our sensors by their damn cloaking technology.” added Lieutenant Commander Charles Latham, the ship’s science officer and also a doctor in applied physics. “Whatever we will do next, we will have to avoid jumping spacetime around Earth’s orbit. We will need to jump spacetime only when we are at least beyond the orbit of the Moon.”

“I agree with you, Charles.” replied Janet Holt. “However, my primary objection to killing Dows stays. We should find another, surer way to return our Imperium to existence.”

“Like what?” objected the ship’s weapons officer, Lieutenant James Robertson, his voice showing some irritation. “It is evident by the effusive report on Dows’ retirement ceremony that she has indeed been central to most of the military and strategic successes of the United States during the second half of the 20th Century. We just need to quickly kill her before she could become a factor of importance, then hide in deep space and wait to see if that will be enough to allow the Imperium to reappear again in the future. Our best clue about that will be if the British Empire survives this century intact and in a dominant position in the World.”

“I would agree with Lieutenant Robertson on this, Captain.” said Lieutenant Elizabeth Turner, the ship’s sensors officer. “May I remind you all that by now our food

reserves are dangerously low, due to our need to constantly evade detection by the Time Patrol. We need to act, and quickly.”

“I cannot agree more with you, Elizabeth.” replied Lara Beltram. “We need to act quickly and that is what we will do, by killing this Ingrid Dows before she can help lead the United States to World preeminence. We only need to decide when, where and how to do that, all while evading Time Patrol detection. I am awaiting your suggestions, ladies and gentlemen.”

CHAPTER 20 – TO KILL A YOUNG WOMAN



Tower Green, inside the walls of the Tower of London, with Gaoler's House at right.

01:30 (London Time)

Saturday, July 12, 1941 'C'

Helperin Ingrid Weiss's room, Gaoler's House

Tower of London, London, England

Three women dressed in the uniforms of German female auxiliaries entered quietly the small room where a teenage girl was sleeping in a bed, being as silent as they could. Approaching slowly the sleeping girl and surrounding her bed, the three German women, two of them holding crude wooden truncheons, looked down at the girl for a few seconds, hatred in their eyes, before attacking and starting to beat up savagely the sleeping teenager. The latter never had a chance to wake up fully as her attackers spat out insults while striking her with truncheons, fists and feet.

"You fucking Jewish bitch! That should teach you not to become friend with an enemy officer."

"Let see if your Jewish God can help you now, you traitor!"

"I hope that you will die from this, Jewish bitch!"

The teenage girl, her face now bloody and bruised, soon lost consciousness. Despite of that, her three attackers kept hitting her for a few more seconds, with the more senior woman in the lot finishing with a nasty kick into the girl's ribs.

"Here! Have a good night now, Weiss!"

The three women then hurried out to return to their own rooms before some of the other female auxiliaries detained as war prisoners in Gaoler's House could wake up and catch them in the act. However, with the girl's room being in the attic section of the old medieval house, nobody apparently heard the noise of the beating and the three women safely made their way back to their rooms, where they went back to bed as if nothing had happened.

Some two minutes after the three had left the small room, a giant, bald man wearing a blue and gold uniform appeared in a flash next to the bed where the teenager lay unconscious, bleeding heavily from a broken nose. The giant, who was holding a syringe in one hand, couldn't help feel pity as he contemplated the battered girl, who could not be much more than fifteen years-old. In fact, the giant already knew that this Ingrid Weiss, who was due to marry an American officer in a few days and then become Ingrid Dows, was indeed fifteen. She would also be truly beautiful if not for the bruises now covering her face. The giant man then bent over the unconscious girl, trying to find the best spot to inject her where the syringe's needle would not leave a visible mark. He soon decided to prick her where a large bruise covered the left side of her neck.

"I am sorry, girl: this is not personal."

Before he could push his needle in her neck and inject her with a fast-acting, difficult to detect advanced poison, a yellow beam struck him from behind, knocking him unconscious. A strong hand then grabbed him by the collar before he could collapse over Ingrid Weiss and pulled him away from the bed. The man who had shot him with a stun pistol then picked up the syringe full of poison and put back in place the plastic safety cap that had covered its needle. Putting the syringe in a cargo pouch hooked to his belt, he then took out a cylindrical object that was about the size of a pen and fixed it to the Imperium trooper before pushing the red button at its tip, then stepped back. Two seconds later, the Imperium trooper's body disappeared in a flash, bringing a mean smile to the face of his attacker, a big, powerful man in a gray body-hugging uniform.

