

UNITED STATES SPACE CORPS



A science-fiction novel

By

Michel Poulin

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BY
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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

THIS FICTION NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF VIOLENCE, WAR AND SEX, AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE AND CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS WHICH ARE UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN.

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This novel is the ninth book in my series on the Time Patrol and Nancy Laplante and is a sequel to FROM THE FIELDS OF CRIMEA TO THE SANDS OF MARS. The letters 'A', 'B' and 'C' following the year in dates indicates in which of the three parallel timelines described in this series the action is happening.

Other novels by this author

(Available for free at Free-Ebooks.net, or can be requested directly to me via email at natai@videotron.ca)

Time patrol 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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JOVIAN UPRISING - 2315

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THE LOST CLIPPER
FRIENDS AND FOES
SPACETIME ODYSSEY
A MARS ODYSSEY

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CHAPTER 1 - PROLOGUE

N.B.: The letters 'A', 'B' and 'C' following the year in dates indicate in which of the three parallel timelines described in this series the action is happening, with Timeline 'A' being our own historical timeline. The bulk of this prologue will concentrate on listing the main life events of Ingrid Weiss 'C', while introducing basic information on the adventures of Nancy Laplante 'A' and 'B'. The texts in red mark pivotal events along the way.

Timeline of the series

September 7, 1925 'A': Birth in Berlin, Germany, of Ingrid Weiss.

June 13, 1982 'A': Birth in Montreal, Canada, of Nancy Laplante.

October 11, 2012 'A': Nancy Laplante, a Canadian war reporter and reserve army officer (Intelligence Branch), is kidnapped by scientists from the 34th Century intent on using her as a guinea pig for their experiments in time travel. They abandon Nancy, with her car and personal equipment, near Northolt, England, on September 2, 1940 'A', but are then killed in a freak air collision, marooning Nancy in the past.

September 7, 1940 'A'/'B': Due to Nancy's presence and actions in the past, **Timeline 'B' is created and splits from Timeline 'A'**.

September 19, 1940 'B': U.S. Army Major Mike Crawford 'B' pays an official visit to Nancy, who was wounded in a combat operation in France and is resting in the St-Thomas Hospital in London. The pair fall mutually in love.

December 20, 3383 'A': Doctor Farah Tolkonen 'A', a top physicist of the society of the Global Council, witnesses the creation and splitting of Timeline 'B', briefly sees her timeline counterpart, Farah Tolkonen 'B'.

December 14, 1940 'B': Nancy Laplante 'A' and Mike Crawford 'B' are married by President Roosevelt at the White House.

January 2, 1941 'B': A young (underage) German Luftwaffe female auxiliary, Ingrid Weiss 'B', is captured with other female auxiliaries during a British commando raid in France led by Nancy Laplante and is then interned in the Tower of London. Ingrid, a closet German Jew, soon becomes a good friend of Nancy.

January 25, 1941 'B': Nancy 'A' and Mike 'B' offer to Ingrid 'B', a war orphan and a minor, to secretly adopt her. Ingrid happily accepts, will discretely become an American citizen thanks to the good offices of Mike. The following night, both Nancy and Ingrid start remembering their past incarnations, thanks to the influence of 'The One', an

immensely powerful but immaterial spiritual entity who has been shepherding Humanity for millions of years.

May 30, 1941 'B': A spy probe sent from the future by Farah Tolkonen 'A' identifies Nancy as the cause of the splitting of the timelines.

June 23, 1941 'B': Nancy's plane crash in the North Sea during a storm. She parachutes out but is found by a German submarine and captured. She is brought to Germany, where the Gestapo manages to get its hands on her in contravention of an edict by Hitler concerning Nancy. Brought to a Gestapo headquarter in Berlin, Nancy is horribly tortured for two days.

June 26, 1941 'B': Farah Tolkonen 'A', despite being from a pacifist society and being unarmed, attempts to deliver Nancy in Berlin but is herself captured, then tortured by the Gestapo. Both women are then saved by the Abwehr, the German Army Intelligence service, and brought to a Berlin Luftwaffe (German Air Force) hospital for treatment. On orders from Hitler, a physically crippled Nancy is sent to Colditz Castle, a high-security prison for Allied prisoners of war, while Farah stays in the Luftwaffe hospital and helps treat the German wounded there. **At night, as Nancy lies crippled in a bed of the infirmary at Colditz Castle, Abraham, now an angel of The One, appears to her and heals her in seconds while conferring to Nancy the powers of a Chosen of The One.**

June 30, 1941 'B': Nancy is brought back to the Luftwaffe hospital in Berlin, learns that Farah Tolkonen has somehow escaped and disappeared. She is then told that a massive British bomber raid has reduced Colditz Castle and its nearby town to burning rubble, killing the Allied prisoners along with thousands of German civilians. Nancy, furious and distraught, then telepathically communicates with Farah, who has been arrested by the British counter-intelligence service on her arrival in England. The M.I.5 is trying to force her to reveal to them the secrets of time travel. Nancy then steals a plane at the nearby Tempelhof Airfield and flies at night to England.

July 1, 1941 'B': With the help of her husband Mike, **Nancy frees Farah from her cell at M.I.5 headquarters and helps her recuperate her instruments. They then jump to the 34th Century with the help of Farah's two young assistants.**

August 10, 3384 'A': **The leader of the Global Council, Chief Global Administrator Boran Kern, accepts to help and support Nancy, agrees to Farah's proposal to create a time travel regulatory agency, the Time Patrol.** Nancy goes back to 1941 'B', picks up Mike Crawford 'B', Ingrid Weiss 'B' and a number of Ingrid's German comrades, plus her car and 2012 equipment, then returns to 3384 'A'.

August 30, 3384 'A': Nancy starts training her first batch of field agents for the Time Patrol and, since the society of the Global Council is a pacifist one which has banned weapons centuries ago, looks for sources of modern weapons in the 20th and 21st Centuries, prior to the 2052 Great Nuclear Holocaust which nearly extinguished Humanity. More recruits are collected across the past for the Time Patrol.

October 27, 2012 'A': Nancy 'A' arrives in Afghanistan to serve her third tour in country with the Canadian Forces. She helps train a class of female Afghan police recruits. An Iran-Israel war then starts on November 30, while Nancy is still in Afghanistan. A big victory over the Taliban in Bala Buluk attracts international attention on Nancy. In Tel-Aviv, a retired Ukrainian arms dealer recognizes Nancy as being one of his clients in 1992, when Nancy was supposed to be only a teenager. He points her out to the Israeli Mossad, which then sends a team to Canada to investigate Nancy. The CIA also learns that Nancy is a time traveler via a mole inside the Mossad.

December 15, 3384 'A': Nancy 'A' gets her first mission in the past as a field agent of the Time Patrol: to document the life and death of Jesus Christ (Yeshua of Nazareth) in the 1st Century Israel, then under Roman occupation.

October 16, 2 C.E.: Nancy, disguised as a Sarmatian female warrior on a spiritual quest, visits Yosef and a pregnant Miriam in Bethlehem of Galilee, helps Miriam give birth to Yeshua at night. A few days later, she helps the small family move to nearby Nazareth, then rides to Jerusalem, where she buys a house in the city and lives there to document the local history.

January 1, 3385 'A': Nancy returns to the Global Council for a few months to continue the training of her field agents. A decision is taken to build a secret mobile base for the Time Patrol and to then move it to the distant past as a protection against historical manipulations.

April 11, 6 C.E.: Nancy completes the second phase of her mission in Israel, leaves Jerusalem after the local Jews riot against the Romans and burn down her house. She briefly visits young Yeshua in Nazareth before returning to the 34th Century. There, she collects more recruits for the Time Patrol in the past, including SS officer Otto Skorzeni 'B' and Princess Elizabeth Windsor 'B'.

June 5, 30 C.E.: Nancy returns to 1st Century Israel as an older Nauca the Sarmatian, witnesses the marriage of Yeshua and of Miriam of Magdala in Cana, Galilee.

November 2, 2013 'A': Back in Boucherville, Nancy get job offers from both CNN and Universal Productions, becomes a CNN war correspondent on November 6 and an action movie actress for Universal on November 9.

November 20, 2013 'A': Nancy travels to Tel-Aviv, on assignment for CNN, but is kidnapped by the Mossad, who wants to torture her to get the secrets of time travel. Nancy kills her captors and frees a young CIA agent before leaving Tel-Aviv. She enters Southern Lebanon on November 23, does a couple of important interviews before flying to Tehran. The Iranians, suspicious of her, assign her a female minder (Lieutenant Farah Qualibaf) to escort her around. Nancy films an Israeli air raid on Tehran and the Iranian response with secretly-acquired Russian S-400 surface-to-air missiles. The Iranians do Nancy a big favor, allow her to visit and film their secret nuclear installations and give to her enriched uranium samples to be handed to the International Atomic Energy Agency.

December 2, 2013 'A': Nancy returns to the U.S.A. with her precious films, has a chat with the director of the CIA.

April 10, 32 C.E.: Nancy, as an ageing Nauca, witnesses Yeshua's crucifixion and death. On request from a spiritual Yeshua, now an angel of The One, Nancy brings the pregnant Miriam of Magdala to January 30, 3385 'A', to protect her and her future baby from Yeshua's enemies.

July 11, 3385 'A': David, son of Yeshua of Nazareth and of Miriam of Magdala, is born at the New Lake University Hospital. Yeshua, in angel form, briefly visit his son and Miriam.

September 21, 3385 'A': Time Patrol agents return from exploring the 20th Century of Timeline 'B'. American agents assassinated one-day-old Nancy Laplante 'B' and her parents in the Maisonneuve-Rosemont Hospital in Montreal on June 14, 1982 'B'. The British Empire is still mostly intact and survived a nuclear war in 1986 'B', becoming the dominant power on Earth.

February 17, 3386 'A': Mass graduation of 61 new field agents of the Time Patrol in New Lake City.

April 27, 2014 'A': Nancy plays last scene of the movie 'Crossroads'. The Hollywood premiere of the film, on July 17, proves a big success, consecrating Nancy's new career as an actress.

June 18, 3386 'B': Farah Tolkonen 'B', a top scientist of the Imperium working on time travel, decides to flee the tyrannical hold of General Alan Veck, head of the Imperium's

Ministry of Security. She jumps spacetime to October 28, 1941 'B' to meet with British Daily Telegraph reporter Peter O'Neil, locked up in the Tower of London as a security risk. Time Patrol agents go get Farah 'B', who asks for political asylum, and bring her to New Lake City, where she meets her timeline counterpart.

June 22, 3386 'A': Nancy and both Farah Tolkonen 'A' and 'B' testify in an agitated debate of the High Council of the Global Council, discuss ways to avoid a possible invasion by the Imperium.

June 26, 3386 'A': Three Imperium ships are detected appearing over London on May 20, 1942 'B'. A Time Patrol group is sent, shoots down two of the Imperium ships but not before Imperium troopers kidnap Princess Margaret Windsor and Group Captain Peter Townsend in Buckingham Palace.

June 26, 3386 'B': General Veck has Townsend tortured, to learn where Farah Tolkonen 'B' is, and is about to torture Princess Margaret as well when King Stan sweeps in, puts Margaret under his protection and brings her to his palace. He later convinces Veck to also release Townsend in his care. British Foreign Minister Eden then shows up with Nancy Laplante aboard a Time Patrol shuttle, asks for diplomatic talks with King Stan. King Stan accepts, receive them at his palace but prepares a trap for Nancy. Nancy kills Veck as she is being arrested, then disappears.

May 22, 1942 'B': Princess Margaret and Peter Townsend are returned to Buckingham Palace by the Time Patrol. However, in 3386 'A', the High Council refuses to let the Time Patrol go rescue Nancy in the Imperium, fearing an invasion in response, then votes to impeach and replace Boran Kern, who was supporting the Time Patrol. Kern then joins the Time Patrol, which mutinies and leaves for the past.

June 14, 1982 'B': A Time Patrol team saves baby Nancy 'B' and her parents in Montreal, brings them to the past.

June 27, 3386 'B': A Time Patrol scoutship rescues Nancy 'A' from the Imperium. King Stan, offered a last chance for peace by Nancy, refuses. Stan then decides to take refuge in the past with his family aboard his flagship, the ROYAL SOVEREIGN.

May 23, 1942 'B': The Time Patrol fleet arrives in the past, establishes temporary bases in Northolt, England and in Hawaii. It then makes a demonstration of force over Europe, raids Gestapo offices and drops a team in the Warsaw Ghetto. A GNN reporter in 3386 'A', Lori Kano, finds a way to get to the past and join the Time Patrol to report on the war in 1942 'B'.

May 26, 1942 'B': The Time Patrol intercepts a command message from SS leader Reinhardt Heidrich, ordering the demolition of all concentration camps and the massacre of their inmates. Nancy orders change to operations, concentrates on saving the concentration camps inmates before it is too late. The SS Totenkopf guards are mercilessly slaughtered by the Time Patrol and hundreds of thousands of inmates saved.

May 26, 1942 'B': Nancy gives an ultimatum to the German forces in Western Europe to abandon their heavy weapons and return to Germany, on pain of destruction. The German commanders comply. Next day, Stalin and Beria, the head of the Soviet secret police, are killed by the Time Patrol.

May 30, 1942 'B': The Time Patrol and Free French forces retake Paris without a fight. Next day, Nancy brings the Ark of the Covenant to the Warsaw Ghetto, to celebrate its liberation. Nancy performs two huge healing bursts covering Poland and England. The Time Patrol then sweeps away the Japanese around the Pacific.

June 25, 1941 'B': Imperium trooper Rina Tonen jumps to the Gestapo torture chamber in Berlin and shoots dead Nancy. That act causes Timeline 'B' to split and creates Timeline 'C'. Nancy 'C' lives for a fraction of a second before dying from Rina's bullet, while Nancy 'A' is not affected and stays in Timeline 'B'. Rina Tonen is then captured and tortured by the Gestapo. King Stan 'B' comes to her rescue, extracts her from Berlin and decides to go attack the Global Council with his flagship.

July 10, 3386 'A': The Time Patrol surveillance center in New Lake City detects the approach of the ROYAL SOVEREIGN, alerts the Time Patrol fleet. Two scoutships arrive and engage the Imperium battleship while Time Patrol robotic ground defenses pound it. The scoutships mortally wound it before being both shot down. King Stan orders the crew to evacuate, then take the controls to allow the others to escape. He crashes with his flagship after veering it away from New Lake City.

June 4, 1942 'B': Start of a post-war peace conference organized by the Time Patrol in Paris. The Global Council, now led by Boran Kern's wife Tomi, pledges its support for the reconstruction of Europe. The British agree to pass full control of Palestine to Nancy 'A' as its Overseer, while Elizabeth Windsor 'B' will become Overseer of Japan. The peace treaty is signed on June 9.

July 18, 3,000 B.C.E.: Nancy arrives at the secret base of the Time Patrol, in New Zealand's distant past, talks to Farah Tolkonen 'A' about a possible new threat.

June 27, 1941 'C': The body of Nancy Laplante 'C', mistaken as that of Nancy 'A', is repatriated to England by the Red Cross. Ingrid 'C' gets the bad news in the Tower of London.

July 4, 1941 'C': Nancy 'C' is buried in the crypt of St-Paul Cathedral, next to the Duke of Wellington and Admiral Nelson. Ingrid 'C' acts as one of the pallbearers.

July 11, 1941 'C': Mike Crawford 'C' dies in a plane crash in the Atlantic. Next night, a grieving Ingrid 'C' is attacked and beaten up in her sleep by fanatical Nazi comrades.

July 18, 1941 'C': Ingrid 'C' is released from the infirmary of the Tower of London, gets a visit by U.S. Marine Corps Major Ken Dows, a friend of Mike Crawford, who offers to marry her. Ingrid happily accepts and is freed by the British. She then accompanies Ken to the Philippines.

November 5, 1942 'B': Nancy 'A' arrives in Jerusalem to take over as Overseer of Palestine. She visits the Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem, adopts an orphaned newborn boy, Eli, then produces a giant healing burst that covers most of the Middle East.

August 2, 1941 'C': Ingrid 'C', now 'Misses Ingrid Dows', arrives in Manila with husband Ken. Next day, they bring copies of Nancy's info from the future about the Pacific War to Admiral Hart and General MacArthur. Ingrid also gives them verbally some vital extra information.

August 5, 1941 'C': Ingrid 'C' pays for private flying lessons at Nielson Field. She also soon obtains her High School Equivalency diploma, learns to drive and buys a used Springfield 1903 rifle.

September 18, 1941 'C': A botched American air defense exercises prompts General MacArthur into hiring Ingrid as a civilian auxiliary air situation plotter.

November 10, 50,000 B.C.E.: Sylvie Comeau, member of a Time Patrol team studying Neanderthals in the Dordogne region of France, sees their group of Neanderthals decimated by cave hyenas. She saves and adopts the two survivors, a six-year-old boy named Kin and a four-year-old girl named Ani. She brings them to the secret Time Patrol base in New Zealand, where she will raise and educate them.

October 20, 1941 'C': Ingrid 'C' is on duty at USAFEE headquarters when the Japanese attack Pearl Harbor. She immediately plots the information, gets by herself more critical information from the British in Indonesia and Hong Kong. Later, she asks General MacArthur to let her become a fighter pilot. MacArthur eventually passes her request to Filipino President Quezon, who accepts Ingrid as a fighter pilot in the Philippines Air Forces.

October 18, 1943 'B': Nancy 'A' gives birth to twins, Patrick and Suzanne, in Jerusalem.

October 23, 1941 'C': Ingrid 'C' arrives at her new unit, the 6th Pursuit Squadron in Batangas, will pilot a P-26A fighter.

October 24, 1941 'C': On her first combat mission, Ingrid 'C' shoots down two Japanese planes, is rewarded by a Silver Star medal and a promotion to First Lieutenant. She is given a P-40E fighter.

October 27, 1941 'C': Flying in her P-40E on her second combat mission, Ingrid 'C' uses tactics taught to her by Nancy and by German air aces she met in France and shoots down eight Japanese planes, thus becoming a double ace.

October 28, 1941 'C': Ingrid returns from a mission with three more air victories, now has a total of thirteen kills. She gets the Distinguished Service Cross from General MacArthur, while her mechanics find a nickname for her: 'Lady Hawk'.

November 4, 1941 'C': Ingrid is alone to attack over 300 Japanese planes, but still manages to shoot down seven of them before being shot down herself. She parachutes out but suffers burns. General MacArthur visits her, give her the Purple Heart and promotes her to Captain. He further gives her a Medal of Honor before she is evacuated by plane to Australia on November 6. On arrival in Darwin, Ingrid is appalled by the carelessness and incompetence of the Americans and Australians based there.

November 12, 1941 'C': The Japanese attack and bomb Darwin, cause heavy losses in planes on the ground. Ingrid mans a machine gun abandoned by its Australian gunners, shoots down two Japanese planes and damages a third one.

November 14, 1941 'C': Ingrid 'C' arrives by air in Brisbane, is soon put in command of the 17th Fighter Squadron (Provisional), flying on P-40s. She counsels Brigadier-General Barnes, in command in Brisbane, to send his new planes by ship to Manila. Barnes listens to her and finds her logic correct, orders the Pensacola convoy to sail out for Manila.

December 2, 1941 'C': The Pensacola convoy arrives safely in Manila, unloads its planes, guns, ammunition and fuel. Ingrid's squadron goes to Batangas.

January 11, 1942 'C': The Japanese invasion of the Philippines starts. Ingrid 'C' proposes a plan to her superior, Major-General Brereton, to defeat the Japanese invasion.

January 13, 1942 'C': The Japanese fleet is forced to abandon its landed troops and to withdraw. By now, Ingrid 'C's air victory count is at 67.

January 14, 1942 'C': As the American forces in the Philippines are celebrating their victory over the Japanese, Ingrid 'C' is informed that her husband Ken was killed in action. Ingrid is devastated.

February 22, 1942 'C': Ingrid 'C' arrives in Havre, Montana for a well-deserved leave period, stays at the family ranch of the Crawford family.

March 9, 1942 'C': Ingrid 'C', at the request of Lieutenant General Arnold, head of the U.S. Army Air Force, meets him in Washington. Arnold formally enlists Ingrid in the USAAF, with the rank of major and tasks her to form a female air combat group, which will become the 99th Composite Air Group, nicknamed the 'Fifinellas'.

March 13, 1942 'C': General Arnold tests Ingrid's claims about her incarnations with the help of a group of eminent historians and linguists. The results stun Arnold, who now believes Ingrid.

March 23, 1942 'C': Ingrid 'C' starts recruiting her female volunteers in New York, then visits many other cities and locations, including the Manzanar Relocation Camp, where she recruits a number of Japanese-American women interned there. Her recruiting campaign proves to be a big success, signing in hundreds of young women with civilian pilot licenses or technical qualifications.

July 17, 1942 'C': Lieutenant General Arnold reviews the graduation parade of the last class of fighter pilots in Luke Airfield, Arizona, which includes 31 women. Arnold then gives to Ingrid the first mission orders for her air group, sends her to the South Pacific.

September 8, 1942 'C': Ingrid 'C' and her 99th C.A.G. arrive in Espiritu Santo, New-Hebrides, and unload their planes (P-38, B-25, C-142) and helicopters.

September 10, 1942 'C': Ingrid 'C' and six other female fighter pilots land their P-38s in Guadalcanal, while her C-142 heavy transport aircraft starts an air bridge between Espiritu Santo and Guadalcanal, ferrying vital supplies and evacuating the American wounded and the sick. On their first intercept mission, the Fifinellas shoot down 25 Japanese aircraft, causing many American male fighter pilots to doubt their claims. More intercept and strike missions follow in the next days.

September 14, 1942 'C': The women of the 99th C.A.G. join the ground fight at night to help protect their airfield and to support the hard-pressed Marines against fanatical ground assaults by the Japanese. Next day, the 99th C.A.G. and the U.S. Navy and Marine planes based in Guadalcanal attack an approaching Japanese battlefleet, sink four battleships and two heavy cruisers, at the cost of fifteen women killed and four more wounded in action.

September 30, 1942 'C': Admiral Nimitz and Lieutenant General Arnold visit Guadalcanal. Ingrid 'C' is promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, at the tender official age of nineteen (actual age: seventeen).

December 7, 2015 'A': Nancy Laplante 'A' reports for CNN from a Filipino oil platform in the South China Sea. Chinese Navy ships try to seize the oil platform, starting a major international incident. Nancy is slightly wounded by Chinese fire during the crisis.

October 7, 1942 'C': The marines of Lieutenant-colonel Lewis 'Chesty' Puller are chased back to a beach by the Japanese, have to reembark in their landing craft. **Ingrid 'C' arrives in her P-38 fighter, provides critical air support but is shot down and gravely wounded. Brought to the field hospital in Guadalcanal, she briefly dies on the operating table, but is then miraculously resurrected, becomes a Chosen of The One.**

June 22, 3388 'C': An illegal time traffic in sex slaves by an Imperium 'C' crime syndicate attracts a combined intervention by both King Stan 'C' and by Nancy Laplante 'A', who raid the Tower of London together, along with Imperium royal guards.

January 7, 1943 'C': Lieutenant General Kenney, commanding the American air forces in Australia, learns that the Fifinellas, now a full-sized air wing, is being transferred under his command. He then assigns Ingrid and her 99th Composite Air Wing to Port Moresby, Papua-New Guinea. Ingrid's first mission there is to help and support the Australian Army unit under Japanese pressure in Wau. With Wau secured, Ingrid 'C' next suggests a plan to take the important Japanese base of Lae by air assault landing.

February 1, 1943 'C': General Douglas MacArthur inspects liberated Lae, promotes Ingrid to full colonel.

June 17, 1943 'C': Ingrid 'C' is posted to the Pentagon, accompanies General MacArthur at a big joint command staff conference on June 28, where she describes her new air tactics and impresses many skeptics.

August 17, 1943 'C': Ingrid 'C' attends a big Allied conference in Québec City, Canada. She is visited in her hotel room by Nancy Laplante 'A', who brings her to the secret Time Patrol base in the past, where she spends one month being briefed and educated, before returning to Québec five minutes after disappearing from her hotel room.

January 4, 1944 'C': Ingrid 'C' is promoted to the rank of brigadier general and is given command of the 9th Tactical Command, in England, will fly there in her new P-38NC fighter.

January 7, 1944 'C': Ingrid 'C' arrives in England, having shot down on her way three German Arado-234B jet bombers near Bristol. She learns from her superior, Major

General Quesada, that the Germans have started to use surface-to-air missiles against Allied bomber formations and that the Allied bomber units are close to collapse from heavy casualties and low morale.

January 11, 1944 'C': At a contentious air command meeting, Ingrid clashes with the outdated tactics and strategic views of old, stubborn Allied senior air commanders. Lieutenant General Vandenberg relieves Ingrid of command on the spot, but she is defended by General Eisenhower, present at the meeting and equally furious at the stupidities uttered by British and American air generals. Ingrid is quickly reinstated by General Marshall, while Vandenberg is in turn relieved of command and sent back to the U.S.A. Ingrid then helps General Eisenhower devise a new Allied invasion plan for France.

June 6, 1944 'C': D-Day in Europe. Following Ingrid's master plan, Allied forces land in Southern France, preceded by a massive wave of heliborne forces and hovercraft carrying armored vehicles. The invasion is a big success, with very light casualties thanks to the weakness of local German defenses, the bulk of which had been concentrated in Northern France, along the Pas-de-Calais area.

June 11, 1944 'C': Phase Two of Ingrid's master plan is launched. The bridges along the Rhine River in Southern Germany are taken by a massive Allied heliborne operation, while armored columns rush eastward towards the German border. Ingrid 'C' is in charge of the helicopter force assaulting Karlsruhe, helps take the Karlsruhe Ducal Palace, where she kills Gauleiter Wagner, the top local Nazi official. As she congratulates her pilots in Karlsruhe, she sees the flash of a British nuclear blast on Berlin. General Eisenhower is furious at not having been forewarned of this by the British. Later, he learns that the British also launched a dozen nuclear-tipped missiles on Japan, obliterating much of that country.

June 14, 1944 'C': Ingrid is urgently recalled to the U.S.A. with General Eisenhower, to attend a meeting at the White House with President Roosevelt. There, Ingrid's comprehensive knowledge about nuclear weapons stuns the other participants. After that meeting, she returns to Germany, to take the temporary post of Allied Military Governor of the Bade-Württemberg Region, with headquarters in Karlsruhe.

January 8, 1945 'C': Ingrid 'C', now a reserve officer but still with the rank of brigadier general, starts studying aeronautical engineering at the M.I.T. in Boston. As a reservist officer, she also flies on weekends on planes based in Logan International Airport, in Boston.

March 1, 2018 'A': Nancy Laplante 'A' participates with other Hollywood celebrities and their children in a cruise on the yacht of a Russian multimillionaire off Los Angeles. Pirates board the yacht at night, kill the whole crew and take the guests as hostages, with the intent of emptying their bank accounts. Nancy is forced to bring the children to Jerusalem 'B' in order to ensure their safety, thus puts at risk her secret life as a time traveler. She kills the pirates, get a promise from the grateful parents to keep her secret safe. Back in Los Angeles, Nancy gets a visit at her hotel room by two Canadian RCMP officers, who accuse her of having colluded with the pirates and promise her trouble when she will go back to Canada. Disgusted, Nancy 'A' decides to move out of Canada for good, to then live in Los Angeles.

April 15, 2018 'A': China takes by force the Senkaku Islands, triggering a war with Japan. Nancy 'A', now living in a Santa Monica condo, goes to Japan, acts as embedded reporter with the Japanese assault force that will take back the Senkaku Islands.

May 28, 1948 'C': Ingrid 'C' graduates with honors from the M.I.T., then gets reactivated the same day and given orders to lead an air task force in South Korea, with the goal of preventing a communist invasion of South Korea. For that, she will mostly use air units from her old war command, the 99th Wing (Fifinellas).

June 19, 1948 'C': Ingrid 'C' lands with her planes in Pusan, South Korea, but is then obliged to take off again and go to Suwon Airfield, near Seoul, due to a chaotic American command structure in Korea which is rife with incompetence. Ingrid goes to Seoul to meet with her direct superior, Lieutenant General Hodge, who commands all the American forces in Korea.

June 25, 1948 'C': The North Koreans, supported by 'volunteer' Soviet pilots and planes, launch a massive invasion of the South in the early morning. Ingrid, having anticipated that move, reacts quickly and hits the enemy hard, slowing down his advance and causing him heavy casualties. However, general American incompetence in command, allied with the low level of both training and fighting spirit among the American ground troops, complicate her job, with many army units withdrawing from their positions without permission.

June 27, 1948 'C': Ingrid is shot down during a close air support mission and has to parachute out, but manages to run and take refuge in the positions of the Marine battalion she was supporting. The next night, the American positions are overwhelmed by a massive North Korean human wave assault. Ingrid barely manages to escape that

trap with four marines, then marches towards Seoul. On the way, they save two U.S. Army nurses who were being gang-raped by North Korean soldiers. They finally reach the Han River the next day, swim across it and reenter the American lines.

July 1, 1948 'C': At his headquarters in Okinawa, Japan, a furious General Douglas MacArthur blasts his staff, relieves of command numerous commanders for incompetence. The dilapidated state of the U.S. Army and Navy, starved of budgets for equipment and training by a misguided Truman Administration, makes it hard to find enough equipment and trained men to reinforce the American units in Korea.

July 7, 1948 'C': While flying back to Pusan in P-38s taken out of storage in Okinawa, Ingrid and three of her female pilots reroute to help an American ground unit in trouble. They encounter a bad surprise: enemy jet fighters, which will later turn out to be Mig-15s. Ingrid still manages to shoot down two of the Migs with her propeller aircraft. The news of enemy jet fighters in Korea comes as a very bad surprise for the Americans, whose P-80 jet fighter is inferior to the Mig-15.

July 10, 1948 'C': The pitiful state of the American forces in Korea and the Pacific, along with poor showing by army units and soldiers in Korea, raise a storm in the U.S. Congress. President Truman's refusal to listen to his military commanders prompt General Eisenhower, General Vandenberg and Admiral Nimitz to present their resignations to Truman, in what will be called 'The revolt of the generals'.

July 12, 1948 'C': The House of Representatives votes to censure President Truman, passes it to its Judicial Committee, then to the Senate.

July 24, 1948 'C': The Congress formally passes a motion of censure against President Truman, will judge him for criminal negligence and abuse of power.

August 1, 1948 'C': General Walker, U.S. Army commander in Korea, out of reserve combat units, asks Ingrid to provide a ground combat force to protect Masan and Pusan, something that directly contravenes a congressional law forbidding the use of servicewomen in frontline ground combat roles. Knowing how desperate the situation is, Ingrid accepts that mission. She quickly organizes over 400 women from her ground support and technical services, arm them with clandestine stocks of weapons kept at the end of World War 2. Ingrid leads her force to Masan, establishes strong defensive positions in the surrounding hills and then waits for the enemy. The latter shows up quickly, but is pushed back with heavy losses in a series of ferocious battles.

August 2, 1948 'C': Ingrid 'C' realizes with a shock that the enemy soldiers attacking her positions are Chinese, not North Koreans. She urgently passes that information up

the chain of command, but is not believed at first. Next day, a group of U.S. senators on an inspection tour in Korea visits Ingrid's fortified position. They are impressed by what they see and listen to Ingrid's opinions and advice before living through a failed Chinese attack. Other American army units around keep fleeing their positions when under pressure, putting in danger Ingrid's own positions.

August 6, 1948 'C': Ingrid and her fighting women are back in Pusan after five days of ground combat. General MacArthur is still refusing to believe that Chinese soldiers are in Korea, refuses permission to General Walker to evacuate his units from Korea.

August 8, 1948 'C': General MacArthur and most of his sycophantic staff are relieved of command. Lieutenant General Lawton Collins takes his place.

August 16, 1948 'C': The last American troops in Korea leave by air. Ingrid and her women are dead last, leave in good order and with all their equipment and weapons, with Ingrid last to take off from Pusan. The war ends in a humiliating defeat for the U.S.A. Ingrid returns to the Philippines with the women of the 99th Wing.

August 21, 1948 'C': The U.S. Senate finds President Truman guilty of criminal negligence and abuse of power, forces him to leave the White House. Not having named a vice-president, Truman is then replaced by the Speaker of the House, Joseph William Martin Jr., who is named Interim President. Martin is later counseled to take Ingrid as a special military advisor.

August 25, 1948 'C': Ingrid, having been called to Washington, is named special military advisor and special counselor for foreign affairs for President Martin, plus is named National Director of Aircraft Development Programs, with the rank of major general. Her main mission will be to reorient, reorganize and push the development of a new generation of military aircraft.

September 21, 1948 'C': Ingrid, acting as plenipotentiary envoy of President Martin, arrives in Niigata, Japan, offers U.S. help to rebuild Japan in exchange for basing rights. Emperor Hirohito accepts her offer.

October 11, 1948 'C': Ingrid visits the Lockheed factories in Burbank, California, brings a juicy government contract for the development of an advanced supersonic fighter, the XF-83.

November 7, 1951 'C': Three years after Ingrid 'C' gave a contract to Lockheed to design the XF-83, the first prototype arrives at Muroc Air Force Base. Ingrid does her first test flight in it three days later.

January 29, 1952 'C': President Dewey asks Ingrid to be part of a U.S. military delegation to be sent to Indochina, to study the communist insurgency there and the French response to it.

February 5, 1952 'C': Ingrid 'C' and the U.S. delegation arrive in Saigon by air. Ingrid delights in experiencing the atmosphere of Vietnam, as one of her past incarnations was as a Vietnamese peasant. The head of the Vietminh Underground in Saigon quickly learns about the arrival of the U.S. delegation. Two days later, Ingrid leaves Saigon by jeep with a French driver to do an inspection tour of the French airbases. In Nha Trang Airfield, she replaces a wounded French pilot and fly a combat mission in support of a besieged French outpost in Laos. She is shot down on her second mission but parachutes out and take refuge in the French outpost, where she volunteers to care for the enemy wounded. She is returned to Nha Trang by helicopter the next day.

March 11, 1952 'C': Her team's mission completed, Ingrid flies out of Saigon, returns to the U.S.A.

May 2, 1952 'C': Ingrid does a night test flight in the XF-83, pushes it to maximum and breaks the speed record with a speed of Mach 3.96 (2,950 mph) at 60,000 feet.

May 28, 1952 'C': The women of the 99th Composite Wing (The Fifinellas), based in the Philippines, are told by Ingrid that their wing has been selected to be the operational test unit for all the prototypes tested in Muroc.

June 7, 1952 'C': A senatorial team investigates why the U.S. Navy planes are inferior to Soviet jet fighters. It first visits the naval test center at Patuxent River, where the local commander serves b.s. to the senators and hides his planes deficiencies. Next day, the frustrated senators head towards the navy test center at China Lake, California, but then decides to reroute to nearby Muroc AFB, to go see the Air Force prototypes. The senators are stunned by what Ingrid shows to them.

June 10, 1952 'C': The yacht PACIFIC DREAM, transporting a group of Hollywood starlets, including a young Marilyn Monroe, collides at night with the fishing trawler SEA BOUNTY. Both ships sink, with the survivors clinging to a life raft and a rowboat. The prototype of the XB-50, on a long-range night test flight, hears a radio S.O.S., reroutes and adopts a watch station over the survivors while giving the alert. Ingrid understands that her XC-10 vertical takeoff transport prototype is the only aircraft able to save in time the survivors. She flies out with the XC-10, rescues the survivors and lands at vertical at the San Diego Naval Hospital. General Vandenberg angry at seeing the secret XC-10 on TV news, flies to California but quickly understands and approves Ingrid's actions.

November 13, 1952 'C': President Dewey decides to send a joint U.S. military task force to Indochina to deter Soviet and Chinese aggression. Ingrid is put in command of the task force, comprised of the 405th Provisional Air Wing and of the 1st Expeditionary Marine Brigade, commanded by Brigadier General Lewis Puller.

December 12, 1952 'C': Soviet 'volunteer' pilots based in Southern China, including Captain Lilya Litvak, are told to expect an American involvement in the conflict in Indochina.

December 20, 1952 'C': Ingrid is on the last leg of a long trans-Pacific flight aboard her YF-83A when she gets a request for help from the French to stop Soviet bombers approaching the port of Haiphong. Ingrid accelerates to Mach 4, intercepts in time the Soviet planes and shoots down eleven Tupolev-16 jet bombers and one Mig-17 jet fighter, then go land in Da Nang. The following evening and night, Ingrid flies a photo-reconnaissance mission, then a ground strike mission against Kunming Airfield, China, destroying a whole Soviet air division on the ground.

December 21, 1952 'C': Strong Soviet counter-attack against Da Nang. Ingrid is swamped, can't stop some bombs from falling on Da Nang. The Soviet raid commander, Colonel Ivan Kozhedub, and Captain Litvak are shot down and captured.

December 22, 1952 'C': American electronic warfare assets locate a number of large Soviet and Chinese army camps along the border with Vietnam. Ingrid goes to Saigon to warn the French High Command and also manages to find and talk to the head of the local Vietminh Underground, passing a warning for Ho Chi Min to stop counting on the Chinese and Soviets.

December 23, 1952 'C': American Special Forces teams are dropped in hidden observation positions along the Chinese border while the Soviet and Chinese border camps are bombed out of existence. Ingrid makes a pact with the Devil (in this case, Colonel Edward Lansdale of the CIA), asks him to arrange a psychological warfare campaign against the Vietminh. She then flies to Formosa to get some precious intelligence on the Communist Chinese, learns about a Chinese prisoner of war camp in Manchuria that is holding American prisoners.

December 24, 1952 'C': Ingrid visits an orphanage in Da Nang run by French nuns, invites the orphans and the nuns to a Christmas party to be held at her airbase. During her visit, she sees a little girl, 5-year-old Pham Thi Hien, and is attracted to her.

December 25, 1952 'C': Chinese troops massively enter Vietnam on foot, are spotted by the American S.F. teams, who direct devastating airstrikes on the Chinese. In Da

Nang, both Vietnamese orphans and Soviet prisoners of war attend a big Christmas party.

December 27, 1952 'C': U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles is called on the carpet by a furious President Dewey, for having initiated a dirtying campaign against Ingrid and having divulged publicly the fact that Ingrid remembers her past incarnations.

December 28, 1952 'C': The French secret services in Saigon get the order to discretely eliminate Ingrid.

December 29, 1952 'C': Pinpoint concentrated U.S. air raid on the Zhongnanhai, the Beijing compound where all the top Chinese leaders live and work. The compound is completely obliterated. In Manchuria, American marines land at the vertical in the prisoner camp containing Americans, free them and capture a few Chinese and Soviet interrogators. On return to Da Nang, while heading to the orphanage, Ingrid and her driver are kidnapped by French agents, then briefly tortured before Ingrid uses her powers of Chosen to kill her interrogators and calls for help. President Dewey is enraged by that news, calls the French President and blasts him verbally.

January 2, 1953 'C': Mao Zedong and all the top Communist Chinese leaders are confirmed dead. The Chinese armies invading Vietnam turn around in chaos or surrender. Ho Chi Min accepts to participate in a coalition government under Ingrid's conditions. President Dewey rewards Ingrid's successes by directing that American servicewomen gain full equality with men in terms of service and privileges, can now marry and have children.

February 6, 2019 'A': Nancy Laplante 'A' is killed by a mortar bomb while on assignment for CNN in Kirkuk, Kurdistan.

November 20, 2989 BCE: Thirteen-year-old Nancy Laplante 'B', living at the secret Time Patrol base in New Zealand, learns about the death of Nancy 'A'. Nancy 'A', now Natai, angel of The One, briefly appears to Nancy 'B', asks her if she is ready to become a Chosen of The One. Nancy 'B' accepts.

February 23, 2019 'A': Nancy Laplante 'A' is buried in her hometown of Boucherville, Canada, with Hollywood celebrities, CNN staffers and disguised Time Patrol members in attendance.

January 15, 1953 'C': Ingrid 'C' supervises a big prisoners exchange between the French and the Vietminh near Hanoi. She then frees young Vietminh spy Dinh Thi Hoa from her cell in Da Nang, offers her a job as a translator.

January 22, 1953 'C': Soviet leader Joseph Stalin is furious about the peace accord in Vietnam. He orders preparations for an invasion of Eastern Europe within a year, along with a purge of Soviet Jews.

January 26, 1953 'C': Ingrid, still serving in Da Nang, receives the new U.S. Air Force regulations concerning servicewomen, allowing them to marry and have children.

January 27, 1953 'C': **Ingrid adopts little Hien**, asks Mother Thérèse to find a dependable nanny for Hien. The next day, **Natai the angel, in the physical shape of Sarah Ur, shows up at the airbase with Hien, says to Ingrid that she is Hien's Nanny.** Ingrid is overwhelmed.

February 21, 1953 'C': Vice-President Earl Warren arrives with a U.S. delegation in Da Nang aboard the presidential VC-5000 supersonic airliner. John F. Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe and a troop of female burlesque dancers are also aboard. Warren asks Ingrid to help prevent an incoming crisis in Palestine. In the evening, Ingrid presents her little Hien to J.F.K. and Marilyn Monroe. The next day, while offering a backseat tour of the scenic Ha Long Bay to J.F.K. and Marilyn in two F-83 fighters, Ingrid has to respond to a distress call from a U.S. destroyer under heavy attack by Chinese boats and aircraft in the Gulf of Tonkin. A Soviet submarine is sunk and many Chinese planes and gunboats are destroyed.

February 24, 1953 'C': Ingrid shows to Hien her new Medal of the Order of Vietnam (1st Class).

March 6, 1953 'C': The ex-wife of Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov is shipped by train with other imprisoned Jews from their Gulag camp to the port of Sevastopol, on the Black Sea, where they board a cargo ship headed to Palestine.

February 24, 2,988 BCE: **The Time Patrol discovers that a time causality loop destines young Nancy Laplante 'B' to become a person recorded in formal history, Lady Jeanne d'Orléans, around 1848 'A' in Paris.**

April 15, 1651 'A': Sent on a training mission with a senior agent to document the French 'Fronde Uprising' in Paris, Nancy 'B' meets the famous musketeer, d'Artagnan, and falls in love with him. Nancy 'B' and Elizabeth Windsor 'B', impersonating English aristocrat girls, interact with both d'Artagnan, Queen Anne and 13-year-old King Louis XIV during their mission in France. Nancy 'B' becomes a secret mistress of Louis XIV and also becomes pregnant from d'Artagnan.

June 26, 1953 'B': Nancy 'B' gives birth to Charles d'Artagnan in the Hospice de la Maternité in Paris.

March 15, 1953 'C': U.S. troops and equipment arrive by ship in the port of Haifa, Palestine, go reopen the nearby Ramat David Airbase. A U.S. air armada led by Ingrid 'C' later lands in Ramat David after shooting down a number of Arab warplanes attacking Jewish towns. Ingrid's second-in-command for this mission, a Rear-admiral Felt, refuses to leave his aircraft carrier. Ingrid flies to the USS WASP, relieves Felt of his command for gross insubordination.

March 16, 1953 'C': The British, who controlled Palestine before and support the Arabs, send two planes over Palestine on a reconnaissance mission. Both are shot down by Ingrid's pilots, causing the political heat to go up.

March 22, 1953 'C': Ingrid has a heated discussion with Jewish leader David Ben-Gurion about Jewish acts of ethnic cleansing against Arab villages. Ingrid, furious, then goes to Jerusalem, where she learns that the American representative in Palestine has been killed by a sniper (Jewish extremist from the Stern Gang). In Tel-Aviv, Ben-Gurion gets a shocking visit from Abraham, angel of The One, and is told to mend his ways at once on pain of tasting the wrath of The One. Ben-Gurion orders a stop to the Jewish campaign of ethnic cleansing against Arab villagers. The next day, Sarah Ur (Natai the angel), warns Ingrid about an incoming British commando night raid against Ramat David, meant to destroy Ingrid's planes on the ground. Ingrid reorganizes and reinforces at once her base defenses.

March 24, 1953 'C': British S.A.S. commandos, wearing non-descript uniforms and armed with German WW2 weapons, infiltrate the Ramat David airbase at night but fall into the trap set by Ingrid and are killed or captured. The British survivors at first refuse to say what their nationality is but Ingrid manages to convince them to talk. The next morning, a massive Arab air attack on Ramat David follows, with the British cruiser HMS TIGER providing them with electronic jamming support. Ingrid's fighters shoot down the Arab planes, while Ingrid strikes the HMS TIGER with bombs and sinks it. British Prime Minister Churchill suffers a heart attack on getting the news, is then replaced by Anthony Eden.