"Nobody kills my adopted daughter, you Imperium bastard!"

Then mentally concentrating and powering his implanted time distorter unit, Mike Crawford disappeared from the room in a brief flash of white light.

High above England, over the River Thames, Commander Lara Beltram was anxiously waiting for a confirmation by his trooper sent down to the Tower of London that he had killed Ingrid Dows. So much depended on that apparently minor act, starting with the renewed existence of what had been her home world and that of her crew. Getting impatient after a few minutes of waiting, she looked at her sensors officer, Lieutenant Elizabeth Turner.

“So, did Sergeant Reeves report back or not, Lieutenant?”

“Not yet, Captain.”

“Then, call him and ask him what is delaying him.”

“Right away, Captain!”

Watching Turner try without success to contact Reeves, Beltram suddenly had a bad feeling about this and looked at her second-in-command.

“Mister Murray, do we detect any other ship near us or in orbit?”

“None, Captain. However, as you know too well, we still can’t defeat the stealth technology used by the Time Patrol. We should...”

Murray never had a chance to finish his sentence before the antimatter warhead-tipped missile launched by the Time Patrol scout ship TEEN TEAM struck the Imperium cruiser and exploded into a gigantic fireball with an energy of eighty megatons, vaporizing in an instant the 230-meter-long warship.

Aboard the scout ship TEEN TEAM, Ingrid Weiss ‘B’ watched the destruction of the Imperium cruiser on her display screens and nodded to her partner.

“Good shooting, Tom! We are now finally rid for good of this damn Imperium.”

CHAPTER 21 – LIFE GOES ON

09:42 (Washington Time)

Saturday, June 26, 1999 ‘C’

Ingrid Dows’ residence, Aurora Hills

Arlington, Virginia, U.S.A.

“Everybody got his or her coffee? Then let’s start this show.”

Nancy then smiled to Lucy, Leonardo, Carmen, Erika and Sarah, who were now all sitting with her around the dining table.

“Now that Ingrid has retired from the military and is planning to move to the West Coast in order to start a new job, she wants us to decide what to do with this house and whether we would like to sell it or keep it. We also have to consider the fact that we of the band already have a place in New York, with me in particular owning as well and managing the Windermere Home Project in New York.”

“There is actually even more than that at play, Sis.” said in turn Leonardo. “Don’t forget that I also own by inheritance my family’s residence on Woodland Drive Northwest, here in Washington, plus my family’s beachside cottage in Atlantic City. I also own and manage the Whole Foods Company in Reston and the Express Vans Company in Gaithersburg. Those two companies presently employ a total of over 700 people and I want to stay close to them in order to care for them and my employees.”

“I stand corrected.” replied Nancy, smiling to Leo. “So, you understandably want to continue to live in the Washington area for those reasons, which I can understand perfectly. Now, what would you like us to do with this house we are in? We have been happily living in it with Ingrid for close to sixteen years and you still live here, contrary to us girls, who have been living in New York for four years and only visited it from time to time. Since you presently are the true resident with Ingrid, I believe that you should decide what to do with this house, Leo.”

Leonardo, who had himself recently graduated from the Boston’s M.I.T. with a degree in mechanical engineering, nodded his head slowly in acknowledgement.

“You are right, Sis, and I appreciate that you leave that choice to me. However, I believe that my two other residences I personally own, meaning my family home and my

Atlantic City summer cottage, have to be factored into my decision. I truly want to be able to keep this house in Arlington and to continue living in it, because of its proximity to my two companies on this side of the Potomac River. On the other hand, I have barely used my ex-family house in Woodley Park, and that mostly when we wanted to throw big parties in it. That mansion is in excellent shape, has nine bedrooms, six bathrooms, a huge grand lounge, which by the way would be perfect for you girls to practice as a band, plus a big pool, a tennis court, a large garage and many more amenities. It also sits on a large lot, with the



neighbors being far enough away to avoid having them complaining about the noise when you would practice music in it. I thus am offering you that mansion as the official residence of your band. I know that you like your present place in New York's Hell's Kitchen District, but I believe that you should move to my mansion in Woodley Park, which would be perfect for you five. Besides, your present apartments in New York are costing you quite a lot in monthly rent, thanks to the prices for homes in New York, while I am offering my mansion to you as a gift. Finally, about your Windermere Home Project, Nancy, I know that you can in fact get to it at will in a mere fraction of a second. You could thus live here in Washington while still being able to visit your project quickly and at will. As for my cottage in Atlantic City, I want to keep it, so that it could be used by all of us. Oh, I nearly forgot: the garage of my Woodley Park mansion contains a Buick SKYLARK 1986 four-door sedan and a BMW M3 1988 sport cabriolet, both of which have been mostly gathering dust for years, since I have my own Porsche 911 convertible."