March 30, 1953 'C': Ingrid and her driver are attacked in Haifa by Jewish Irgun irregulars. Her driver is killed, while Ingrid is badly wounded, but U.S. military policewomen intervene and save Ingrid. Brought to the infirmary in Ramat David, Ingrid is miraculously healed and rejuvenated (looks again like a teenager), then resurrects her driver through The One. She earns the nickname of 'God's General'.

April 1, 1953 'C': Ingrid talks with President Dewey and General Bradley at the White House, reveals herself as a Chosen. Dewey renews his confidence in her, sends her back to Palestine to complete her mission.

May 18, 1846 'A': Young Nancy Laplante 'B', on the first phase of her mission to become 'Lady Jeanne d'Orléans', appears in the Guadeloupe as a shipwrecked survivor named Jeanne Marie Céleste de Brissac, is rescued by Pierre Alphonse d'Orléans, who owns a plantation near the beach where 'Jeanne' is rescued by Pierre. Pierre quickly falls in love with 'Jeanne', marries her on July 5 of 1846 'A'. Nancy 'B' legally becomes 'Jeanne d'Orléans'.

June 9, 1953 'C': Ingrid's servicewomen are finally rewarded for their exploits, at last receive the choices of new military postings they had been longing for. Ingrid and 49 of her servicewomen are posted from Palestine to Germany, with Ingrid to take command of the U.S. Air Force units in Europe.

July 3, 1953 'C': Ingrid's old combat comrade, Colonel Gertrude Meserve, arrives with other women fighter pilots at her new command in Germany, the 81st Fighter Wing, based in Neubiberg, near Munich. She quickly encounters jealousy from some of the male pilots of her unit but quickly puts them back in their place.

July 18, 1953 'C': Ingrid leaves her residence in Stuttgart with little Hien in her new Porsche 356 sports car, heads Northeast towards Flensburg, near the Danish border, where she finds Frida Winterer, one of her old comrades who had been interned with her in the Tower of London, spends a few days at her family farm. She next goes to Kiel, where she finds another old comrade from the Tower of London, Susanna Berghof.

July 22, 1953 'C': Ingrid and Hien leave Kiel, go towards Berlin and briefly stop at the closed road junction marking the forbidden radioactive zone around the ruins of her native city. Hien then vows to become a diplomat, to help prevent wars.

July 28, 1651 'A': Nancy Laplante 'B' is back in Paris as 'Lady Nancy Sommers', is greeted back by a happy d'Artagnan.

September 5, 1651 'A': Big birthday party at the Palais-Royal for 14-year-old Louis XIV, who is now legally considered an adult, with the right to reign by himself. Nancy 'B' shows up as Lady Nancy Sommers, dances with Louis. In private, Louis gives to Nancy a royal safe conduct, plus the title of 'Marquess of Saint-Laurent' and a lifetime annual pension of 9,000 Livres, to thank her for her services to the Crown. At night, in her Paris inn, a tearful Nancy has to refuse d'Artagnan's offer to marry him. Breaking down when asked why she is refusing to marry him, she reveals herself as a time traveler to

d'Artagnan, then jumps space-time with him, transporting him to 1954 'B' Paris and thus breaking a cardinal rule of the Time Patrol. In Paris, Farah Tolkonen 'A' decides to let that slip, allows Nancy to return to the 17th Century with d'Artagnan instead of sacking her as a Time Patrol field agent. Back in 1651 'A' Paris, Nancy vows to continue to love d'Artagnan.

February 10, 1847 'A': Pierre d'Orléans falls gravely ill at his Guadeloupe plantation, dies on February 12. Nancy 'B' is mad with genuine grief.

May 11, 1847 'A': 'Jeanne d'Orléans' sells her plantation, which she had inherited from Pierre, then leaves the Guadeloupe to return to France on May 28 as a rich widow. She arrives in Paris on July 1, stays in a hotel at first.

July 5, 1847 'A': 'Jeanne d'Orléans' buys the old but distinguished Hôtel de Brinvilliers in Paris, then go deposit a fortune in gold and gems worth 5.88 million Francs of the time at the Bank of France, where she pays for her new home. She then starts to renovate her new home and hires domestic staff. On July 16, she saves a young Chinese girl, Li Mai, from abusive men on the quays of the Seine, hires her as her personal hostess.

July 28, 1953 'C': The Soviet dictator, Stalin, reviews and approves a deception plan submitted to him as part of his incoming invasion of Europe. The next day, in Stuttgart, Sarah Ur (Natai the angel), tells Ingrid that she had to eliminate discreetly another team of Soviet assassins sent by Stalin to kill Ingrid. She also warns her of the incoming Soviet invasion.

August 1, 1953 'C': In a masterful bluff, the Soviets send their only two prototypes of their new heavy jet bomber to skirt the coasts of California, to make the Americans believe that the Soviet Union possesses an operational fleet of intercontinental bombers. They then send an ultimatum to President Dewey: to not use nuclear weapons against the Soviet forces about to take over Eastern Europe, or face nuclear strikes on American cities. President Dewey is in a jam, with his top military advisors in Washington proving of little help. Dewey then calls his military commander in Europe, General Ridgway, who tells him that Ingrid already has a plan to counter the Soviets. Dewey gives Ingrid the permission to initiate her plan at once. Minutes later, Ingrid takes off with other F-83 pilots at night, effect selective airstrikes meant to destroy the Soviet radar surveillance network in Eastern Europe. A massive wave of American air attacks then destroys the Soviet Air Force on the ground before targeting the ammunition and fuel depots of the Soviet invasion forces, plus their heavy artillery units.

August 2, 1953 'C': The Soviet invasion starts at the planned hour but is already seriously hampered by a shortage of supplies and is without air cover. In the Far East, in Siberia, Brigadier General Helen Richey leads four B-50 supersonic heavy bombers from Da Nang, attacks and destroys the bridges along the Trans-Siberian Railway, cutting that Soviet strategic links in two. Stalin suffers a massive heart attack on learning about those strikes, dies in his office. Meanwhile, in Poland and the Baltic States, Allied forces oppose a desperate resistance to the Soviet invasion force.

August 8, 1953 'C': Nikita Khrushchev, a senior member of the Soviet Politburo, leaves his Moscow dacha (rural house) to go to an important Kremlin meeting that will decide who will replace Stalin as the leader of the U.S.S.R. Khrushchev is delayed by a flat tire, something that saves his life, as he sees on approaching the Kremlin a squadron of F-83 fighter-bombers led by Ingrid Dows 'C' bomb both the Kremlin and the headquarters of the Soviet secret police to rubble. All the other members of the Politburo are killed, allowing Khrushchev to take power with the support of the Red Army. A jubilant President Dewey is informed of the airstrike on the Kremlin.

August 14, 1953 'C': The American Secretary of State receives a request for an armistice from the Soviets. An armistice conference is organized for August 19, in Helsinki, Finland. Ingrid 'C' is a prominent member of the American delegation going to Helsinki.

August 21, 1953 'C': A peace agreement is signed in Helsinki, to the joy of Ingrid 'C'.

August 29, 1953 'C': Captain Lilya Litvyak and the other Soviet pilots held as prisoners of war in the Fort Leavenworth military prison are told that they are free and will be returned to the U.S.S.R.

August 31, 1953 'C': A fearful Lilya arrives back in the Soviet Union, fully expecting to be sent to a Gulag by the Soviet secret police for 'defeatism', but she is well treated, thanks to the new Khrushchev-Red Army government coalition, and is reinstated at her present rank into the Soviet Air Force, with no disciplinary actions taken against her.

July 1, 1652 'A': Nancy 'B' returns to 17th Century Paris, present to d'Artagnan his baby son Charles.

June 7, 1654 'A': The Fronde Uprising has been defeated by royalist forces. Nancy 'B', as 'Marquess of Saint-Laurent', attends King Louis XIV's crowning ceremony in Reims. She then gets King Louis' permission to go visit her native New France (present day Canada).

February 23, 1848 'A': Jeanne d'Orléans (Nancy 'B') and her domestic staff live through the tumultuous 1848 Revolution in Paris. The King of France flees into exile, while a provisional republican government is proclaimed. Jeanne uses the crisis and political troubles, plus her knowledge from the future, to engage in bold speculations on the stock markets of Europe, inflating quickly her fortune to over thirty million French Francs.

June 22, 1848 'A': Paris descends in bloody insurrection during the 'June Troubles'. Jeanne shelters her employees and their families in her residence of the Hôtel de Brinvilliers. More stock market speculations balloon her fortune to 49 million French Francs (two million British Sterling Pounds of the time).

September 20, 1848 'A': With the June Troubles over, Jeanne d'Orléans invites big names of the intellectual scene to a party at her residence. Among the guests are Alexandre Dumas (both Father and Son), Victor Hugo and George Sand.

September 23, 1848 'A': Jeanne d'Orléans 'encounters' Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, then a French Parliament deputy, and his mistress, Harriet Howard, along with their two sons, in Dover, England. Jeanne invites them to temporarily reside in her Paris home once in France. They accept, thus starting an important political link for Jeanne.

July 1, 1955 'C': Her tour of duty in Europe completed, Ingrid 'C' flies back to Langley AFB in her personal F-83, 'Lady Hawk'. She recuperates her Porsche 550 in Langley, then drives to the Washington National Airport to greet little Hien and Sarah Ur. The next day, Ingrid buys a nice house in Arlington, near the Pentagon. Hien is registered for the next school year at the Oakridge Elementary School in Arlington.

July 5, 1955 'C': Ingrid visits Admiral Radford, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, is told by him that she will be promoted to the rank of lieutenant general, will be named 'National Director of Aerospace Programs' and will command the yet to be formed U.S. Military Space Command.

July 15, 1955 'C': Two small neighbors come to play with Hien in her home's backyard under the supervision of Sarah Ur, while Ingrid is gone to fly a few hours at Langley AFB. Four Mafia men show up to kidnap the two young neighbors, whose father is a prominent criminal prosecutor. All four are shot dead by Sarah Ur, who telepathically finds out who sent them. That night, the police rush to mafioso Joe Bolsano's mansion in Washington, find him and all his men massacred in ruthless fashion by assailants unknown. The F.B.I. then learns that dozens of more prominent gangsters were also killed around the U.S.A. in an apparent coordinated campaign by another gangster boss.

July 29, 1955 'C': Admiral Radford presents to the other Joint Chiefs of Staff Lieutenant General Ingrid Dows, Commander of the U.S. Military Space Command. Ingrid then presents her plans on how she will structure her new command.

August 2, 1955 'C': Ingrid visits the Lockheed's 'Skunk Works' in California, gives the company a contract to produce a space plane, using her specifications and ideas. On August 8, she meets with the senior officers of her new command and with Doctor Werner Von Braun in Patrick AFB, Florida (next to Cape Canaveral), briefs them on her projects.

October 30, 1956 'C': Launch into orbit of the first American artificial satellite, EXPLORER 1, by a JUPITER rocket launched from Cape Canaveral.

January 17, 1957 'C': British Prime Minister Rab Butler is told that the U.S.A. successfully test-launched an intercontinental ballistic missile with a range of 7,200 miles. His counselors ask him to initiate a British ICBM program in response but he refuses, citing the ruinous cost. Butler is soon ousted by his own party and replaced by Harold MacMillan.

January 22, 1957 'C': Admiral Radford calls Ingrid at the Pentagon, asks her to accelerate her space plane program. Ingrid orders a spacesuit made to her own measurements.

March 23, 1957 'C': The famous CBS reporter Edward Murrow is invited by Ingrid to Muroc AFB with his camera team. They board a giant XC-200 transporter with Ingrid and take off. Once at high altitude, Ingrid sits in her SPS-10A spaceplane prototype, which is then dropped from the XC-200 and lights up its rocket engines while filmed by Murrow's team. **Ingrid's spaceplane successfully attains low Earth orbit, making Ingrid the first Human to fly in space.** After 46 hours in space and 29 completed orbits, Ingrid reenters Earth's atmosphere, skip a number of times over the stratosphere. The British refuses her the right to overfly the British Isles, shoots missiles at her when she is unable to turn tightly enough without losing precious altitude and speed. She is able to evade the missiles, flies across the Atlantic and lands in La Guardia Airport, in New York, watched among others by a happy Marilyn Monroe.

June 16, 1654 'A': A disguised Time Patrol team, including a Nancy 'B' impersonating Nancy Sommers, boards a ship headed for New France (now Canada). They meet a few young French settlers, become friends with them during the long and miserable sea voyage. Their ship arrives in Québec nearly a month later. The TP team and their settler friends go to a local inn to wash and rest before leaving for Ville-Marie (now

Montreal) on August 12 in a rowboat and a canoe. After a night stop in Trois-Rivières, the group finally arrives in Ville-Marie, which is a simple wooden fort with about a hundred inhabitants. The group is introduced to Governor Paul Chomedey de Maisonneuve, who allots parcels of lands to them. The TP team starts building an inn on the land lot given to them, with Nancy 'B' hunting for food and furs for them while dressed like an Amerindian native.

May 31, 1655 'A': Major Iroquois attack against Ville-Marie. The TP members are enlisted to help defend the fort. The Iroquois chieftain tries to set a trap, using a young English slave boy, 9-year-old James Walker, who is their slave. The French turn the trap on the Iroquois, capture two chieftains and free young James Walker. Nancy 'B' decides to adopt James.

July 16, 1655 'A': Peace talks prove successful, with the Iroquois returning their French captives in exchange for their own captured warriors. Nancy 'B' helps as a translator.

September 6, 1655 'A': Nancy 'B'/Nancy Sommers leaves with young James to go back to New France, say goodbye to her friends in Ville-Marie.

April 19, 1720 'A': Nancy 'B' pays a last visit to one of her settler friends, Catherine Lorion, now old and on her deathbed in Montreal.

April 24, 1957 'C': Ingrid rescues with her spaceplane Soviet cosmonauts Lilya Litvyak and Yuri Gagarin, stuck in orbit by a malfunction of their space capsule. On return to Earth, her spaceplane is shot down by the British forces based in Australia. Ingrid is forced to crash-land in the middle of the Australian desert but she and the two Soviets jump out in time before it explodes. This causes a major international incident, with both Great-Britain and Australia finding themselves at risk of war with both the United States and the Soviet Union. Ingrid and the two Soviets finally recuperated safely.

March 11, 1854 'A': Nancy 'B'/Lady Jeanne d'Orléans is rendered amnesiac by a near lightning strike while in London. Captain Gordon Smythe, of the 8th Hussars, finds and shelters her at his home. Three days later, a bank clerk recognizes her as Lady Jeanne, which helps her in getting back her identity papers and her Paris house keys. She and Gordon then visit her house in Paris. The Time Patrol become aware of her amnesia, grab Nancy and bring her for extensive treatment at their secret base, then return Nancy to Paris the same night.

March 28, 1854 'A': Nancy 'B'/Lady Jeanne marries Gordon Smythe in London, vows to accompany him to Crimea, where a war against Russia has started. Lady Jeanne

signed in as a regimental nurse with the 8th Hussars. The 8th Hussars sails to Crimea on April 22, 1854 'A'.

June 1, 1854 'A': The British fleet arrives in Varna, Bulgaria, establish camps there, along with the French forces.

September 14, 1854 'A': British and French forces land in Crimea. Nancy 'B'/Lady Jeanne Smythe-d'Orléans lands with the field ambulance of the 8th Hussars, then participates in succession in the battles of the Alma River (September 20), Balaklava (October 25) and Inkerman (November 5). At the Battle of Balaklava, Lady Jeanne gallops into the 'Valley of the Death' to go save her husband Gordon. She is wounded at the Battle of Inkerman and hospitalized.

July 28, 1855 'A': Nancy 'B'/Lady Jeanne gives birth to William Smythe at the British camp near Balaklava. Sebastopol finally falls on September 9, 1855 'A'.

June 7, 1856 'A': With the war in Crimea over, Lady Jeanne and Gordon arrive with their toddler son back in England.

January 20, 1961 'C': John F. Kennedy is inaugurated as the President of the United States, promptly asks Ingrid to do some significant space first.

January 22, 1961 'C': The CIA tries to assassinate Ingrid 'C' in Washington, then tries again five days later, in Florida. Federal marshals raid the CIA headquarters in Langley, find lots of compromising documents. The Special Activities Division of the CIA is dismantled on order of President Kennedy.

October 10, 1961 'C': First Moon landing by a SPS-10C piloted by Brigadier General Gertrude Meserve, with three other Americans aboard. Start of the gradual building of a permanently-manned Moon base, using the space cargos sent to the Moon and then transformed into base modules.

October 27, 1961 'C': President Kennedy promotes Ingrid (now age 36 but still looking to be in her late teens) to the rank of full general. She however stays as Commander of the U.S. Military Space Command and Director of National Space Programs. Ingrid proposes a program to send a manned mission to Mars.

October 21, 1857 'A': Nancy 'B'/Lady Jeanne learns that her husband Gordon has been killed in combat in India. She goes with little William to visit his tomb in Delhi, India, eleven months later, after the Sepoy Rebellion has been crushed.

May 26, 1659 'A': King Louis XIV, as a reward for her services, raises Nancy 'B's' pension to 12,000 Livres per year, gives her an estate and winery near Bordeaux, the

Château la Tour Carnet, in Saint-Laurent du Médoc. Nancy then sleeps with Louis XIV, accidentally becomes pregnant.

November 6, 2977 B.C.E.: Farah Tolkonen is not amused by Nancy's pregnancy, wants to oblige her to stay for a year at the secret Time Patrol base until she gives birth, thus cutting Nancy off from her sons for over a year. Nancy 'B' revolts, resigns from the Time Patrol and disappears from the base, along with her robotic horse Pegasus. She then collects her three sons and go with them by ship to Japan. They arrive in Japan on June 29, 1859 'A' and spend a family vacation together. After that, Nancy 'B' goes to 1963 'B' Jerusalem, gives birth to twins (Louis and Anne) under the protection of Natai before going back to the Time Patrol base to present her babies. **Nancy 'B' announces to Farah that she now considers herself as an independent time traveling operator and that her parents have moved to 1860 'A' Paris to live in her house there.**

March 8, 1661 'A': Cardinal Mazarin dies at the Château de Vincennes, Paris. King Louis XIV then makes Nancy 'B' his personal secret agent.

September 28, 1968 'C': The spaceship U.S.S. CONSTITUTION, weighing 9,700 tons at launch, takes off from Muroc AFB, flies all the way to orbit on its own power. The U.S.S. CONSTITUTION then gets its nuclear rocket engines, sent individually into orbit due to their huge weight.

September 9, 1864 'A': Nancy 'B'/Jeanne Smythe-d'Orléans officially opens the first office of the French Red Cross Society in her Paris home.

November 3, 1968 'C': Election of Robert Kennedy as President of the United States.

February 1971 'C': Launch into orbit of the U.S.S. LIBERTY, sister ship to the CONSTITUTION.

June 25, 1673 'A': Death of d'Artagnan at the siege of Maastricht, Holland. Nancy 'B' is present on the battlefield, along with her son Charles, which she had from d'Artagnan.

February 23, 1871 'A': Nancy 'B'/Jeanne Smythe-d'Orléans sends her parents and her children to London for their safety, before the Prussians could start their siege of Paris. She then lives through the bloody Paris Commune. The new French government crushes the insurrection in May. Li Mai is killed by French soldiers while trying to treat a wounded man in the street. Nancy 'B'/Lady Jeanne is arbitrarily arrested by those soldiers and very nearly summarily executed alongside captured insurgents. Only the intervention of a senior officer who knows her saves Lady Jeanne, who then mourns Li Mai.

May 6, 1971 'C': Ingrid, now 45-year-old but still looking young, leaves for Mars aboard the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION after hugging her adopted daughter Hien, now 23-year-old and a U.S. diplomatic attaché working in Taiwan.

September 16, 1971 'C': The U.S.S. CONSTITUTION arrives in Mars orbit without any incident.

September 27, 1971 'C': The Mars Lander Module launched by the CONSTITUTION touches down on Mars in the region of the Valles Marineris. Ingrid and her lander's crew are the first to walk on Mars.

September 29, 1971 'C': They find evidence of past life on Mars (fossils), then find Martian fish swimming in an underground lake of brine (water with high salt concentration).

January 14, 1972 'C': Kevin Prentice is the first baby born in space (aboard the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION, while in Mars orbit).

November 6, 1972 'C': Robert Kennedy reelected President of the United States.

April 29, 1973 'C': The U.S.S. CONSTITUTION leaves Mars orbit to return to Earth.

September 17, 1973 'C': The U.S.S. CONSTITUTION has successfully completed a slingshot maneuver around Venus. Ingrid receives a secret visit by Natai, who informs her that the Imperium 'C' is no more, erased and replaced by the Terran Federation, a civilization that does not know time travel and which has not lived through a nuclear war in its past.

October 19, 1973 'C': A message arrives on the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION, announcing that the U.S. Military Space Command will become the U.S. Space Corps, effective January 1, 1974, with Ingrid as its commander.

November 9, 1973 'C': The U.S.S. CONSTITUTION is back in Earth orbit, its mission completed. Ingrid 'C' is now 48 years-old but looks to be barely twenty years-old.

April 14, 1912 'A': Nancy Laplante 'B', now aged 191 (is officially 80-years-old), intentionally sinks with the TITANIC as Lady Jeanne Smythe-d'Orléans.

CHAPTER 2 – A NEW INDEPENDENT SERVICE

15:06 (Washington Time)

Saturday, November 10, 1973 ‘C’

The Oval Office, The White House

Washington D.C., United States



General Ingrid Dows, Commander of U.S. Space Corps in 1973, at the age of 48.

“General Dows has arrived, Mister President.”

“Excellent! Please let her in.”

“Yes, Mister President!”

Robert Kennedy watched with interest as a tall young woman with blue eyes and reddish-brown hair cut at the neck entered the Oval Office, dressed in the going out uniform of the U.S. Air Force and wearing the four stars of a full general. Robert then had to correct himself: that 'young woman' was in reality the same age as he was, 48-years-old, despite appearing to be barely in her early twenties. Like all the other Americans, Robert knew that this was due to a most publicized apparent divine act, when Ingrid Dows had been healed from severe wounds and burns, then rejuvenated twenty years ago while in Israel. Even more, that healing and rejuvenation was not the first such miraculous event connected to Ingrid Dows: in a much less well-known incident, she had both been resurrected and rejuvenated in Guadalcanal in 1942, after being shot down by the Japanese and dying of her wounds on a field hospital's operating table. Since that miracle in Palestine, Ingrid's aging rate had seemingly nearly frozen, gaining only a few years in appearance over the course of twenty years. It was not for nothing that many around the United States and in the rest of the World called her 'God's General'. However, what enticed her most in the eyes of Robert was her competence, her deep knowledge in geopolitics, her strategic and tactical genius and her talent to advance the United States' prestige and power with her accomplishments in the aerospace domain. She had in fact just completed another huge accomplishment, having returned only yesterday to Earth after a successful two-year mission to Mars in the flagship of her U.S. Military Space Command, the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION. All that made Ingrid a truly exceptional person, something that made Robert a true admirer of hers. That she was also a beautiful, sexy 'young' woman was a nice plus for him. Walking around his presidential work desk, he met Ingrid halfway and shook her hand while smiling warmly to her.

"Ingrid, what you achieved during your mission to Mars will truly be in the history books: to have found proofs of both past and present life on Mars, on top of being the first person to walk on the surface of Mars, is downright fantastic."

"May I correct you on one point, Mister President? The other crewmembers of our landing module and I all stepped at the same time on Martian soil so, technically, I am only part of many."

"True! But please drop the 'Mister President' and call me simply 'Bobby'."

"As you wish, Bobby."

"Good! Let's sit and talk!"

Offering to Ingrid one of the sofas placed around a low coffee table set in a corner of the Oval Office, Robert then sat in an easy chair facing that sofa and eyed Ingrid in silence for a few seconds before starting to speak.

"First, Ingrid, I want to congratulate you again for your mission to Mars. What you and your crew accomplished greatly enhanced American prestige, which you had already boosted by your many past exploits and successes."

"Not only American prestige, Bobby: we had quite a few foreign crewmembers aboard the CONSTITUTION, including two Soviet scientists. That mission was truly an international one."

"But all the hardware was American, much of it designed or invented by you. Mind you, I must say that your inclusion of Soviet scientists into your Mars crew did a lot to warm our relations with the Soviet Union."

"And that is a part of my mission about which I am particularly proud of, Bobby: I may excel in a war, but helping peace and preventing wars will always be my main goals. My own daughter, Hien, espouses the same philosophy, which is why she became a diplomat."

"And where is your sweet Hien right now, Ingrid?"

"She works as a junior cultural attaché at the American embassy in Taiwan. Normally, she would have flown back to the United States in time to greet me on my return to Earth, but I told her to stay in Taiwan, with me going instead to visit her there for part of my post-mission vacation time."

Ingrid didn't miss the way Robert Kennedy's smile faded partly on hearing the word 'Taiwan' and eyed him with concern.

"Is there something that I should know about Taiwan, Bobby? I must say that, due to the limited volume of telecommunication traffic we could receive aboard the CONSTITUTION, I am not as well informed of the present geopolitical situation as I normally am."

"Well, we are not sure yet, but there are some disquieting pieces of intelligence which make us worry about Communist China preparing some kind of hostile action against Taiwan. As you know well, China has always claimed that Taiwan is part of its territory and that it would one day reunite it with Mainland China. Also, there are a few worrying signs around Korea, possibly as part of a geopolitical move by China. The Korean government being basically little more than a puppet of the Chinese government, the situation in both of those countries must be assessed together."

"I agree with you on that, Bobby. I sometimes regret the past advice I had given to President Martin, then to President Dewey, not to attempt to retake the Korean Peninsula after having been expelled from it in 1948. It may have saved us from a ruinous, unending war, but the result of this today is a totalitarian state which makes the world of the fiction novel '1984' look like paradise."

"I know but retaking Korea, apart from probably costing us horrendous casualties and huge military expenditures, would have stuck most of our army in vulnerable defensive positions along the borders of both China and of the Soviet Union, with long, vulnerable supply lines and no predictable end in sight for that conflict. Your counsels were the correct ones then, Ingrid."

"Maybe, but I don't envy the plight of the Korean people, which has to live in what is mostly a prison state ruled by a murderous megalomaniac."

"Well, since we can't do much about Korea right now, let's talk about something else that we can do something about, Ingrid: your new command."

With Ingrid listening carefully to him, Robert spoke in a calm, deliberate tone.

"Your present command, the United State Military Space Command, is due to officially become on January one of next year a fully independent new military service under the name of the United States Space Corps. It will thus become our sixth independent military service, if you count the Coast Guard, with you as its commandant. Have you started thinking about what it would look like during your return trip from Mars?"

"A bit, Bobby. However, I would need first to know its exact mandate and missions. The messages I got aboard the CONSTITUTION were, uh, somewhat vague."

That remark made Robert grin in amusement.

"Well, to be frank, you are not alone in not being too sure about what it will do. Everybody wanted a service in charge of Space operations, but I guess that few people thought further past that stage. As usual, things will be mostly left to your imagination and vision of the future. However, the goals that I, as President of the United States, certainly wants to see fulfilled are as follows: first and foremost, prevent and counter if needed any threat against the United States that would come via Space. That would include defense against long range ballistic missiles and enemy spy satellites. Next would be the development, building, launch and operation of our own artificial satellites and orbital space stations, including our Moon Base Alpha. Third, via a civilian branch

attached to your new corps and which will be under your direct command, you will continue to be responsible for our civilian space program, which will include the exploration of our Solar System via either robotic space probes or via manned missions like the one you just completed. Finally, I am counting on you to develop, improve and perfect our various space systems, be they rockets, spaceplanes, spaceships, space probes and artificial satellites and orbital space stations. As you can see, all this will be more than enough to keep you very busy for many years to come.”

Robert was then surprised to see some kind of reservation on Ingrid’s face after he had said his last sentence.

“What? Is there a problem with that, Ingrid?”

“Possibly. As you said, all that will take years and even decades to accomplish. However, there is the coming subject of my retirement from the military.”

Robert nearly jumped in his chair, as if getting an electric jolt.

“WHAT? What retirement?”

“My mandatory retirement once I complete 35 years of service, Bobby. Such retirement is spelled in the regulations from Congress about the running of the armed forces. I have already completed 31 years of military service since I joined officially in 1942, thus would technically be forced to retire in a bit less than four years.”

“But, that’s ridiculous! You still look like you are twenty-years-old and I am pretty sure that your physical fitness level would easily be on a par with that.”

“Well, ridiculous or not, it is still the law and too many people would be most happy to cry foul if I tried to bypass that mandatory retirement age. In fact, it would be a very convenient way for all those who hope for me to disappear and get rid of me. I expect some acrimonious debate in Congress if you try to circumvent this in order to keep me in the service.”

“The hell with debating this in the Congress! I will make a presidential executive order to nullify such nonsense. I still have that power and those idiots in the Congress better not argue against it, or I will make them look like chimps in the eyes of the public.”

“I would say that our politicians in the Congress don’t need others for them to look like chimps, Bobby: they do it by themselves all the time.”

Her joke made Robert laugh briefly before he grinned to her.

“Touché! Now that this thing about forced retirement is out of the way, do you have any specific ideas that you may already have about your command?”

“Yes! First, I will want to have distinct uniforms designed and produced for my new independent service. Normally, I would avoid such a large expenditure as being frivolous and expensive. However, part of the Space Corps’ objectives will be to strike the American public’s imagination and make it willing to support the service via the taxes they pay. One direct way to do this is by the appearance of my personnel. I will want avant-garde, distinct uniforms which will both boost the spirits of my personnel and make them stand out from the other military services, while being comfortable and practical. The present uniforms used by our various services, particularly those for officers, are basically little more than civilian suits with a set color and with military insignias and ribbons. I want better than that.”

“And what color would you want to adopt for your Space Corps uniforms, Ingrid?”

“Well, the Army is wearing brown or green uniforms, the Navy wears both black and white uniforms, while the Air Force wears medium blue uniforms. For my Space Corps, I envision dark blue and black uniforms: that would make them distinctive, while they will stain less easily than, say Navy Whites or Air Force Blues. There is another thing that I want for my uniforms: no skirts! Everybody will wear trousers. I still remember how my servicewomen in World War 2 kept being harassed by local bigots for wearing trousers when they went home on leave and were called ‘sluts’ and other bad names. In the case of my servicewomen, their trousers will have flared bottoms and will be adjusted to their owners around the hips and waist, while female vests and shirts will definitely have adjusted cuts.”

“You certainly won’t have arguments from me against that, Ingrid.” replied a smiling Robert, who had a well-deserved reputation as a skirt-chaser. “I see that you have already a few solid ideas about what you want for your new command. I won’t delay your vacation further, though: God knows you deserve it after two years spent in space. As for your mandatory retirement, don’t worry anymore about it. As well, I can tell you that the other service chiefs have been told by me in a rather forceful manner that they are not to put any obstacles in the path of their servicemembers who will volunteer for a transfer to the Space Corps. I in fact told Admiral Moorer, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, to keep a sharp eye out for any such roadblocks against personnel transfers to your command.”

“That is most appreciated, Bobby.” said Ingrid, genuinely relieved. Interservice rivalry was unfortunately still alive and well in the United States, with the pettiness and

small-mindedness often attaining mind-boggling levels. Getting up from her sofa, she again shook hands with Robert, then saluted him before walking out of the Oval Office.

CHAPTER 3 – A ROUGH VACATION

10:31 (Taiwan Time)

Sunday, November 11, 1973 'C'

Taipei Songshan Airport

Taipei, Taiwan



Pham Thi Hien, adopted daughter of Ingrid Dows, at age 26 in 1973.

The sky was partly cloudy and the ambient temperature proved to be mild when Ingrid exited the Boeing 717 VOYAGER that had brought her from Seattle, but the wind was fairly strong, the Taipei Songshan Airport being in close proximity to the sea. Going down the mobile staircase which had been rolled up to the side of her aircraft, she couldn't help notice that the airport had a military section to it, with a row of F-10 jet

fighters parked on a tarmac separate from that used by commercial aircraft. Those jet fighters actually bore the markings of the Republic of China Air Force, something that didn't surprise Ingrid, as she knew that the Republic of China, better known as Taiwan, was a close ally of the United States and was a critical bulwark against its big, hostile neighbor, the People's Republic of China, or PRC in short. The United States and the PRC were still in a technical state of war and had been so for a good 25 years, since the time when Chinese soldiers had entered Korea to help their North Korean counterparts expel the American forces from the whole peninsula, a defeat that Ingrid had personally lived through. The murderous air raid that she had led from her base in Vietnam against the Chinese leadership in Beijing some 21 years ago, while fully justified, had then cemented the hostilities between the two countries.

Following other travelers to the nearby air terminal while carrying her small carry-on bag, Ingrid soon walked into the passengers' arrival section and inserted herself into one of the lineups which quickly formed in front of the customs and immigration checking booths. As she was waiting in line, she saw her daughter Hien waiving happily at her from an upper observation gallery and waived back at her. When her turn came at the booth facing her, she handed her passport to the customs agent while smiling to him and speaking in fluent Mandarin Chinese.

"Good morning! I am here as a tourist and also came to visit my daughter, who works at the American embassy."

With her words already softening the attitude of the customs officer, the latter raised an eyebrow on seeing that Ingrid's passport was a diplomatic one. Opening it, the man examined the pages containing her photo, name, particulars and special observations. He straightened up in his chair on reading the sentence 'The bearer is a personal advisor to the President of the United States of America.' Quickly scribbling a note about that, he then stamped her passport and gave it back to Ingrid, along with a yellow ticket, while bowing and smiling to her.

"Welcome to Taiwan, Miss Dows. Once you will have recuperated your luggage, you may present this yellow ticket to the agents in charge of customs inspection."

"Thank you very much!" replied Ingrid, smiling back while taking her passport and the ticket. She then walked out of the arrival hall, heading towards the nearby luggage retrieval section, where she was able to recuperate her two suitcases after a seven-minute wait beside the luggage carousel assigned to her flight. Those suitcases

in turn made a few heads turn around her when she headed towards the customs checking counters, towing them behind her: they were modern affairs with integrated wheels and telescopic handles, which she had received as gifts from Ken Dows 'B', the timeline counterpart of her long-dead husband and a field agent of the Time Patrol. At the customs counter where she presented herself, an agent took her yellow ticket and waived her through without further ado, as that yellow ticket probably marked her as a visitor to be treated with deference. Once clear of the customs area, she found herself in the public arrival lounge, where Hien nearly jumped on her, happily hugging her.

"Oh Mom, those two years you spent in Space were long ones for me. I missed you so much!"

"And I missed you as well, Hien." replied Ingrid while returning her adopted daughter's hug. She then took a step back to look her up and down. At the age of 26, Hien was a truly beautiful young Asian woman. While small compared to Ingrid, she had a most graceful body, with curved hips and well-shaped legs.

"Look at yourself! You are a fully-grown woman now. Men must be swarming around you."

That remark brought a malicious grin on Hien's face.

"Oh, many men are certainly trying their luck with me, but I am quite selective in my choices and take only the best."

"And that's the way it should be, Hien. Let them earn your favors, like I do. I do hope that you still have a bed for me available at your apartment, or will I have to share it with one of your lovers?"

"Me, sharing my lovers? Never! Knowing you, you would steal them with a single bat of your eyes. Don't worry about your lodging while in Taiwan: I temporarily kicked out my lovers for the duration of your vacation here. Or do you really want to share with me?"

"Hum, I may have to think seriously about that, Hien. I am not against a threesome either."

That made Hien laugh briefly.

"You will never change, Mom: always on the hunt for some fun time."

"As long as it does not detract from or impede my work. Well, let's go to your place! Do you have a car or did you come by taxi?"

"I came by taxi. I still don't have a car and my salary as a junior attaché at the State Department is not exactly worth shouting about it."

“You know that I would be most happy to help you in that aspect, Hien.” replied Ingrid while following Hien towards the external taxi stands. Hien shook her head in response.

“Thanks, Mom, but I want to make it by my own. Besides, I don’t like driving very much, even though I am a competent driver, and the public transportation system in Taipei is more than adequate for my needs.”

Getting into a taxi after its driver put her luggage in the trunk, Ingrid looked around her from her seat as the car rolled out of the taxi stand. Hien then spoke to her in a sober tone, using Vietnamese.

“You better keep your passport handy, Mom: there are quite a few checkpoints between the airport and downtown Taipei.”

“Still the same paranoid bunch, hey?” replied Ingrid, also using Vietnamese to prevent the taxi driver from eavesdropping on their conversation. While an ally of the United States, the ROC was in truth a one-party state which was still under martial law, and this since its establishment on Taiwan at the end of the Chinese Civil War, in 1947. An ageing Tchang-Kai-Chek was still in power, even though he was now a sick old man, and ruled Taiwan with an iron fist, using a permanent national state of emergency to counter any dissent to his rule. When she had visited Taiwan in 1952, in order to obtain some precious information about Communist China for an incoming military operation, she had encountered no less than six military checkpoints between the airport and the ROC Intelligence Ministry building, all manned by suspicious and heavily armed military policemen, while government informers lay everywhere. Her trip to downtown Taipei today proved no different, with their taxi having to stop in succession at a total of five military checkpoints. However, the diplomatic passports held by her and Hien greatly helped speed up their taxi’s passage through those checkpoints.

Thanks to all those checkpoints, it took their taxi over one hour to arrive at the apartment building where Hien lived. Ingrid paid the taxi driver, leaving him a sizeable tip, then climbed with Hien to the second floor of her building, where Hien unlocked the door of her apartment and invited Ingrid in. She however spoke in a near whisper once they were both inside, with the door closed and locked.

"By the way, that old woman who was sitting in a rocking chair in the entrance lobby is a paid government informant who reports on any suspicious goings in and out of the building. The embassy's CIA officer warned me about her."

"That's always useful to know. So, how do you like your work here in Taiwan, Hien?"

"It is a satisfying job, while my superiors are good people. Since the vast majority of Chinese intellectuals and artists fled Mainland China after the end of the civil war, in order to escape persecution and arbitrary arrests by the Communists, there is quite a large artistic and intellectual community in Taiwan. Much of my time is used in arranging cultural exchanges between Taiwan and the United States and helping various visiting artistic groups, like orchestras and popular singers. I also help connect local writers with American publishers."

"All nice things, I must say. Compared to you, I could be said to be an insatiable warmonger."

"Don't say that, Mom!" protested Hien, instantly serious. "You helped my country of birth to get out of a disastrous war and saved it from a Chinese invasion. Without you, Vietnam would now be a puppet state of Communist China. You also defended Western Europe and Poland against a massive Soviet invasion and brought peace to Palestine. And let's not also forget about your defense of the Philippines against the Japanese and your role in pushing back the Nazis in Europe. You may be good in a war, but you are an even better peacemaker."

"A peacemaker... I certainly could live with that title."

"And you will, mark my words. Now, let's unpack your bags, so that we could then go eat something at a nice little restaurant I know nearby."

As Ingrid started unpacking her suitcases and suspending her clothes in the closet of Hien's bedroom, her daughter smiled and spoke with some amusement in her voice.

"Not a single dress in your wardrobe: only female suits with trousers. You are still as much a feminist as you ever were."

"You nearly need to be a feminist when you work in an environment impregnated with machismo like the Air Force, Hien. And you are incorrect about my wardrobe: I still

wear from time to time my Chinese slit dress and my Vietnamese Ao Dai¹ outfits. I just chose not to bring them on this trip.”

“If you say so, Mom.”

After another couple of minutes Ingrid was done with her unpacking and both women left Hien’s apartment, going down the stairs and exiting the building. As the duo walked down the sidewalk, Ingrid started asking questions to Hien in a low voice, to avoid being overheard.

“Tell me, Hien. I had only limited access to World news while in space and I would like to get up to snuff on the actual geopolitical situation. What is the state of the relations between the PRC and Taiwan?”

“As icy as ever, Mom. There is zero love lost between those two governments and I don’t expect any improvements in that matter anytime soon.”

“And the state of relations between the PRC and the United States?”

“The same as with Taiwan. The Communist Chinese still remember very well your devastating air raid on their leadership compound in Beijing, even after twenty years. In particular, the Communist Chinese leaders still want your head on a platter.”

“Well, it’s nice to see that they haven’t forgotten yet about me.” replied Ingrid, doing her best to minimize that point. “Is Deng Xiaoping still in charge in China?”

“He is, but the political scene in Beijing can rightly be described as a dog’s breakfast: palace intrigues and back stabbings are a constant there. While Washington believes Deng to be a hardened Communist, the few remaining survivors from the old guard, mostly army generals who had been away from Beijing at the time of your raid, consider him too moderate and accommodating towards us. If I would be Xiaoping, I would sleep with only one eye closed.”

That made Ingrid chuckle briefly.

“Oh, the price one has to pay to retain power. Thank God that I never became a politician and stuck to flying. I am too honest anyway to make a good politician.”

They continued chatting together while walking along the fairly crowded sidewalk, until Hien opened the door of a small restaurant advertising Cantonese cuisine. Ingrid took a good sniff of the appetizing odors inside the restaurant and smiled.

¹ Ao Dai: Traditional female Vietnamese outfit made of a long dress slit along both legs and worn over a pair of flared trousers.

“Aaaah, real Chinese cuisine! Our cooks on the CONSTITUTION did their best, but there is only so much that you can do when you only have freeze-dried or canned products. Let’s take that corner table next to the front window.”

A waiter came to them as soon as they sat down at that table, bringing them menus and filling glasses of water for both of them. He then left them to give them time to study their menus. Ingrid only needed a minute or so to make her mind.

“I will go for the shrimp dumplings and a noodle soup with bamboo shoots. We had only instant noodles aboard the CONSTITUTION and I sorely miss freshly-made noodles.”

“I think that I will have the same: this restaurant serves top-notch home-made noodles.”

“Perfect! Let’s order!”

Calling the waiter back to their table, Ingrid then gave their orders in fluent Chinese, making the man bow to her before walking away.

They had been waiting and talking together for maybe two minutes when a small group of Caucasian men entered the restaurant, obviously intent on sitting down for lunch. Ingrid, absorbed in her conversation with Hien, didn’t see one of the men abruptly stop while staring at her, then change direction to walk towards her table. She became conscious of the man’s presence when the latter stopped a mere pace from her table and spoke to her with a distinct British accent.

“Miss, are you General Ingrid Dows?”

“Uh, yes! What can I do for you, mister?”

“You can take THAT!”

Taken by surprise, Ingrid was unable to avoid the powerful right hook to her jaw that the man then delivered. The resounding hit projected her back while she was still sitting and she ended up with her back on the floor, half knocked out. The man, apparently in a mighty rage, then jumped on her and started punching her savagely as Hien was screaming in horror.

“YOU BITCH KILLED MY FATHER TWENTY YEARS AGO, WHEN YOU SANK THE HMS TIGER OFF PALESTINE.”

“STOP! SOMEONE STOP THIS MADMAN!” yelled Hien while trying to pull the man off her mother. While their waiter reacted quickly and ran to the rescue, the other men who had entered the restaurant with the assailant mostly did nothing, staying frozen

near the entrance. After absorbing two more punches to the face, Ingrid went over her surprise and immobilized the man's right fist by squeezing his wrist in a superhuman grip. A noise of crushing bones was accompanied by a loud scream of pain from Ingrid's attacker. Ingrid then followed on that by putting the sole of her right boot against the man's stomach and then catapulting him in the air. The British flew clean off the floor and flew against a wooden wall, against which he loudly impacted, creating a large hole in it. Grimacing with pain and holding his fractured wrist, the man collapsed on the floor as Ingrid, a bit wobbly, got back on her feet. All the other people in the restaurant were now frozen with stupor and staring at that scene, everybody except Hien, who went at once to her mother.

"Mom, are you okay?"

"I...I will be, Hien. I may end up with a couple of bruises but I have lived through much worse. Let me check on that man."

Ingrid then walked slowly to the man rolling on the ground while whimpering with pain, making the companions of the man stiffen up, ready to defend him. Ingrid gave them an unsympathetic look but stayed two paces away from her assailant.

"I suppose that you are all British, gentlemen?"