The five girls surrounding Leo stared at him with open mouths for long seconds, stunned by his generosity. Lucy, sitting next to Leo, then planted a big kiss on his cheek.

"Leo, I love you! You are such a nice guy."

"Yeah, not bad for the son of a mafioso, eh?" replied Leo, grinning. He then got more kisses from Erika, Sarah and Nancy. The latter was all smiles when they all sat back in their places around the table.

"Well, judging from the reactions of us girls, I would say that your most generous offer has been unanimously accepted, Leo."

"Well, as new and aspiring professional musicians, I know that you are not exactly millionaires, so that rent you pay in New York could end up being quite a financial burden on you five. On the other hand, you will now have a perfect place to practice as a band without having to worry about disturbing the neighbors. So, who wants the BMW and the Buick?"

"Uh, can I have the BMW, girls?" asked Carmen Estrada, hopeful, while smiling.

"Well, since I already have a very nice Hiller Airbike, courtesy of Ingrid, I am not going to take the BMW. What do you say, Sarah and Erika?"

"Uh, before you girls decide on that, I have something that could interest Erika in particular." cut in Leo. "My transport company had a small delivery van that was used mostly to carry truck spare parts and tools and that is still in good condition. However, we just bought a new, more capacious delivery van to replace it and I was about to put the older van on sale. It is yours if you want it, Erika."

"How big exactly is it, Leo?" asked Erika, obviously interested, whose present minivan was starting to seriously show its age.

"It is still a garage-compatible vehicle but has a longer wheelbase than standard minivans. I know for a fact that it fits inside the garage of my mansion."

"Then, I would be most happy to take it, Leo. Thanks again for your generosity."

"My pleasure, Erika. So, who will take my BMW and the SKYLARK?"

"I will let Carmen keep the BMW, while I will take the SKYLARK." answered Sarah Weissman. "I tend to be the quiet, cerebral type and a sports car doesn't fit my character well. On the other hand, your SKYLARK sounds like a perfectly traditional sedan for group use, like the five of us."

"Excellent!" replied Leo, happy. "I will start arranging the property exchange papers right away. You girls will definitely be happy in my big mansion, as long as I can visit it from time to time."

In response, Nancy threw him a sarcastic look.

"We would be really mean and ungrateful to refuse you such a right, after all the generosity you just showed, Leo."

"Good! Uh, does anybody knows where Ingrid is planning to go live on the West Coast?"

Nancy nodded her head once at that question.

“She told me yesterday that she already got a job offer from the Hiller Helicopter Corporation, the same company that produces Ingrid’s Aircar and Airbike. Their business has grown so much and so fast, mostly thanks to military contracts, that Hiller just opened a new, much larger production plant near Seattle, in the state of Washington.”

“Now, that is a nice place.” said dreamily Lucy. “Moderate temperatures all year long and gorgeous natural vistas, especially along the coasts. I definitely can see Ingrid living there. God knows how much she earned the right to retire in peace, away from wars.”

GRETA VISBY'S SERVICE BIOGRAPHY



Private Greta Visby in 1995 'C', during her Marine Corps boot camp training.

Present rank (March 1998 'C'): Sergeant. In command of 1st Rifle Squad/3rd Rifle Platoon/Bravo Company/1st Marine Battalion/6th Marine Regiment.

Personal information:

- Born February 9, 1976 'C' in Skaulo, Sweden (Lapland Region). Emigrated with her father to the United States (Nome, Alaska) in 1990 'C'.
- 177 cm, blond hair, blue eyes. Athletic. Strong for a woman (practices weightlifting).
- Enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps in 1995 'C'. Boot camp training in Camp Lejeune (N.C.), then affectation to 1st Battalion/6th Marine Regiment in Camp Lejeune.
- Speaks Swedish, English, Finnish, Inuktitut (limited) and Somali (limited).
- Experienced hunter, trapper, fisherman (line fishing) and outdoors person.
- Practices Krav Maga (Blue Belt), both in unit training and on personal time at a Krav Maga club off base. Certified rifle sharpshooter and pistol marksman.
- Owns one SVD DRAGUNOV 7.62 X 54R sniper rifle (Somalia war booty), one DESERT EAGLE .44 Magnum pistol (Somalia war booty), one FN Five-Seven 5.7mm pistol (bought in U.S.A.), one GLOCK 26 9mm sub-compact pistol (bought in U.S.A.) and Spetsnaz Ballistic Knife (bought in Galkayo, Somalia).