"Yes, we are!" replied one of the men, a short but beefy man in his forties. "Are you really General Dows?"

"What if I am? You would then all jump on me, like your friend did? The Palestine War of Independence happened twenty years ago and what I did then was a legitimate act of war against a ship actively supporting Arab planes intent on bombing my airbase. I am truly sorry that this man's father was one of the victims of that war, but he should blame instead the stupid British politicians who decided to backstab the United States then."

Before any of the four British men could reply to her, the restaurant's owner came to them, armed with a big kitchen knife and started shouting in broken English.

"YOU, NO MOVE! POLICE COMING!"

On her part, Ingrid looked calmly at the owner and spoke to him in Cantonese.

"Then you better call an ambulance as well, sir: this man will need hospital treatment."

The restaurant owner nodded to that, then shouted to his wife to get on the phone while staying put himself, his knife still up. The now nervous British, who knew how severe the local authorities were about civil disturbances, didn't dare move or try to flee, with one of

them kneeling beside his wounded comrade to assess his wounds. He soon looked up with shock at Ingrid.

“His right wrist is completely shattered. How did you do that?”

“Simple: I squeezed it! I could have killed him, but chose not to. He can count himself lucky in that he didn’t take out a knife or a gun on me.”

The British’s face hardened as he stared at her with hatred.

“You killed over a thousand Royal Navy sailors off Palestine, miss, and…”

“And British commandos wearing unmarked uniforms attacked my airbase at night, killing 46 of my people and even attacking the house where my six-year-old daughter was. Your government then compounded its treachery with moral cowardice and hypocrisy by refusing to acknowledge those commandos as being British soldiers. As a consequence, those soldiers ended up being executed by Israeli firing squads as terrorists and saboteurs. This all happened twenty years ago and you still carry a grudge about that? You better change your attitude, and quickly, mister.”

Ignoring the British men from then on, she turned to face the restaurant owner and, pulling her wallet out of a pocket, gave him 200 U.S. dollars while bowing to him.

“Please accept this as reimbursement for the damage to your restaurant my visit indirectly caused, sir.”

The owner, most pleased at getting a sum that easily covered at least three times the cost of the said damage, took the money and bowed deeply to Ingrid.

“The lady is too kind. Consider this incident forgotten on your part.”

As if to emphasize his last words, a squad of Taiwanese military policemen then rushed inside the restaurant, their batons high.

“NOBODY MOVES! WHAT HAPPENED HERE?”

The restaurant owner stepped forward at once, presenting himself and describing to the senior MP what had happened. That MP first looked at the whimpering British man on the floor, then at the large hole in the wall, before eyeing Ingrid with disbelief.

“You were able to project that man this strongly against the wall, miss?”

“That’s correct, Sergeant. I am General Ingrid Dows, of the United States Military Space Command. I came here to have lunch with my daughter, who is working at the local American embassy. That man on the floor then entered the restaurant and attacked me and punched me a couple of times, so I defended myself.”

The MP straightened up on hearing her rank and saluted her.

“Then, be assured that you will not be bothered further, General. I will only need to take note of your name, along with a short deposition, then you will be free to resume your lunch in peace.”

Ingrid gave that information with good grace, with the MP taking notes in his pocket notebook. The MP then looked at his men and barked an order.

“GET THOSE ASSHOLES IN THE TRUCK! THAT ONE ON THE FLOOR AS WELL! HE WILL HAVE TO WAIT UNTIL BOOKED BEFORE GOING TO THE HOSPITAL.”

The British men tried to protest this but a liberal use of batons by the MPs cut their protests short and they were soon dragged out of the restaurant. Ingrid slowly shook her head in disappointment as she watched the MPs leave with the British.

“Damn! I was hoping that this was by now forgotten, or at least forgiven.”

“The British do still have problems accepting the fact that they are now only a secondary World power, with their precious empire mostly gone.” said Hien. “I am sorry that your vacation in Taiwan started on such a shaky footing.”

“You certainly were not at fault here, Hien, so don’t blame yourself for this. Let’s return to our table: I am still quite hungry.”

Sitting back at their table, the two women were promptly served by their waiter, who had been told by the owner to take special care of them as customers. Ingrid took the time to savor her first bites before resuming her conversation with Hien.

“Okay, we were on the subject of Communist Chinese leadership before that little incident. What about the relations between the PRC and the Soviet Union?”

“Not too good, actually. There actually were a few border skirmishes between Chinese and Soviet soldiers along the Amur River, in the area of Mongolia. We believe that hardline, old guard Chinese Army generals are fueling those border clashes and that Deng Xiaoping is incapable of reining them in, lacking the needed political support in the Chinese Communist Party’s Central Committee, which is dominated by army generals. This business of having mostly army generals or ex-generals in charge in China actually concerns my ambassador, Patrick McConaughey Junior, who is worried that they may decide one day to invade Taiwan. You must know that the Communist Chinese already attacked Taiwanese-held islands in the past, right?”

Ingrid nodded slowly her head at that.

“Yes: the Quemoy and Matsu Islands attempted invasion of 1955. We had to threaten China with atomic bomb strikes to make the Communists back off.”

“But now the Communist Chinese have their own atomic bombs, along with bombers and missiles able to carry them.” added Hien, her expression sober. “Now, the Chinese won’t be deterred so easily.”

“You’re right, Hien. Unfortunately, there is not much that we could do about this: the Congress has little appetite for another war in Asia and so does President Kennedy. The fact that the Tchang Kai-Chek Regime is in reality a military dictatorship is cooling down a lot of the resolve about helping to defend Taiwan against a Communist attack. To make matters worse, we have Communist Korea, sitting close to the Japanese islands and with a brutal, unpredictable dictator in charge. To be frank, our forces in the Pacific are way too extended and overcommitted to my own taste. Any region-wide coordinated attack by combined Chinese and Korean forces would tax our forces to the limit.”

“And...do you believe that such an attack could happen, Mom?”

“That’s hard to say, Hien. There are too many unstable and unpredictable political factors and players involved in this. I give it a fifty-fifty chance for such a scenario to happen in the next few years.”

Hien was silent for a moment while mentally digesting those words, then forced a smile on her face.

“Well, let’s forget that doom and gloom talk! What are your plans for your new command? What will be your first priorities?”

“First of all, I must secure the cooperation of the other service chiefs in order to organize my new corps and to get the personnel I need to be transferred from their actual service branches. Then, I will need to secure some extra budgets in order to initiate the most urgent priority projects on my wish list. However, you can be assured that the other service chiefs will defend their own portions of the defense budget and personnel tooth and nail.”

“Ouch! That could be brutal.”

“Indeed!” said Ingrid, sighing heavily at the thoughts of the bureaucratic infighting ahead of her.

CHAPTER 4 – BUREAUCRATIC INFIGHTING



09:04 (Washington Time)

Monday, December 3, 1973 'C'

U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff conference room

The Pentagon, Arlington, Virginia

U.S.A.

As she had grown accustomed to along the years, Ingrid found herself to be the only woman in the Joint Chiefs of Staff conference room at the Pentagon, with all the other ten participants being graying men. Apart from the service chiefs, the Secretary of Defense and his deputies for each of the services formed the group of participants for this meeting. All of them eyed her with anticipation mixed in with a detectable bit of sexual lust as she took her place at the conference table. Then, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, who was directing the meeting, spoke up.

"Welcome all, lady and gentlemen. This meeting is meant to introduce to the Joint Chiefs of Staff its newest member, General Ingrid Dows, Commander of the soon to be officially formed United States Space Corps. As Secretary of Defense, I have been briefed by President Kennedy about what he expected of this new armed service. He also told me that he expected your full collaboration in helping General Dows to form her

new command and in transferring to her Space Corps the personnel she will need to operate it.”

The service chiefs had noticeable reactions to that last sentence, most of them stiffening in their chairs or throwing a wary glance at Ingrid. On her part, Ingrid’s face stayed inscrutable as she displayed Olympian calm on this meeting, on which so much counted for her. The service chiefs’ reactions didn’t escape as well the attention of Harold Brown, a scientific prodigy with a PhD in physics and an extensive background in nuclear systems. However, he did not comment on it at that time and decided to let Ingrid deal with that herself.

“Thus, without ado, I will let General Dows present her exposé on her new command, its organization and its goals. General Dows...”

“Thank you, Mister Secretary!” replied calmly Ingrid while pushing a button and switching on the slide projector which equipped the conference room. “First off, let me emphasize that my new Space Corps will evolve directly from our existing Military Space Command and will need only a few minor changes to the latter in order to be formed, if you except of course the new name and new uniforms intended for its personnel.”

Those words seemingly calmed down most of the apprehensions around the table. Ingrid then made a slide appear on a wall projection screen. That slide showed a map of the United States, on which a number of locations had been highlighted with symbols.

“What you see now is a map of the various facilities and bases which will either belong to the Space Corps or will share the use of with another service. Those are the Vandenberg Space Base in California, Cape Canaveral and Patrick Space Base in Florida, the North Annex of Muroc Air Force Base, which will be shared with the Air Force as we already do presently, the White Sands Research Facility in New Mexico and the Wallop Space Station on the coast of Virginia. Not shown here but still a vital installation in its own right is our Moon Base Alpha. Add to that the various constellations of artificial satellites in place around Earth and our two planetary spaceships, the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION and the U.S.S. LIBERTY. As of now, I have no need for any other extra base for my command. What I will need, though, is to add a few additional facilities and capabilities to my present bases in order to boost the performances and efficiency of our space systems and in turn reduce the cost and time needed to launch items in orbit.”

Ingrid then made a second slide replace the first one on the viewing screen.

“Those additional facilities will be a space systems research and development center, to be built in Vandenberg; a Space Corps Academy in Cape Canaveral, meant to form my personnel; and mass drivers launch systems, which I hope to have built in the next coming years at both Vandenberg and Cape Canaveral.”

“And what the hell is a ‘mass driver launch system’?” asked the commander of the Air Force, General George Brown, a man known for his often brutally direct talk. In response, Ingrid switched to another slide showing what looked like a giant inclined ramp.

“This is a concept drawing of what my mass driver will look like, General Brown. During my trip to Mars and back, I had plenty of time to think about ways in which I would be able to make my space systems more performant and also less costly to launch in Earth orbit. What you see here is a concept that was contemplated in the future as Nancy Laplante knew it, but which was never realized then for political and financial reasons. In our case, I believe that this concept could save us billions of dollars in the long run and could make orbital trips both cheaper and easier. Basically, it will be an electro-magnetic launch ramp which will function a bit like the launch catapults found on our aircraft carriers. Presently, the bulk of our satellites and all of our manned spacecraft are launched at high altitude by a C-2000 heavy transporter, then climb on their own ramjet and rocket engines to orbit. While that procedure is both very reliable and much less costly than using single-use rockets as used still by the Soviets, it takes some time to react to a launch order, while the mass of the craft launched is limited by the lift capacity of the C-2000. This new mass driver system, which has started to be researched and developed a year ago at my request, will essentially be a long launch ramp on which various craft and payloads will be accelerated to a speed of close to Mach 3 or more before they leave the launch ramp. That will allow those craft’s ramjet engines to light up and propel by themselves their craft up to the stratosphere, attaining a speed of over Mach 5 before pure rocket engines will take over and push the craft into Earth orbit. This launch ramp will thus eliminate the need to use a heavy transporter aircraft and will also eliminate the need for solid rocket boosters, which presently push our spaceplanes to supersonic speeds after they drop from their C-2000 transporter. The only thing we will need to do apart from building those mass driver ramps will be to modify our spaceplanes so that they could use those launch ramps.”

“But, this slide of yours shows your launch ramp to be close to eight miles long.” objected Brown, making Ingrid nod once.

“Correct, General. That will be the length required of it to allow it to launch payloads from the ground at a speed of Mach 3 while using accelerations of no more than 3 Gs, weak enough to avoid damaging the payloads or unduly stressing human crews. Think of it as a half-minute-long carrier catapult launch. In return, I am hoping for this new launch system to nearly cut in half the present cost of launching satellites and spaceplanes into low Earth orbit, while also accelerating greatly the rhythm at which we could do space launches.”

The men around the table exchanged bemused looks, except for Harold Brown and for Acting Deputy Secretary for the Air Force James Plummer, an aeronautical engineer by profession, with the two men grinning with enthusiasm on hearing Ingrid’s concept. Ingrid was however far from finished and put up a new slide which made the others bend forward for a better look.

“One other major innovation I want to introduce in the next few years is a brand-new spacecraft: a space interceptor.”

“A space interceptor?! exclaimed General Creighton Abrams, the head of the U.S. Army. “You are squarely jumping into science-fiction, Dows.”

“I would rather call that ‘vision’, General Abrams.” replied Ingrid while staring at Abrams, using a tone that apparently displeased the 59-year-old army general.

“Are you trying to look smarter than us, Dows?”

“No, General Abrams: I am simply embracing the future. I just came back from leading a two-year mission to Mars and I intend to continue advancing the United States through innovative technologies and science. When I start a project, I always have a clear path to what I want to do and I use feasible solutions, not pipe dreams. If I propose something here and now, then you should take me seriously.”

Abrams reddened a bit in anger but, seeing the warning look from Admiral Moorer and from Harold Brown, did not reply to that and kept quiet as Ingrid resumed her presentation.

“This proposed interceptor will be a multi-mission spacecraft launched by my future mass driver and able to attain orbit by itself. Its missions will include the interception and destruction of hostile artificial satellites and spacecraft; space rescue of human crews stranded in orbit; the repair in orbit of artificial satellites and spacecraft; strategic orbital and stratospheric photo-reconnaissance and strategic strikes from orbit. However, I intend to keep the last mission confidential, in order not to unduly alarm the Soviets or the Chinese. It will have a small crew of two to three persons but will have a

seating capacity for up to six persons. It will also have a limited space cargo capacity and a few weapons bays for missiles. I expect its development to be costly and complicated, but only a limited number of these interceptors will be built, to be used as a rapid-reaction space component.”

“What about your two big interplanetary spaceships, the CONSTITUTION and the LIBERTY? What are your future projects for them?” asked James Plummer.

“They will be devoted mostly to space exploration under the direction of the civilian division of my command, sir. Eventually, we will want to return to Mars to better study it, while I envision a return mission to the Jupiter System, once our two ships will receive some improvements to their propulsion systems.”

“And exactly what kind of improvements to their propulsion systems are you thinking about, Ingrid? I believe that our nuclear rocket technology is still superior to anything else we know.”

“Exact, sir, but not to what the scientists from Nancy Laplante’s era knew. Again, I have been plundering the data available in our Athena files and found technical descriptions of a new type of space engine called a VASIMR, or Variable Specific Impulse Magneto-plasma Rocket, a type of engine that ionizes a plasma propellant and accelerates it with a magnetic field. While the actual thrust of such an engine will be minuscule compared to our present chemical rockets, it will be able to burn for very long periods, with a specific impulse of up to or even higher than 10,000 seconds, making them about eleven times more efficient than our present nuclear rockets. With such engines and with our present nuclear engines modified to also be able to provide electricity to these plasma engines, scientists in the future had calculated that a flight to Jupiter or Saturn could be cut in length from six years to fourteen months, while a trip to Mars could be done in 39 days. However, all these nice ideas will stay simple ideas without the proper budgets and research facilities. I am thus hoping to gain approval for supplementary budgets for my Space Corps, over and above the present budgets assigned to the Military Space Command. You can also add a much smaller extra budget which will be consecrated to acquiring new, distinct uniforms for the personnel of my command.”

“Can’t you just keep the basic Air Force uniforms you already use and simply add a few new patches and insignias to them?” proposed General Brown. Ingrid shook her head at once.

“Would the Commandant of the Marine Corps be happy to be told to use basic Navy uniforms and simply put Marine Corps patches on them? I very much doubt so.” General Robert Cushman Junior, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, emphatically shook his head at that.

“Not in a million years! You deserve new uniforms of your own for your Space Corps, Ingrid. Go for it!”

“Thanks, Bob!” said Ingrid, grinning, before becoming serious again and looking at Harold Brown. “That’s basically it for my stated projects for my Space Corps, Mister Secretary. However, as they say too justly, the devil is in the details. We would now need to discuss those details and get to a consensus on what will be done and with what budgets.”

“Indeed! Let’s get down to brass tacks², gentlemen!”

When the meeting was finally called off at the end of the afternoon, Ingrid felt exhausted but also happy. With the enthusiastic support of the Secretary of Defense and of the Deputy Secretary for the Air Force, plus the sympathetic ears of the Marine Corps Commandant and of Admiral Moorer, she had been able to gain approval for her projects, along with a majority of the extra budgets she had requested. She did not win all of her demands but hoping so would have been unrealistic. Now, she only wanted a good meal, followed by a shower and eight hours of sleep. Tomorrow, she planned to start arranging for the new uniforms needed for her Space Corps. She already had a fair idea of what she wanted but finding a good clothes designer with enough bold vision to produce something both striking and practical was not going to be easy. An idea then suddenly struck her mind, making her smile to herself as she walked towards one the exits of the huge building, intent on catching a taxi outside and return to her hotel in Washington. She now knew where to look, or rather when to look.

² Going down to brass tacks: Old expression meant to say ‘going to the bottom of a problem or solution’. It came from the instance of long marches wearing down the soles of boots and exposing the brass tacks holding the soles.

CHAPTER 5 – CHINESE MOVES

00:06 (Washington Time)

Sunday, December 9, 1973 ‘C’

Room 412, Hotel Hay-Adams

16th Street Northwest, Washington, D.C.

U.S.A.

Ingrid had been soundly asleep for a bit over one hour in her room at the Hay-Adams Hotel, situated in close proximity to the White House, when the telephone on her night table started ringing. Still groggy from fatigue, she extended her right hand and grabbed the receiver, then spoke in it with a sleepy voice.

“Yes?”

“General Ingrid Dows?” said a male voice, making Ingrid sit up on her bed.

“Yes! Who’s speaking, please?”

“This is Brigadier General William Hanson, at the NMCC³. We have a crisis situation concerning Taiwan and China and you need to go at once to the White House situation room to attend an emergency meeting with the President and the Joint Chiefs.” Ingrid felt immediate dread on hearing the word ‘Taiwan’, but did her best to control her voice.

“Taiwan? What is happening exactly, General Hanson?”

“I can’t say much on this line, General, except that the Chinese are attacking Taiwan, starting by striking Taipei with a nuclear-tipped missile.”

Tears started flowing at once and Ingrid couldn’t help sobbing audibly, unable to speak for long seconds and prompting Hanson to speak with alarm on the telephone.

“General Dows, are you okay?”

“N...no! My daughter works at the American embassy in Taipei.”

It was the turn of Hanson to be silent for a moment, embarrassed for having involuntarily caused such grief with his call.

³ NMCC: National Military Command Center, situated inside the Pentagon. The NMCC serves as the coordination center of the American armed forces and keeps on a permanent basis an eye on military operations and crisis situations around the World.

"I am truly sorry about that, General. Still, you are needed urgently at the White House."

Taking a deep breath to regain control of herself while wiping away her tears, Ingrid managed to reply to Hanson in a shaky voice.

"Tell the President that I will be at the White House in twenty minutes at the most. Thank you for calling, General Hanson."

"You're welcome, General. I will advise the President right away." said Hanson, who wisely decided not to end his call with a customary 'good night'. On her part, Ingrid hung down her receiver, then freely let out her grief, crying for a good minute before forcing herself to get up from bed and starting to put on her uniform. Eleven minutes after receiving the call from the NMCC, she was walking out of her room and heading down to the ground lobby of the hotel. From there, she only had to walk for a few hundred meters before arriving at the guarded access point to the White House at the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and of the West Executive Avenue. There, she presented her military identity card and her White House security pass to the Secret Service agents and the marines guarding the access point. The senior marine in charge, having obviously been told to expect her, gave her back her security pass and looked at one of his marines on duty.

"Alvarez, get into your jeep at once and drive General Dows to the White House."

"Right away, Master Sergeant!"

The NCO then saluted again Ingrid.

"Corporal Alvarez will drive you to the White House, General."

"Thank you, Master Sergeant!" replied Ingrid while returning his salute. She then climbed aboard Alvarez' jeep, which had been parked next to the guard house, with the marine then starting to roll at once towards the White House, some 400 meters away. While Alvarez drove, Ingrid did her best to chase away her grief and prepare mentally for the coming emergency meeting. Since the Chinese had made a first use of an atomic weapon against Taiwan, then her command, which included the American intercontinental ballistic missile force based in fixed silos in the continental United States, was certainly going to be solicited. Another division of her command which was assured to be solicited was her squadron of strategic photo-reconnaissance spaceplanes. She had time to decide on a number of measures and priorities by the time that Corporal Alvarez dropped her at the main entrance, where she presented again

her security pass to the marines and Secret Service agents posted there before being admitted and escorted towards the underground Situation Room.

She arrived at the Situation Room to find it still mostly deserted, except for a military White House liaison officer, a staffer from the National Security Council and three Secret Service agents. The military liaison officer came at once to her and saluted her.

"General Dows, you are the first member of the JCS⁴ to arrive at the White House. The other members should arrive within half an hour."

"And where is the President, Major?"

"He is making a few urgent phone calls from his Oval Office but should come down soon."

"And what do we know already about the situation around Taiwan?"

"Details are still sketchy, General, but the Communist Chinese apparently launched two medium range nuclear-tipped missiles about an hour ago. According to our surviving units in Taiwan, those two missiles struck both the city of Taipei and the Taoyuan Airbase, west of Taipei, destroying completely those two locations. Our airwing based in Taoyuan is assessed right now as effectively destroyed, while all communications with Taipei are cut. One of our destroyers, which was patrolling inside the Taiwan Strait at the time, reported after seeing both of the nuclear blasts that it encountered a Chinese invasion fleet approaching the Taiwanese West Coast. Unfortunately, that destroyer was then attacked by a number of Chinese aircraft and is not responding anymore to our calls."

"Damn! Have the Chinese leaders gone completely mad? They should know what kind of retaliation to expect from us after this. I will need to make some urgent phone calls myself on a secure line."

In response, the Air Force major pointed to one of the padded chairs around the conference table which filled most of the room.

"You have a secure telephone at your assigned seat around the conference table, General."

"Thank you!"

⁴ JCS: Joint Chiefs of Staff, comprising the heads of the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps, plus the Chairman of the JCS and his deputy.

Taking place in her chair, Ingrid placed a call to the operations center of her base in Vandenberg, California, where she got the duty officer, a colonel, on the phone.

"Colonel Parsons, this is General Dows, presently in Washington. First, before anything else we say, I want you to put our whole command on top alert, with special emphasis on our ballistic missile force and our spaceplane reconnaissance squadron. I will wait on this line while you do that."

"Understood, General! Please give me a minute."

Ingrid patiently waited while she heard the colonel shout orders and directives around his operations center. The man then returned on the line some forty seconds later.

"The alert has been passed around our whole command, General."

"Good! Have you received any reports or warnings yet from the NMCC concerning the situation around Taiwan?"

"We were advised some twelve minutes ago about an apparent military attack against Taiwan by Communist China, General."

"That's it? Did that report specify that the Chinese used two nuclear-tipped missiles against Taiwan?"

The shocked silence at the other end of the line said everything to Ingrid, who then continued on an urgent tone.

"Well, we will review that later, Colonel. Right now, I want our strategic reconnaissance squadron to prepare at once three spaceplanes for orbital launch, to effect photo-reconnaissance missions over East Asia. One will overfly Taiwan and report on the state of both Taipei City and of the Taoyuan Airbase. I want to know the exact extent of the damage to those two locations. Our second spaceplane will overfly the Taiwan Strait and look for a possible Chinese invasion fleet approaching the West coast of Taiwan. Our third spaceplane will overfly the coastal area of China opposite Taiwan, to look at the posture of the Chinese military forces stationed along the coast. Make it concentrate its attention on the Chinese ports and airbases there. It should also keep an eye for any unusual deployment of mobile missile launchers near the coast."

"Got that, General! Anything else for the moment?"

Ingrid inhaled deeply before answering that, fully realizing what could follow.

"Yes, Colonel! I want our two remaining C-2000 heavy transporters to load up two more spaceplanes armed for nuclear strikes. Each of these spaceplanes will carry three OGM-2N orbital strike nuclear missiles with warheads set to their maximum yield of two megatons. As soon as they are armed and launched into orbit, I want them to

assume waiting orbits which will allow them to strike on command any point around Eastern China, including Beijing and Shanghai. Have Major General Meserve call me back at the White House Situation Room as soon as our spaceplanes are in the air. Finally, tell our ballistic missile division to be prepared for possible strikes against Communist China. That's all for the moment."

"Understood, General. We're on it!"

The colonel then hung up, followed by Ingrid. The latter then closed her eyes, dreading what could very well come next. Next, tears reappeared in her eyes as she thought about her adopted daughter. Wiping her tears away, she did her best to concentrate on the television set in the Situation Room which was permanently tuned to the CBS News Channel. Apparently, the medias had not caught up yet to the Chinese nuclear strikes on Taiwan and were only reporting mundane daily news. As she was watching the television set, the liaison officer took a call at his station and, after a brief conversation, hung up and spoke to Ingrid.

"General Dows, the President has ordered all our forces in the Asia-Pacific region to go to DEFCON ONE and to consider the United States to be at war against China. The NMCC is passing that directive to all of our commands and services, including yours."

"Thank you, Major! Did he mention anything about the USSR?"

"Uh, no, General." replied the officer, taken off balance by her question.

"Then, I will need to speak with the President. Can you please get me on his line?"

"Right away, General."

A few seconds more and Ingrid had a line to Robert Kennedy and spoke to him in a sober but urgent tone.

"Mister President, I am calling you to counsel you so that we quickly reassure the Soviets that our moves are only reactions to Chinese acts of aggression and are not meant to threaten the Soviet Union. If we don't do that, then the Soviets may think that we are going to attack them as well and they could as a consequence either become an obstacle to our moves or even throw their support behind the Chinese. I believe that, at a minimum, the Soviet ambassador in Washington should be reassured by us to that effect or, even better, that you call Secretary Brezhnev to explain the situation to him. With any luck, we then may see the Soviets try to moderate the actions of the Chinese." There were a few seconds of silence as Kennedy processed mentally Ingrid's advice.

"You may be right about that, Ingrid. If we could split the Soviets from the Chinese, that would make our job much easier. I will call the Soviet ambassador right away."

"Thank you, Mister President. Before you hang up, I want to inform you that I have ordered my spaceplane squadron to immediately launch five spaceplanes in orbit. Three of them will fly photo-reconnaissance missions over Taiwan, the Strait of Taiwan and the eastern coast of Mainland China, while the remaining two spaceplanes will take off with three nuclear missiles each and will take waiting orbits over Eastern China, ready to strike at your command."

"That was an excellent initiative on your part, Ingrid. If the two Chinese nuclear hits on Taiwan are confirmed, then we will have little choice but to retaliate in kind. The only question then will be to what extent."

"Mister President, I would keep for the moment any nuclear retaliation on our part strictly limited. We don't know who in China ordered this attack on Taiwan and all this does not feel to me like it was authorized by Chairman Deng Xiaoping. In fact, I would not be surprised to learn that there was some kind of coup against him organized by all those hardline generals who are partisans of the late Mao's rigid doctrine."

"I will keep your advice in mind, Ingrid, but many may disagree with you on that. I will think this over for now and will call the Soviet ambassador after this."

"I will be in the Situation Room if you need me, Mister President." said Ingrid before Kennedy hung up.

The next person to arrive in the Situation Room was Admiral Thomas Moorer, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who went at once to Ingrid to shake her hand.

"I am glad to see that you came here this fast, Ingrid. Your presence may be crucial to this meeting, as you control one element of our nuclear triad. Do we know anything other than the two nuclear missile hits on Taipei and Taoyuan Airbase?"

"Yes! One of our destroyers patrolling the Taiwan Strait signaled that it had detected a Chinese invasion fleet heading for Taiwan, then came under Chinese air attack and stopped responding to calls. I have placed a call to Vandenberg Space Base and ordered my spaceplane squadron to scramble three spaceplanes on photo-reconnaissance missions and two more on standby nuclear strike missions."

"Good! We will definitely need the reconnaissance reports from your spaceplanes in order to establish a clear situation about what happened."

Before Ingrid could reply to that, the secure telephone at her table position rang, making her nearly run to it and grab its receiver.

“General Dows speaking!”

A female voice she knew very well then sounded on the line.

“Ingrid, this is Gertrude. I called to advise you that our first reconnaissance spaceplane just attained orbit and will overfly Taiwan in about 33 minutes. Also, I got a call from Hong-Kong...from your daughter Hien: she was in Hong-Kong for diplomatic reasons at the time of the Chinese strike on Taipei. She made a long-distance phone call from Hong-Kong to our operations center, to reassure you about her. She says that she is safe and healthy.”

Ingrid had to sit down, blood rushing to her brain and an intense wave of relief washing over her. It took her a couple of seconds before she could speak in her receiver.

“Thank The One! I was already grieving her loss. This is one big weight off my shoulders. When do you expect our other spaceplanes to be in orbit, Gertrude?”

“All four of our other spaceplanes will be up in orbit within the next half hour, Ingrid.”

“Good! You got the word from the NMCC to go to DEFCON ONE?”

“Yes, we did! Our intercontinental missile squadrons are on full alert and ready to execute any strike on China ordered by the President.”

“Hopefully, things won’t go down to a full nuclear strike. Ideally, I would like us to make only a couple of strikes on Chinese national command centers in response for them nuking Taipei and Taoyuan. That’s what I will counsel to the President anyway.”

“Then, I will call you back the moment that our strike spaceplanes will be in range of continental China. Do you have any other orders for me at this time?”

“No! The President is not yet in the Situation Room and I prefer to wait for firm decisions before giving more orders to our command. Thanks for calling: I will keep you posted.”

Maybe ten seconds after she hung up, President Kennedy entered the Situation Room with his Secretary of State, Edmund Muskie, and Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, with the ones already present coming to attention and saluting Kennedy. Within a minute, they were joined by Admiral Zumwalt and General George Brown. That was when Robert Kennedy decided to start the meeting.

“Since time is of the essence and the main players are now here, let’s start dealing with this crisis. Please take your seats, lady and gentlemen.”

Once seated, President Kennedy looked briefly at the regional map of China and Taiwan shown on a large wall projection screen.

“Okay, people, what do we know for certain right now?”

“For sure: not much, Mister President.” replied the military liaison officer. “The only solid reports we have state that two nuclear blasts occurred at about 23:27, our time tonight, over the location of Taipei City and of Taoyuan Airbase. One of our destroyers patrolling in the Taiwan Strait saw the two nuclear explosions, then reported encountering a Chinese invasion fleet heading towards the western coast of Taiwan. Unfortunately, that destroyer, the USS MITSCHER, then came under Chinese air attack and has since stopped answering our calls. That is all that we have as solid information goes, Mister President.”

“Mister President,” said Ingrid at once, jumping in, “one of my spaceplanes equipped for photo-reconnaissance will pass over Taiwan in about 28 minutes, followed soon afterwards by two more spaceplanes which will cover the Taiwan Strait and the eastern coast of China. By then, two other spaceplanes will be in orbit as well, each equipped with three nuclear-tipped strike missiles with yields of two megatons.”

“Excellent! Once the destruction of Taipei and of Taoyuan will be confirmed, I will want us to do a limited nuclear retaliatory strike on Mainland China. I want the Chinese to understand at once that they can’t win at that kind of game. We will use General Dows’ spaceplanes for those strikes. Do I have suggestions on what two targets we should strike first?”

“I say, Beijing and Shanghai, Mister President.” answered at once Admiral Zumwalt. “They are the two most important government and military command centers on the Chinese East Coast, followed by Canton.”

“I would refrain as much as possible from striking Canton, Mister President.” added urgently Ingrid. “It is quite close to Hong-Kong, which is still British territory.” Robert Kennedy only had to think that over for a second before nodding his head.

“I agree! Let’s keep Canton, or any other Chinese center in proximity to either Hong-Kong or Macao, out of our nuclear target list for the time being. Now, about that Chinese invasion fleet approaching Taiwan. What can we do about it? Do we have enough ships near it which could intercept and stop that fleet?”

"Negative, Mister President!" answered Admiral Zumwalt, his expression grim. "The MITSCHER was our only ship present inside the Taiwan Strait. The bulk of our Pacific fleet is in port right now, in either the Philippines, Japan or Hawaii. We do have one carrier group at sea, the USS FORRESTAL group, but it is presently sailing east of Japan and would take a good day to arrive close to Taiwan."

"Mister President," intervened again Ingrid, "We could use one of my spaceplanes armed with nuclear missiles and strike the Chinese invasion fleet with a two-megaton airburst. That should be enough to sink or gravely damage most of the Chinese ships, especially if they are sailing in tight formation."

"I like this, Mister President!" added Zumwalt in an enthusiastic tone. "Such a strike would be devastating to any surface fleet. It would also have the advantage of exposing any Chinese soldiers surviving the strike to massive radiation doses which would make them quickly combat ineffective. Even if they would manage to land on Taiwan afterwards, those Chinese soldiers would be in essence dying men."

General Brown, the head of the Air Force, immediately supported that proposition, making Robert Kennedy nod his head in approval.

"I'll buy that! Ingrid, tell your spaceplane to reserve at least two nuclear missiles to deal with the Chinese invasion fleet. We won't wait until confirmation of the destruction of Taipei before striking that invasion fleet: I don't want it to be too close to Taiwan before we blast it with a nuclear weapon."

"Understood, Mister President!" replied Ingrid before grabbing her secure telephone receiver and calling Vandenberg Space Base. As she was talking with Gertrude Meserve on the secure line, Secretary of State Edmund Muskie slapped one hand on the table, frustrated.

"WHY? Why would the Chinese do such a reckless move now? I thought that Deng Xiaoping was more reasonable than that."

"General Dows theorized to me that Deng could have been victim of a coup by old-guard Chinese Red Army generals." volunteered Robert Kennedy. "The more I think about that, the more her suggestion makes sense to me. If that's so, those Chinese generals may have thought that we would not risk a nuclear exchange just to defend Taiwan and Tchang Kai-Chek's regime."

"Maybe, Mister President, but they just destroyed our 401st Tactical Air Wing in Taoyuan and probably sank one of our destroyers." shot back General Brown. "That

alone is enough for them to deserve a retaliatory nuclear strike, and those Chinese generals should have understood that.”

“Should is the operative word, General.” replied Admiral Zumwalt. “Who knows how those old Communist fanatics think or reason? What is important is their acts, and our response to them. I say: blast that Chinese fleet to Hell!”

“Does anybody have an objection to that? No? Then, we will proceed with that strike as soon as feasible.” said Robert Kennedy before looking at Ingrid, who was still on the phone. “Ingrid, your spaceplane is authorized to nuke from orbit the Chinese invasion fleet as soon as it will be within range. Tell your pilot to be on standby to receive my authorization code for launching his missiles.”

Ingrid nodded her head, then spoke more on the phone before looking at the President.

“My command is establishing a link with the White House right now. You will be able to send your authorization codes in a few seconds, Mister President.”

“Understood! Captain Benning, put my nuclear briefcase on the table and open our target list binder to the pages on China.”

Reacting quickly, the officer carrying the President’s ‘nuclear football’ unlocked his secure briefcase and opened it in front of Kennedy, then laid down on the table the ‘Top Secret’ binder containing the nuclear target lists and opening it on the list of Chinese possible targets. By the time that he had done so and that Robert Kennedy had taken out of a vest pocket his sealed launch code, a link had been established between the nuclear football and the Vandenberg Space Base’s operations center. Robert Kennedy first entered his personal entry code in the command box, then typed in the codes of the targets he wished to see struck with nuclear weapons. Everybody in the room was silent and tense as they watched the President enter his codes, then push a large red button to send the strike authorization signal while listening to Gertrude Meserve on the telephone receiver of his nuclear football.

“You have received my authorization code for strikes against China, General Meserve?”

“Yes, Mister President. It is being transmitted right now to our strike spaceplanes. We have just received the first in-flight report from our pilot overflying Taiwan, Mister President: both Taipei City and Taoyuan Airbase have effectively been obliterated by large nuclear blasts.”

“Then, proceed with retaliatory strikes against Beijing and Shanghai, as well as against the Chinese invasion fleet, General.”

“Will do, Mister President!” replied Meserve in a sober tone, fully realizing what those strikes would cause.

“Thank you, General Meserve! Stand by and be ready for any other extra target I may judge to be deserving of a nuclear strike in the next few minutes and hours.”

Robert Kennedy then hung up his receiver and sat back in his chair, his expression grim.

“May God help us now! We have just embarked into the first nuclear exchange in history. Let’s hope that we will be able to limit the damage to the minimum.”

12:20 (China Time) / 01:20 (Washington Time)

U.S. Military Space Command SP-10D spaceplane METEOR

In low Earth orbit above the Strait of Taiwan

Major Stuart Roosa shook his head as he looked through the viewing lens of his spaceplane’s powerful photo-reconnaissance camera, which was pointed down at the Chinese invasion fleet.

“What an eclectic bunch of ships and boats! And they call that an invasion fleet? There are more fishing boats in this so-called armada than there are true warships.”

“Yes,” replied his copilot, Captain Geena Armstrong, “but what they don’t have in terms of military quality, they compensate with sheer numbers. There must be over 200 fishing boats and commercial ferries in this fleet, all apparently able to carry a minimum of fifty soldiers and with the bigger ones having a carrying capacity of at least 200 men, if I can judge from their dimensions. The important thing is that the decks of all these boats are crammed full of soldiers. This fleet must be carrying at the least 30,000 soldiers.”

“Well, eclectic or not, this ragtag fleet will soon be history. James, is our first missile armed and ready?”

The man occupying the seat reserved for the mission payload specialist, which also had a special command panel for receiving nuclear authorization codes during strike missions, nodded his head once.

“Missile Number One primed, armed and ready to go, Major. The presidential authorization codes are now locked inside our fire control computer. Which part of this fleet do you want our missile to target? That fleet covers a good four square miles of ocean surface.”

"Aim for the center of mass of the fleet, James, with an airburst altitude of 300 feet. With such a collection of flimsy boats, a two-megaton airburst explosion should wipe out pretty much the whole fleet. If any of those ships survive, they will still be both seriously damaged and heavily irradiated. One missile should do the trick. Fire when ready!"

"Understood!" said Captain James Young, who then used the radar return of the Chinese fleet to select his point of aim and enter it in his fire control computer. A green light lit up on his control panel after three seconds.

"Firing data entered in the computer and missile trajectory calculated. Launching Missile Number One now!"

The launch of their first missile was actually not very impressive visually, as it was simply ejected at low speed from its launch rail and rose above the spaceplane floating in orbit. The two-ton OGM-2N orbit-to-ground missile's solid-fuel retro-rockets then lit up when it was a good fifty meters from the spaceplane. The retro-rockets burned for more than twenty seconds, cutting drastically the missile's orbital speed and making it reenter the first layers of the Earth's atmosphere. The empty retro-rockets were then ejected away before the friction with the atmosphere started heating up the nose shield of the big, squat missile. The OGM-2N was actually the second generation of American orbital strike missile and was much improved over its predecessor, the OGM-1N, the biggest improvements being in its electronic sensors and guidance components. In truth, while all of the models of aircraft and missiles developed and introduced by Ingrid Dows in the early 1950s were still in service and going strong, their electronics had been vastly improved over twenty years, with successive retroactive refits giving both brand new lives and much better mission performances to those original planes and missiles. Engines had also been improved, but to a much smaller degree.

Now firmly inside the stratosphere, the big missile followed a pre-calculated trajectory towards the surface, using its inertial guidance system and a number of small liquid propellant rocket thrusters to maneuver it. While still in hypersonic gliding mode, the nose heat shield separated away, uncovering the radar and infrared guidance sensors. However, those sensors were activated only once the missile had arrived at a certain distance from the intended target point, taking over the active piloting of the missile from the inertial guidance package. The image formed by the missile's radar antenna was then compared to the radar image of the Chinese fleet taken from orbit by

the METEOR, a process called image-correlation. Being still a fair distance away from the Taiwanese coast and being alone by itself on its corner of ocean, the radar image of the Chinese invasion fleet was an unmistakable one for the missile's guidance package, with the OGM-2N steering straight for the center of mass of the fleet while lighting up its cruise ramjet engine, in order to keep its speed to over Mach three. With the American missile falling from the sky at high supersonic speed, the Chinese sailors and soldiers of the invasion fleet couldn't hear it approach, while its visual signature was limited to a short blue exhaust flame behind it. The short-range radars of the Chinese ships, the biggest of which were only of destroyer size, did not give more than a few seconds of warning to the Chinese fleet commander that something was approaching before the missile's thermonuclear warhead detonated a mere hundred meters above his flagship. The initial flash of the two-megaton explosion incinerated instantly the ships and boats situated within a few hundred meters of ground zero, while the men on the ships further away were horribly burned or blinded by the thermal flash. They were also bathed by a shower of intense radiations, basically condemning the occupants of the fleet to eventual death, with their distance from ground zero deciding how long they would live. The overpressure blast wave, reinforced by the airburst mode of the explosion, then swept over the collection of small warships and commercial boats, either caving in their hulls, overturning them or ripping off parts of their superstructures.

Aboard the METEOR, Major Roosa looked again into the viewing lens of his spy camera once the flash of the explosion had dissipated, to check what was left of the Chinese invasion fleet. What he saw made a mean grin appear on his face.

"Exit one Chinese invasion fleet. There are barely a few dozen ships left on the surface, with most of those clearly listing and in big trouble. Those Commies won't represent a threat to Taiwan anymore after this. Pass the word to Vandenberg, James, along with a camera snapshot of what's left of the Chinese fleet."

"Right away, Major."

"What next, Stuart?" then asked Geena Armstrong, making Roosa think for a short moment before he answered her.

"We stay on this orbit and stand ready to deliver more candies to the Chinese if needed. We will also keep an eye out for any other possible Chinese fleet approaching Taiwan."

In the White House Situation Room, the successive news of the successful strikes against the Chinese fleet and the cities of Beijing and Shanghai, while raising cheers from some, also brought a somber mood to many, including Robert Kennedy and Ingrid Dows. Ingrid in particular was most affected by the strikes on Beijing and Shanghai: she couldn't help grieve for the millions of innocent Chinese civilians who had just died or would soon die because of the stupidity and thirst for power of their leaders. At least, most of those leaders would now be dead and unable to cause more mayhem and destruction. Kennedy finally looked at the other participants around the conference table.

"Lady and gentlemen, we now have to ask ourselves this: what do we do next? Do we continue hitting China hard? Do we wait to see what China will do after this?" Ingrid hurried to jump in before others could, looking straight into Robert Kennedy's eyes as she spoke forcefully.

"Continuing to hit China, especially if we do it with nuclear weapons, may just draw the Soviet Union into this crisis and force it to side with what is the other major Communist power in the World, Mister President. On the other hand, waiting for China to do the next move would be problematic, for two reasons. First, I wouldn't be surprised to learn that the majority of the national level leaders in China are now dead, thanks to our nuclear strikes on Beijing and Shanghai. We thus may very well see only chaos, indecision and uncoordinated responses by regional military leaders for the next few days, a state I would consider as very dangerous for us. Second, we know that the Chinese still have a number of medium range ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads in their inventory, missiles based inside reinforced launch silos and which could be launched by whoever still commands or who will take command in China in the next hours and days. While I am against more nuclear strikes on China for the moment, I would strongly counsel that the remaining Chinese nuclear missiles be taken out as soon as possible by precision airstrikes using conventional warheads. That way, the Soviets won't have an excuse to jump into this crisis on the side of China. We also should hunt and sink all the remaining Chinese warships, be they in port or at sea, to prevent any second attempt at invading Taiwan. My spaceplanes are already in good positions in orbit to do a detailed reconnaissance of the Chinese ports and of the East China Sea and South China Sea, to spot the remaining Chinese warships. Finally, we should start a large-scale rescue effort to help the Taiwanese hit by Chinese nuclear missiles."

Heads nodded at once all around the table, with Admiral Zumwalt speaking next.

"I strongly agree with General Dows' recommendations, Mister President. We must eliminate quickly the remaining Chinese nuclear missiles as well as what's left of the Chinese Navy before they could use them for further attacks."

"My squadron of B-50 heavy supersonic bombers based in the Philippines can react quickly and strike with precision missiles the Chinese missile launch silos, Mister President." added General George Brown, the head of the Air Force. "Just give the word and it will be done."