Also owns an illegal pair of 'knuckle Dusters' fingerless leather gloves with steel knuckles (taken from dead Somali thug).

Service history:

- Enlisted in the Marine Corps in January 1995 'C'.
- Boot camp training in Camp Lejeune in 1995 'C'.
- Affection to 3rd Rifle Platoon/Bravo Company/1st Battalion/6th Marine Regiment after successful completion of boot camp training. Still part of 3rd Rifle Platoon as of March 1998 'C'.
- Part of Marine Expeditionary Force during the Caucasus War (embarked on battle-carrier U.S.S. NEPTUNE), from January 8 to January 23 of 1996 'C'. Ground combat actions in Armenia and the C.I.R. Promoted in the field to PFC for outstanding combat performance during the raid on the Kapustin Yar ICBM Complex. Then sailed on the NEPTUNE to the South China Sea area during the Paracels Incident, but did not land and stayed on the ship until its return to the U.S.A. in April of 1996 'C'.
- Routine training with 1st Battalion/6th Marine Regiment in Camp Lejeune from April to September 1996 'C'.
- Embarks with her battalion on the Battle-carrier U.S.S. NEPTUNE in October, 1996 'C', for a routine at-sea deployment. Participates in air assault on the Somali airfield at Cadaado on November 2, conducted to rescue the passengers and crews of two hijacked civilian airliners which were forced to land there.
- PFC Visby is still embarked on the NEPTUNE when the U.S.A. – Russia Nuclear Crisis starts on November 10, 1996 'C', but her unit is not deployed on the ground and stays at sea during the brief war.
- Return to Camp Lejeune in February 1997 'C' and routine training on base. Greta is promoted to Corporal during that period, for excellent performance of duty.
- Corporal Visby embarks with her battalion on the landing ship U.S.S. GUADALCANAL on November 01, 1997 'C', and leaves for anti-piracy operations off Somalia.
- Amphibious assault on Harardhere, Somalia, on November 9, by 1st Battalion. Corporal Visby lands with her platoon in an AACV-8A armored amphibian. She distinguished herself during the battle for Harardhere, kills local warlord as he

tries to flee in an armored Range Rover and thus earns the Navy Commendation Medal for her actions.

- Corporal Visby participates in the battle of Eyl on November 12, again distinguishes herself by blocking a convoy of Islamist extremists from attacking her battalion and leading a bayonet charge by her fire team. She gets promoted in the field to Sergeant and ultimately earns the Silver Star for her bayonet charge. The next day, she gets a temporary commotion from the blast of a suicide truck bomb, will earn the Purple Heart for that.
- On November 16, Greta's platoon flies to the town of Galkayo (Central Somalia), with the mission of protecting an ICRC team and hospital from local militiamen.
- On November 19, Greta and two marines escort an ICRC doctor to one of the refugee camps around Galkayo. During that visit, a group of militiamen try to rob the doctor but Greta and her marines kill them. She confiscates a gold-plated DESERT EAGLE pistol on that occasion. This triggers a night attack by the local warlord's gunmen on the hospital. However, the marines are prepared and ready and inflict a bloody defeat on the army of gunmen.
- Greta returns to the United States with her battalion in early March, 1998 'C', after serving and fighting in Somalia for four months, goes to Nome, Alaska, to visit her father during her 3-week vacation.

Medals and awards earned (in order of precedence):

- Silver Star



- Purple Heart



- Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal



- Combat Action Ribbon



- Navy and Marine Corps Meritorious Unit Commendation



- Marine Corps Good Conduct Medal



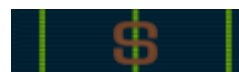
- Marine Corps Expeditionary Medal



- Somalia Anti-piracy Campaign Medal



- Caucasus War Medal
- Sea Service Deployment Ribbon
- Overseas Service Ribbon
- Navy Rifle Sharpshooter's Ribbon
- Navy Pistol Marksman's Ribbon



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