Robert Kennedy nodded his head at once.

"Launch your bombers at once, General Brown! Also, have the remainder of your combat aircraft based around China sink on sight any Chinese warship or submarine they will find. The same goes for your fleet, Admiral Zumwalt: sink what's left of the Chinese Navy!"

"With pleasure, Mister President!"

"Do you have tasks for my army units in the Pacific, Mister President?" asked General Creighton Abrams, suddenly feeling a bit sidelined by the Navy and Air Force.

"Definitely, General! Assemble all your available NBCW⁵ units and get them to Taiwan, to help the local authorities respond to the disasters which struck Taipei and Taoyuan. However, make sure that your units understand that they will be there to help the locals, not to take control over them. We will also need to send as much medical help and disaster relief aid to Taiwan as we can. Let's show to the World that we take care of our allies in times of need."

"Understood, Mister President."

"Then, I believe that I can let you all return to your respective command centers, so that you can disseminate all the necessary orders. This meeting is thus over!"

As the other participants to the meeting were getting up from their chairs and were leaving the room, Ingrid stayed in her seat and picked up again the receiver of the secure telephone provided to her station, then punched in the number for the operations center at Vandenberg Space Base, where she asked for Gertrude Meserve. Her old comrade and friend came on the line after only a few seconds of waiting.

"Yes, Ingrid?"

⁵ NBCW: Nuclear, Bacteriological and Chemical Warfare.

“Gertrude, the President has just called an end to the emergency meeting at the Situation Room. He has ordered that the remaining Chinese nuclear ballistic missiles and all surviving Chinese warships be destroyed, using guided missiles with conventional warheads. The use of nuclear warheads by us is thus suspended until contrary notice from the President. Also, the Air Force and the Navy will take care of the Chinese missiles and warships. On the part of our command, I want the spaceplanes already in orbit to stay up and keep covering China and the Taiwan Strait, along with the East China Sea and the South China Sea. Our three spaceplanes on photo-reconnaissance mission will look on a priority basis for Chinese warships which are either in port or at sea, plus will watch closely for any Chinese heavy bomber activity. If any such activity or presence of a warship is detected, then that information is to be passed on an urgent basis to the NMCC at the Pentagon. As for our two spaceplanes armed with nuclear missiles, they are to stay in orbit, ready to retaliate on order to any further use of nuclear weapons by the Chinese. Any questions about that, Gertrude?”

“No! Your directives are quite clear, Ingrid. Are you going to stay in Washington for the moment?”

“Yes! President Kennedy may ask for more advice from me, so I intend to stay at the Pentagon and command from there, where the President can get me quickly. Normally, I would be working on setting up our new Space Corps, but this crisis has priority over that.”

“I understand, Ingrid. Let’s hope that this conflict will be over soon.”

“I hope so too! Too many innocent people have already died during those short few hours. Thank the crews of our spaceplanes on my part for a job well done.”

“Will do! Have a good day, Ingrid.”

“I will try.” replied Ingrid, her tone not very convincing. She then hung up and sighed audibly: her interrupted sleep was now starting to catch with her and she felt quite fatigued. However, the next few hours could prove crucial, so returning to her hotel room now was not an option.

14:33 (China Time) / 03:33 (Washington Time)

American consulate, Hong-Kong (British Territory)

Hien, like the other people present in the staff lounge of the American consulate in Hong-Kong, was rivetted to the television set tuned to the BBC News channel, which

had started reporting on the nuclear strikes on Taiwan and on the American retaliatory strikes against China. However, unlike the others, who lived and worked in Hong-Kong, she had been directly affected by the awful news about Taiwan: not only was her home in Taipei gone, along with the embassy where she had worked, but her work colleagues, her friends and her neighbors were all likely dead by now or dying. Right now, her only consolation was that she had been able to pass the info that she was safe and sound to her adoptive mother. She gasped when the BBC newscaster showed on the screen an overhead picture of Taipei released by the American government. A low definition photo taken by a commercial satellite, it showed most of Taipei City flattened and blackened, while the surrounding areas had obviously suffered severely, with fires burning all over the place. Tears came to her again when she understood that the district where she had lived and worked was actually very close to the epicenter of the explosion: chances of having survivors in that part of the city were basically zero. The overhead picture of Taipei was still being shown when the American consul general entered the lounge and switched off the television set before addressing the crowd in the room in a somber voice.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I have just received some instructions from the State Department concerning the awful tragedy which struck Taiwan earlier today. Since a state of effective war now exists between the United States and China, the Secretary of State has ordered all non-essential diplomatic personnel, along with all the family members of the State Department employees present in Hong Kong and Macao, to be evacuated back to the United States. To effect this, a transport plane will soon be sent here to evacuate the said personnel, along with other American citizens present in Hong-Kong. That plane should arrive in about six hours. However, space aboard will be limited, so severe limits will be imposed on the amount of luggage you will be allowed to bring onboard. A maximum of two suitcases and one carry-on bag with a maximum total weight of fifty pounds per person will thus be allowed. Those who will leave can now go home and pack their bags. Be back here at the consulate in five hours. Buses will then carry you to the airport. Go now and don't waste time.”

As the people in the lounge started to leave, the consul walked to Hien and gave her a compassionate look.

“Miss Dows, I am truly sorry for all that you lost. Since your diplomatic post has now ceased to exist, you are also to be repatriated to the United States, along with our non-essential personnel.”

"But...I speak fluent Mandarin and Cantonese, on top of Vietnamese, German and French, sir. I surely could be useful here, to help handle all the requests for help or information from American citizens and other foreigners present in Hong-Kong, sir."

"Miss Dows, I can only admire your dedication to duty in such awful circumstances, but you should return to the safety of the United States while you can. To be frank, I am not sure how safe this consulate will be in the next few days and weeks, when pictures of bombed out Beijing and Shanghai will start being shown to the local public. Our relations with the British were already only lukewarm before this nuclear exchange and the Communist Chinese may well put some pressure on the British concerning us."

"Please, let me stay and be useful here, sir. I don't want to feel like a simple weight."

"You won't be a simple weight in Washington, Miss Dows: a paragraph in the instructions sent by the State Department directly concerned you: they want your language and cultural expertise over there, as the Washington's China section is already being swamped by the scale of this crisis. Please, go back to your hotel and pack your bags: you will be more useful in Washington than in here, believe me."

Hien sadly lowered her head but didn't object further.

"Very well, sir. I will go pack my bags."

"Good!" said the consul while gently patting her shoulder. "Thank you for your cooperation...and for your dedication."

The consul then walked out of the lounge as Hien slowly got up from her chair to leave, her mind in turmoil.

06:59 (Washington Time)

Monday, December 10, 1973 'C'

Arrival terminal, Washington International Airport

Washington, D.C.

Hien still felt morose and depressed when her Boeing 717 landed in Washington. The friends and colleagues whom she had lost in Taiwan were still in her head and probably would be for a long time to come. Her morale however went sharply up when she spotted a female figure in U.S. Air Force uniform waiving enthusiastically at her from the observation gallery of the arrival hall. Once she had passed through the immigration

and customs controls and recuperated her luggage, she nearly ran out of the arrival section and into the visitors waiting lounge, where she threw herself in the waiting arms of her adoptive mother.

"My God, you can't know how happy I am to see you again, Mom!"

"And being able to greet you here this morning truly makes my day, Hien. Let me hug you tight for a moment."

They stayed glued together for long seconds before separating and looking at each other. Ingrid was the first to speak then.

"I nearly went mad with grief when I heard that Taipei had been nuked by the Chinese. It is a near miracle that you just happened then to be on an assignment in Hong-Kong."

"Yes, but only one more member of our embassy happened to be away from Taipei at the time. All the others are now officially dead or missing."

Seeing tears appear in Hien's eyes, Ingrid hugged her again while speaking gently in her ear.

"They will be honored and remembered, Hien. Where were you going to stay in Washington?"

"I don't know yet, Mom. A State Department official is supposed to be here at the airport to collect us and bring us by bus to a hotel near the State Department's building. I was then to present myself at the China Section of the department, where I am going to work for the time being."

"Why not use my room at the Hay-Adams instead? It stands empty more than half of the time and I certainly won't object at having you near me when I sleep. Let's go find your official, so that I could speak with him."

Finding the official in question was not hard, nor did it take long, as he was busy shouting above the crowd in the visitors' lounge and waving a sign in order to assemble around him the people arriving from Hong-Kong. With a good forty people already surrounding the young man, Ingrid had to push gently her way to him, arriving near him with Hien at her back.

"Excuse me, mister. You do have a Miss Hien Dows on your list of people to greet here?"

The young man, like most people nearby, couldn't help stare at Ingrid's young face and her four stars on her uniform.

"Uh, let me check my list, General... Yes, I do have a Hien Dows listed."

"Good! She is my daughter and I wish to offer her the hospitality of my room at the Hay-Adams Hotel, instead of her lodging at the hotel assigned by the State Department. I will drive her myself to the State Department afterwards."

"Uh, in that case, I don't see a reason not to allow this, General. The Hay-Adams Hotel, you said?"

"Yes! Room 412, under the name of General Ingrid Dows."

The mentioning of her name made the young official flash a smile at Ingrid.

"General Dows? The leader of our Mars expedition?"

"That's correct! At what time is Hien expected to show up at the State Department?"

"At ten this morning, after she takes the time to unpack in her hotel room."

"Then you can tell your superior that she will be there at ten. Follow me, Hien!"

The young man, from enthusiastic, became confused when he saw the apparent age of Hien, who looked at least as old as Ingrid. He however had the common sense not to ask her about that in public and let them walk away. A graying diplomatic senior secretary known for her arrogance and narrow views however showed much less discretion and spoke aloud in a derisive tone.

"A mother and daughter, really? Make that a couple of lesbians!"

Unfortunately for the senior secretary, she had a strong voice, while Ingrid had a very sensitive ear. The secretary suddenly found herself nose to nose with an irate Ingrid, who jabbed her right index into the woman's chest.

"You insult me again in public, miss, and you will have to explain yourself to the Secretary of State, who attended a White House meeting with me yesterday. Understood?"

Cold sweat appeared at once on the forehead of the secretary, who felt her knees wobble.

"Uh, sorry, General!"

"You better be!" replied Ingrid, giving her a last hard look before walking away. More than one other diplomat present in the hall who had witnessed the scene smiled to themselves, happy to have seen that old bitch being put back in her place. Smarting over the remonstrance from Ingrid, the senior secretary took hold of her baggage cart and followed the rest of the group in silence.

17:15 (China Time)

Thursday, December 13, 1973 'C'

Communist Chinese Party secret jail

Kunming, China

The small, 69-year-old man wearing a stained and wrinkled gray Mao suit and sitting on the hard bench of a tiny cell had fully expected to be executed sooner or later. He was thus not surprised to hear steps approach his cell well before the time for his meager supper was due. His fears solidified when a Red Army officer from the Political Department stopped in front of the steel bars of his cell, holding a pistol in one hand and with an armed guard at his back. The officer, one of his guards in this secret jail run by the Party, looked down at him with a mix of contempt and disdain while speaking in a cold voice.

"Comrade Deng, the time has come for you to pay for your bourgeois conduct and your promiscuity with those Western Capitalists."

The officer then raised his pistol, pointing it at Deng Xiaoping. The latter, still sitting on his bench and even denied the dignity of a firing squad, closed his eyes instinctively just before a loud detonation resonated around the cell block. Not feeling any impact or pain, Deng opened his eyes and saw that the officer was now lying on the concrete floor of the hallway, his brains blown out. The armed guard who had accompanied the officer actually had his rifle at the ready, smoke coming out of its muzzle. The guard then grabbed a set of keys and started unlocking Deng's cell door.

"Follow me quickly and quietly once out of your cell, Comrade Deng: we don't have much time."

"What is happening?" could only ask the stunned ex-Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party as he got up from his hard bench.

"I will explain later, Comrade Deng. Right now, we have to leave this jail before the other guards can understand what is happening with you."

Forcing himself to be patient, Deng followed his savior down the corridor, soon emerging into the small guardroom at the end of it. There, he found two armed guards he had not seen before, standing over the bodies of two other guards lying in pools of blood. The three guards then led Deng through a side door which got them inside a stairwell, where they climbed down two levels of stairs before pushing open a thick wooden door. The four men then found themselves outside, in a courtyard plunged into the darkness of the

evening. A military car with a driver inside was waiting in the courtyard. Deng's savior pushed him inside, on the rear bench of the vehicle, then sat inside as well with the other two guards. As the driver started rolling, the guard who had saved Deng twisted his head to look at the old Party boss.

"There is a counter-coup in progress against the traitors who deposed you, Comrade Deng. Those idiots compounded their treachery with utter stupidity and struck Taiwan with nuclear missiles, at the same time as they launched an improvised invasion of Taiwan. The Americans, contrary to what those stupid generals wanted us to believe, did come to the help of their allies in Taiwan and retaliated...hard and fast. I am pained to have to inform you that both Beijing and Shanghai are no more, obliterated by American nuclear missiles, while our Navy and Air Force are being pounded from the air and systematically demolished."

Deng had to close his eyes on hearing about Beijing and Shanghai.

"Those irresponsible idiots! They could well cause our revolution to fail, and this after all the sacrifices our people accepted to go through with it."

"Well, those idiots may pay very soon for their crimes, Comrade Deng: the few of them who actually survived the destruction of Beijing and Shanghai are now facing the wrath of those younger officers to whom they lied to. With luck, you should be back in power by next week, Comrade Chairman."

08:54 (Washington Time)

Tuesday, December 18, 1973 'C'

Oval Office, the White House

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

Robert Kennedy's secretary barely had time to warn him by intercom that the Secretary of State wanted to see him before Edmond Muskie nearly ran into the Oval Office, a large smile on his face and a letter in one hand.

"Good news, Mister President: the Chinese are asking for an armistice and are ready to negotiate peace. The Soviet ambassador just brought me this letter from Chairman Deng Xiaoping."

While that news was effectively a good one, Robert Kennedy showed little joy on hearing it.

“They want an armistice now, after millions of innocents have died in what was basically a completely pointless war?”

“Well, if I can believe the Soviet ambassador, the nuclear strikes against Taiwan and the attempt at invading it was the work of a group of old-guard Red Army generals who had secretly deposed Deng Xiaoping in a coup. Younger Red Army officers and Communist Party officials, appalled by the senseless deaths and destructions of this war, then conducted a counter-coup and freed Deng Xiaoping from the jail where he was about to be executed. Deng is now back in power and is asking for peace, while presently purging the Red Army and the Communist Party of its more ‘reactionary’ elements.”

Kennedy took the letter offered by Muskie and opened it, reading it carefully before looking up at his visitor.

“Sounds like the kind of ruthless Communist Chinese I had come to know.” said Kennedy on a philosophical tone. “Well, I sure am not going to refuse such an opportunity to be able to put an end to this war. Tell the Soviet ambassador that the American forces will stop all offensive actions against China, starting at noon today, Washington time. Then, start arranging peace talks between us and the Chinese. Invite as well the Soviets as observers. That should further help thaw our relations with the Soviet Union.”

“Understood, Mister President! I will get on this right away.”

After the door had closed behind Muskie, Robert Kennedy allowed himself a triumphant raised fist. He then grabbed the receiver of his secure telephone and called the NMCC, at the Pentagon. He got an answer nearly immediately.

“Brigadier General Hanson, NMCC!”

“This is the President speaking. The Chinese just contacted us via the Soviets and are ready to talk peace. As a consequence, I want all our forces to suspend all offensive operations against China, starting at noon today, Washington time. Only defensive operations will continue for the moment. Lower our posture to DEFCON TWO at once, then disseminate my new directives to all our units.”

“Yes, Mister President!” replied Hanson, who couldn’t help let some joy show up in his voice. Kennedy hung up his receiver after that and sat back in his padded chair, deep in thoughts. Many in the United States, particularly in the Congress, were going to want to be tough on the Chinese during those future peace negotiations. Robert however remembered too well that the harsh conditions of the Treaty of Versailles,

which had ended the First World War, had directly contributed to the following Second World War. Now was not the time to be overly vindictive, especially since nuclear weapons had already been used on both sides, with plenty more nuclear weapons still in reserve.

CHAPTER 6 – GETTING ON WITH LIFE

08:22 (Washington Time)

Monday, December 24, 1973 ‘C’

Room 412, Hay-Adams Hotel

Washington, D.C.

U.S.A.

“Come on, Hien: time to wake up!”

“Uh? Why, Mom? I’m on vacation.”

“Because we are on the eve of Christmas and I want to show you something.” said Ingrid patiently while hovering above Hien, who was still tucked in bed. Hien finally reacted and started slowly to get out of bed, still sleepy.

“So, what is it that you want to show me, Mom?”

“Not here, Hien. What I want to show you is not in this hotel.”

“Could we at least take the time to have breakfast and get a cup of strong coffee first?”

“Of course, my dear daughter. Do take your coat once dressed, though: it is fairly cold outside.”

“Will do!” replied Hien while getting up on her feet. Ingrid then kissed her on the forehead while caressing her back.

“It is really nice to be together like this for some family time.”

“For me too, Mom. Are you going to stay in Washington for a while still, or will you need to return to Vandenberg soon?”

“I actually am in the process of moving my residence from Vandenberg to Washington: as the head of an independent armed service, I have to stay in Washington and work from the Pentagon in order to be able to attend the meetings of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and to answer requests by the President to show up at the White House. And you? How long will you be working out of the State Department’s headquarters?”

“I don’t know yet, but it will be for at the least another six or seven months, if not a lot more. Right now, there are no positions open around Asia for a junior cultural

attaché like me, while my bosses at Foggy Bottom⁶ appreciate a lot my linguistic abilities and don't want to let me go."

"I can understand them on that: good linguists are hard to come by in Washington these days, especially when it concerns Asian languages. You could actually make a good life for you here and have a stable residence."

"But I like to travel overseas, Mom! My dream right now would be to be posted to our embassy in Vietnam."

"And what if you get married? Will you stay in the Foreign Service? You know how hard it is to convince men to follow us around our jobs, rather than the other way around."

Hien audibly sighed at that last sentence.

"I know, Mom, but I am not ready yet to chain myself to a husband's career. There is so much of the World to see."

"I fully understand you on that, Hien. I may have had the right to marry and have children since nearly twenty years now, but I am effectively married to my plane...or spaceship. I just can't see myself become a simple housewife, not after all that I have accomplished and what I still want to accomplish. If anything, my idea of a perfect death would be for it to happen at the commands of a plane or in Space."

"Please, don't talk about your death: I will be heartbroken when it will eventually happen. That is, if I manage to live longer than you: at the incredibly slow rate you appear to age, I may very well die of old age well before you do. How long exactly could you live? Did Natai tell you before she left, once I became an adult?"

Ingrid thought for a moment about the angel who had helped her as Hien's nanny, protecting both Hien and her until five years ago before returning to Jerusalem 'B', where she was still reigning as Queen of Jerusalem and Overseer of Palestine.

"She did not tell me, but I have the feeling that I will be around for quite a while. The Air Force doctors who examine me regularly are pulling their hair out trying to understand what is happening with my body. On the other hand, my dates have no objections at all about my apparent eternal youth."

Hien couldn't help giggle at those words: Ingrid liked sex a lot, with both men and women, but still had to hide her relations with women because of the anathema about lesbianism and bisexuality which still existed in the American armed forces.

⁶ Foggy Bottom: Nickname given to the headquarters of the American State Department, due to its proximity to the Washington neighborhood of the same name.

"You know, sex might be your eventual downfall, especially in a town like Washington. One paparazzi photo taken of you with the wrong partner could be enough to ruin your military career. Talking of your career, aren't you due for mandatory retirement in four or five years?"

"Normally I would, but President Kennedy signed an executive order exempting me from the mandatory retirement age, due to my very special ability to stay young. So, I will be able to serve as long as doctors keep declaring me fit for service. The one thing I eventually hope for is to be able to hold a grandchild in my arms."

Hien smiled and looked up at Ingrid then.

"Well, that could happen one day, but you will have to be a bit patient, time for my urge to travel to calm down. Now, give me a few minutes and I will be ready to go down with you to the hotel's dining room for breakfast."

The two of them ended up going down to the hotel's dining room some ten minutes later, where they had a light breakfast before putting on their winter coats and going out in the parking lot of the Hay-Adams. Hien opened her eyes wide at the sight of the bright red Pontiac Trans Am 1974 to which Ingrid led her.

"You changed your rental car?"

"What rental car? I bought myself a Christmas gift: a Pontiac Firebird Trans Am with an SD455 V-8, 310 horsepower engine. Since I had accumulated a good two years of unspent pay while on my mission to Mars, I was easily able to buy it cash. So, what do you think of it?"

"It is magnificent! I see that the demon of speed is still in you."

"And will be forever! Hop in!"

Hien wasted no time in sitting in the well-padded, leather-covered passenger's bucket seat, then buckled her seat belt as Ingrid started the engine in a mighty roar, making more than one head around the parking lot turn towards the fiery red muscle car.

"With a car like this, you will be a magnet for highway patrol policemen, Mom."

"Pah! If I get stopped, I will simply use my charms to make them forget that they saw me. Besides, I may like speed but I am not simply a maniac: just a reasonable maniac." replied Ingrid before engaging her manual transmission and reversing out of her parking spot.

Ingrid actually proved to be a reasonable driver, mostly keeping to the posted speed limits and following smoothly the Washington's morning traffic while crossing the Potomac river and heading in the general direction of the Pentagon. They however skirted the gigantic building and headed instead into the small city of Arlington, next to the Pentagon. Hien got progressively more excited as they drove into an old familiar scenery.

"Are we going to pass by our old house on South Grove Street, Mom?"

"Yes, we are! I thought that you would like to see again the house in which you spent your first years in the United States."

"I definitely will like that, Mom."

After another six minutes of driving they arrived in sight of a comfortable-looking two-level bungalow with garage located in front of a park and playground and flanked by other bungalows. Hien felt her heart jump in her chest at the sight of the house in which she had grown as a young girl. She had expected Ingrid to simply slow down or stop once in front of the house but, instead, her adoptive mother drove onto the paved driveway of the garage and parked there, shutting the engine. Hien was about to ask what were her intentions when she saw the real estate sign planted on the lawn, with a large sticker saying 'sold' on it. She snapped her head around at her now smiling mother.

"YOU BOUGHT BACK OUR OLD FAMILY HOUSE?"

"Yes, I did, Hien. We know that it is a nice house and it is close to the Pentagon, where I work. It previously belonged to a diplomat who was suddenly posted overseas a month ago, in order to plug a hole created by the sudden death of another of our diplomats. When I saw that opportunity, I simply could not pass over it and bought it...cash! It is now our family home, again."

Overjoyed, Hien bent sideways to hug Ingrid, who happily return her hug.

"I love you, Mom! Thank you for buying back our old house."

"It was my pleasure, Hien...and a pleasure for me as well. I always liked this house and what it meant for both of us. You want to tour it?"

"Of course, Mom!"

Both of them stepped out of the car, with Ingrid taking a set of keys out of one pocket once in front of the entrance door. She unlocked it and pushed it open, then stepped aside to let Hien pass first.

"After you, my dear daughter."

Hien felt utter joy as she entered the house and looked around her. It was immediately evident that there had been prior occupants, as the walls were not painted the same colors as what she remembered of her old home. However, the new colors were in good taste and she certainly could live with them. Walking slowly around the ground floor, she visited in succession the large living room, the dining room, the kitchen, the laundry room and a bathroom, then climbed the varnished wooden staircase leading to the upper floor. There, she visited the three large bedrooms, the private study and the large bathroom, which were all empty of furniture.

"When are you expecting to get your furniture from Vandenberg, Mom?"

"In about ten days, once the New Year holiday will be over. In the meantime, I will buy new furniture sets for the master bedroom and the living room, plus a full kitchen set of accessories. My official residence in Vandenberg included kitchen and dining room sets of wares which belong to the Air Force, so I could not have them packed for moving. This will give me a chance to reequip our house to a brand-new standard."

"And your collection of old weapons and armored suits?"

"Packed and soon on its way to Washington. You really think that I would have thrown away my medieval armors and antique weapons? They represent too much for me, and I don't mean in terms of money."

"I know! You were always passionate about what they remind you about your past incarnations. The only thing missing then from our old house will be Natai."

"Who said that I won't be around this house again?" said a female voice which made both Hien and Ingrid snap their heads around, to see a young and extremely beautiful Semitic woman now standing in the middle of the empty main bedroom. She wore an embroidered silk dress of classic Arabic design, plus a gold tiara and jewels worthy of a royalty, which Natai was. Hien immediately ran to her old guardian angel to hug her with passion.

"NATAI! I am so happy to see you again! Will you actually stay with us in this house?"

"No! However, if you ever need me, you will just need to think about me and call me mentally and I will then appear to you. To see you two back in this particular house is truly nice to me. The One is happy as well about this."

Hien nodded her head and bowed respectfully at that mention of the prodigiously powerful spiritual entity to which Natai was an integral part, on top of acting as its divine envoy.

"And I thank The One for all that he did for me and Ingrid."

"The One wishes for you two to be happy again in this house for the next few years. Have a merry Christmas and a happy New Year, my friends."

Natai then faded into nothingness, leaving Hien and Ingrid alone in the bedroom. Hien sighed heavily while staring at the spot where Natai had been.

"I missed her so much. Well, I suppose that, now that we have a house, I will have to buy a car in order to travel between here and my work."

"Hold on to your horses, Hien: I have something else to show you. Follow me."

Curious and half-guessing what Ingrid wanted to show her, Hien followed her down the stairs. Her suspicions were reinforced when Ingrid opened the door linking the living room with the garage. Still, she opened her mouth wide at the sight of the brand-new Ford Mustang 1974 sitting in the garage.

"Oh my God! You didn't!"

"Yes, I did! This car is now yours. Here are the keys."

Taking the keys offered by Ingrid, Hien then slowly turned around the royal blue sports coupe with electric opening sunroof, admiring it from various angles. The coupe was a model which had a rear bench seat, making the car a four-seater.

"That's for the time when you will have a family to transport." explained Ingrid, smiling.

"It is beautiful! You shouldn't have!"

"And why not? I wanted to give you a Christmas gift, so here it is. Sorry that it didn't come gift-wrapped."

"It will do just fine the way it is, Mom. Thank you so much!" said Hien, going to Ingrid to hug and kiss her on both cheeks, with Ingrid returning her kisses.

"How could I not spoil a bit such a sweet daughter as you, Hien."

CHAPTER 7 – AD ASTRA

07:21 (Washington Time)

Monday, January 7, 1974 ‘C’

Pentagon parking lot

Arlington, Virginia

U.S.A.

The passage of the fiery red Pontiac Firebird Trans Am, along with its powerful engine's roar, made a lot of heads turn among the military and civilian personnel arriving at the Pentagon to start their day shift. The muscle car then went to park in one of the spots reserved for the general officers belonging to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Those now staring with envy at the car then switched their attention to Ingrid when she stepped out of her Trans Am, wearing a type of uniform never seen before by them. Since the weather this morning was relatively mild for the season, she had not put on her winter coat, instead carrying it in one hand while carrying a briefcase in her other hand. That allowed the onlookers to have a better look at her dark blue uniform, composed of shiny black boots rising to her calves, close-fitting dark blue trousers molding her legs and buttocks, with black sidebands along the outer sides of the legs and with the bottoms tucked inside her boots, plus a double-breasted dark blue vest with black panels covering the upper chest and back area and a dark blue Robin Hood-style hat with white, red and gold trimmings. The cut of the vest, which contoured closely her torso and enhanced her chest, was further underlined by a large shiny black leather belt with silver buckle, from which was suspended over her left hip a large female black leather purse with silver trimming. Two Air Force enlisted women close by held their breath while saluting Ingrid, who was now walking towards one of the access points of the Pentagon. The younger one spoke in a near whisper to her friend once Ingrid was far enough away not to hear her.

“Did you see that uniform? It's gorgeous! I would kill to be able to wear such an outfit at the office.”

“There will be a lot of male tongues hanging out at her passage, Mary: that uniform sure enhances her body curves. It also looks like it comes straight out of some

science-fiction movie. I can't wait to hear the small talk around the Pentagon at the end of this day."

The military policemen manning the access control point of the huge building did their best not to stare at Ingrid as she showed her security pass and walked in while being saluted. One young corporal however couldn't resist staring at her buttocks, well molded by her trousers made from stretchable cotton-spandex fabric, as Ingrid was walking away.

"Wow, what an ass!" he whispered to himself, making his sergeant give him a warning look.

"Watch what you say about a four-star general, Corporal."

That MP sergeant then stared himself at Ingrid's bum.

"But you are right. What an ass indeed!"

After walking the close to 250 meters of corridors separating the access point from the offices of her command, Ingrid stopped briefly to watch three civilian workers in the process of replacing the old Military Space Command emblem fixed over the entrance to her offices with the new United States Space Corps emblem, on which figured prominently the Latin moto 'Ad Astra'.

"To the stars! A fitting moto indeed for the Space Corps." said Ingrid to herself before entering the section housing the offices of her command. As in the sections of the Pentagon through which she had just gone, her uniform made her own command personnel stare at her, while all work stopped on her passage. Smiling to the men and women now looking at her, Ingrid stopped and spoke out loud.

"IF I MAY HAVE EVERYBODY'S ATTENTION FOR A MOMENT, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN. PLEASE GATHER AROUND ME."

She soon had over forty men and women forming a semi-circle around her, all of them still wearing Air Force uniforms.

"Ladies and gentlemen, what you see now is the female version of the new going-out uniform the personnel of our Space Corps will soon wear. The male version will be quite similar, except that the belt will not support a purse. To turn this going-out uniform into our new parade uniform, you will only need to pin your medals over their medal ribbons sewn on the left breast of the vest, plus will either suspend a parade dagger to the belt in the case of NCOs and enlisted personnel, or put on a sash

supporting a ceremonial sword in the case of officers. To switch to office or relaxed dress, you will simply need to do this.”

Ingrid then removed her hat and belt, passing both to a nearby female staff sergeant, and undid the large front flap of her double-breasted vest, which was held by hidden pressure buttons. Next, she unzipped the long vertical zipper hidden under the front panel and took off her vest, also giving it to the staff sergeant. Her personnel were now able to clearly see the light blue short-sleeved shirt with open collar that she wore under the vest, with a sky-blue bow tie covering her open collar. The top of her trousers, now visible, consisted of a wide horizontal black elastic band of Spandex tissue which closely molded her waist and hips. That elastic band, over twenty centimeters in width, in turn supported two front pouches made of flexible black tissue and closed by zippers along their top edge.

“This will be our customary office dress here, ladies and gentlemen. The elastic waist band precludes the need to use a hard leather belt, while the two front pouches replace the usual trouser pockets. Men will wear a sky-blue ascot instead of the bow tie reserved for women. In Winter time, the going-out uniform is supplemented with a winter coat like the one I was carrying in one arm and by gloves. Both the hat and the boots can in turn be replaced by warmer cold-weather variants. I selected the fabric used in our new uniforms so that they would be rain and wrinkle-resistant and also be comfortable to wear. For tougher, dirtier work, we will also have both a dark blue utilitarian loose two-piece coverall and a camouflaged two-piece combat uniform. Both of those two last uniforms will be worn with laced, heavy-duty boots. Do you have any questions up to now on our new uniforms?”

Quite a few hands shot up at once, making her point a young female corporal.

“Yes, Corporal Singer?”

“The boots you are presently wearing have only slightly elevated soles, General. Does that mean that we won’t wear high-heel shoes anymore?”

“That’s correct, Corporal. High-heel shoes, like female skirts, will be a thing of the past in our new Corps.”

That announcement brought a chorus of cheers from the female staff members, making Ingrid smile before she pointed a male sergeant who had his hand up.

“You’re next, Sergeant!”

“Thank you, General! What about hot-climate environments, like in New Mexico and California, or Florida?”

“Aaah, a judicious question indeed! On top of our going-out, utilitarian and combat uniforms, we will also have a jungle/desert uniform, made of short pants with cargo pockets, a T-shirt, a pair of soft ankle boots and a baseball cap or wide-brimmed flexible jungle hat. To return briefly to our winter uniform, the going out short-sleeved shirt I am wearing can be either supplemented or replaced by a dark blue wool turtleneck sweater over a blue undershirt.”

“And when could we expect to be kitted out with those new uniforms, General?”

“Well, know that I performed a private demonstration of our new uniforms, with my official driver acting as the male model, in front of both Admiral Moorer and of the Secretary of Defense last Friday night, to gain their approval for them. They both liked our new uniforms, so I will be officially firing away this morning with your help mass production contracts for them. One last point: both the ranks we presently use and the various insignias we wear, which are from the Air Force, will stay the same, so no need for you to acquire expensive new sets or to sew new ranks on your uniforms.”

“General, what is the meaning of the words ‘Ad Astra’?”

“Ad Astra means in Latin ‘To the Stars’ and is the moto of our new Space Corps. I am sure that you will all make our Corps proud, ladies and gentlemen. Now, let’s get back to work, so that we could order our new uniforms as quickly as possible.” Ingrid did not have to repeat herself, as her men and women returned at once with renewed enthusiasm to their desks.

08:06 (California Time)

Thursday, January 10, 1974 ‘C’

Lockheed ‘Skunk Works’ Advanced Development Projects complex

Eastern side of the Burbank-Glendale-Pasadena Airport

Burbank, California

Clarence Leonard ‘Kelly’ Johnson had an instant smile on his face on seeing through a glass partition Ingrid approach his office inside the ‘Skunk Works’, the very special aerospace plant belonging to Lockheed and which he directed. Getting up from his desk, he quickly walked to his office door and opened it for Ingrid, shaking her hands as soon as she arrived at the door.

“Ingrid, it is so nice to see you again! I haven’t seen you in, what, three years?”

"You can blame my two-year trip to Mars for that, Kelly. I am in fact here for another space project in which you may well be interested."

"All of the projects you presented to us proved to be interesting, Ingrid. But please, take a seat. By the way, nice new uniform: you must have made a few of my male engineers drop their coffee cups on the way to my office."

That brought a malicious grin on Ingrid's face as she entered the office and went to sit in a padded chair near Kelly's work desk.

"You know that I always liked to attract men's attention, Kelly. This is the new regulation female going-out uniform for my new Space Corps."

"It is a truly nice uniform, quite futuristic too. I like it!"

"Thanks! What I have in mind for Lockheed as a project is the development of a successor to our SP-10 spaceplane. The SP-10 has served us in an outstanding manner for many years and is still doing so, but its design is now nearly twenty years old and it is due for a replacement. One of the main things I will want in a new design will be the ability to take off conventionally by itself from a normal airport and climb to orbit on its own power, without having to use a transporter aircraft to bring it to a high altitude first, like the SP-10 does. As you can imagine, such a single-stage-to-orbit spacecraft, or SSTO, will push our aerospace technology to its limit, but I already have a few ideas and possible solutions in mind for this project."

Kelly Johnson nodded his head once at her last words, knowing that she was not simply bragging: Ingrid held a Master's degree in aerospace engineering from the Boston's M.I.T. and had already participated in the development of many cutting edge technologies and aircraft designs, including the SP-10 spaceplane used by her command and in which she had become the first person ever to fly into Space and attain Earth orbit. She was also still the American 'Ace of aces', with a combat air kill score, accumulated during no less than five wars, which was not about to be equaled. She was thus the ultimate combination of designer and user of advanced aircraft and spacecraft.

"Your ideas are always welcomed here, Ingrid. So, what will be the main job of that new spaceplane? Insertion in orbit of large loads?"

"No!" replied Ingrid at once, surprising Kelly. "What I want is a space interceptor, or more exactly a multi-mission space fighter."

"A space interceptor?" nearly shouted the 63-year-old chief engineer. "Uh, tell me more, Ingrid."

“With pleasure, Kelly. Our new spaceplane, which I will name for the moment as the ‘SFX’, will be able to indeed carry a small compact payload into orbit, but orbiting payloads will only be a secondary mission for it. Its main mission will be as a quick-reaction space interceptor and strike craft, with a secondary mission of orbital rescue of stranded astronauts. Another mission will be strategic photo-reconnaissance, using both high-definition cameras and mapping radars. I have brought with me a number of preliminary sketches and notes I did on my spare time during my return trip from Mars. In that, I was helped greatly by the fact that half of my Mars crew was composed of highly skilled engineers and physicists. We had quite a few brain-storming sessions as a group on the subject of future space systems and you would be blown away by some of the ideas that came out of those sessions.”

Ingrid then took out of the briefcase she had been carrying a file marked ‘Top Secret’ and passed it to Johnson, who eagerly took it and opened it. He read quickly the four pages of notes and the accompanying half-dozen sketches and technical drawings before looking back at Ingrid with glinting eyes.

“This looks positively fantastic, Ingrid! Your project will truly revolutionize space travel.”

“Our project, Kelly.” corrected Ingrid. “I may be providing the basic concept, but you and your engineers will be the ones in charge of turning this into a concrete reality. Do you see any problem area right away?”

“No! While revolutionary, your concept uses a variety of technologies already in use by us and which we pretty well master. The only trick will be to assemble those technologies the right way and make them work together.”

“And how long before you think that you could produce a first prototype for testing?”

Johnson looked again at the sketches and specifications shown in the file before answering Ingrid.

“If we make this our top priority project, then I believe that we could have a first prototype ready for flight testing in two years, three at the most.”

“Excellent! I am in fact asking for top priority status for this project, with a contract premium to go with it. So, what do you think?”

“That Lockheed would be stupid not to sign such a contract, Ingrid. I will certainly push hard for the big bosses to accept that contract. Uh, may I ask a question?”

"Anytime, Kelly! What do you want to know?"

"Well, if this SFX project is not meant to place payloads in Earth orbit, then what will replace the SP-10 in that role? Or do you intend to keep the SP-10 in service for that?"

"I do want to get something better and more economical to use than the SP-10 in order to place payloads in orbit, but it will not be the SFX. I have another project for that, which I have already initiated and given to the research and development division of my Space Corps, in White Sands, New Mexico. I call it a 'mass driver' and it will basically be a giant, twelve-kilometer-long sky-jump launch ramp, which will use sets of electromagnets to accelerate a payload vehicle to over Mach 2 before launching it from the ground, allowing pure ramjet engines to then accelerate that payload vehicle and make it climb to altitude at very low cost. A reusable rocket booster integrated to the payload vehicle will then kick the payload into orbit. Right now, I am hoping that this method will cut the cost of launching payloads in low Earth orbit by a factor of at least five or six. That method will also allow the launching of very large or heavy payloads, since the payload will not be limited anymore by the lifting capacity of our C-2000 heavy transporters."

"Wow! You keep surprising me with your imagination, Ingrid. Be assured that we will have our arms wide open for you the day when you retire from military service." That made Ingrid smile in apparent appreciation.

"And I may just take you on that offer in a few years, Kelly. To work here at the Skunk Works would definitely be a nice way for me to switch to a civilian career. However, don't hold your breath in the meantime: I may still have a decade or more of service ahead of me, despite the desperate efforts of many other senior officers to get rid of me so that they themselves could rise in rank and take my place. In view of my unusual prolonged youth, President Kennedy already signed an executive order exempting me from the mandatory military retirement age limit."

Johnson stared at her in silence for a moment, then spoke in a soft tone.

"Ingrid, you know how many American women would be ready to kill to be able to stay young the way you do?"

"Just American women, Kelly? Hell, half of the World population is jealous of me because of that. Actually, it could be even more than that: I didn't count all the old male shmucks who would love to know the secret of my eternal youth."

"I know: I am one of those old male shmucks, Ingrid." replied Johnson in a humble tone, making Ingrid giggle.

16:14 (Vietnam Time)

Friday, January 25, 1974 'C'

Imperial Palace, Hue

Republic of Vietnam

While applauding like the others standing near Secretary of State Edmund Muskie and Chairman Deng Xiaoping, who had just signed a peace accord between their two countries, Hien felt a wave of pride and joy wash over her. As Muskie's personal choice as his translator for these peace talks, she had been able to play a role, however small, in putting an official end to a horrible war which had cost a total of more than eight million dead, plus untold millions of wounded and sick from radiations. Two decades ago, when asked by Ingrid near the radioactive ruins of Berlin what she wanted to become as an adult, she had answered that she wanted to become a diplomat, in order to help prevent or stop wars. Now, her wish had been fully realized and she couldn't possibly be prouder.

CHAPTER 8 – AN OLD ADVERSARY TURNED FRIEND

15:01 (California Time)

Wednesday, March 6, 1974 'C'

Arrivals terminal, Los Angeles International Airport (LAX)

California, U.S.A.



Lydia Litvyak, Hero of the Soviet Union, at age 22 in 1943 'A', during WW2. Killed in air combat over Ukraine in 1943, with 12 certified air victories to her credit.

Lydia Litvyak was a bit nervous as she was about to get to one of the immigration and customs booths at the passengers' arrival hall of the Los Angeles International Airport, more popularly known as 'L.A.X'. The relations between the United States and the Soviet Union may have been relatively cordial at the present time, with no serious points of discord between the two countries, but it was not very often that a Soviet Air Force colonel showed up for an official stay in the United States, especially while wearing a Soviet military uniform, unless he or she was an appointed diplomat attached to the Soviet embassy or one of the Soviet consulates across the United States. When her turn came at the booth, the petite, 52-year-old blonde with curly hair and blue eyes,

walked up to the wicket opening of the booth and presented her passport to the immigration officer while speaking in good but accented English.

“Good day, sir! I am coming to the United States to participate in an incoming international space mission. Someone from the U.S. Space Corps is supposed to meet me on arrival here.”

The immigration officer glanced briefly at her before looking at her passport and then typed something on his data terminal. He read quickly whatever appeared on his screen, then stamped her passport and gave it back to her.

“A notice has effectively been passed to us to expect your arrival, Colonel Litvyak. The liaison officer from the Space Corps is due to meet you at the customs counters, after you recuperate your luggage. Have a nice stay in the United States, Colonel Litvyak.”

“Thank you very much, sir.”

Feeling less stress now, Lydia, also familiarly known as ‘Lilya’, walked past the control booth and headed towards the luggage retrieval hall, situated under the arrival hall. There, she retrieved her two suitcases from the luggage carousel assigned to her flight, putting them on a luggage cart which she then pushed towards the lineup of customs checks counters. To her relief, a female American officer wearing the very distinctive and futuristic dark blue and black uniform of the United States Space Corps was plainly visible behind one of the counters, holding a sign in Russian that said ‘Welcome, Colonel Litvyak’. Her relief turned to surprise as she approached the said counter and could better see the face of the officer: she looked definitely familiar to her but she couldn’t place her exactly from where or when she had seen her previously. Pushing her cart up to that counter, she spoke to the female officer, who was standing next to a customs officer and who wore the ranks of a lieutenant colonel.

“Good day! I am Colonel Lydia Litvyak. Did I see you somewhere before, Colonel?”

“You sure did, Colonel Litvyak!” replied the grinning tall woman, who looked to be about the same age as Lilya. “Lieutenant Colonel Julia Miller, U.S. Space Command. We met in Danang, Vietnam, during the 1952 Christmas party held there, when you and other captured Soviet aviators were invited to share tables with little Vietnamese orphans. In fact, I was at the time the radar and weapons officer for General Dows’ F-83 fighter-bomber.”

“And now?” asked Lilya, now smiling widely.

"Now, I am part of the designated Mars mission crew of the U.S.S. LIBERTY, the same mission you are due to participate in."

"And General Dows, is she going to also go on that mission?"

"Oh gosh, no! She is way too busy right now to leave Earth for over two years. Our Space Corps is still quite young and there are myriads of things to take care of and projects for her to complete. Well, we could discuss this further once we will be in my official car and on our way to Vandenberg. No need to show your belongings to the good customs officer here: things have been smoothed in advance by General Dows."

"That is much considerate of her, Colonel Miller. I hope that I will be able to meet her soon."

"Oh, you will, Colonel Litvyak. Follow me, please!"

With Lilya still pushing her luggage cart, the two women crossed the visitors' hall and went out of the building, to walk towards a big black official car bearing military plates. Lilya couldn't help smile with appreciation when she saw the very handsome military driver in Space Corps uniform waiting besides the staff car.

"Hmmm, did you choose your driver for his good looks, Colonel Miller? If he drives as well as he looks, then he probably would win a F-1 Formula race." Julia Miller giggled, amused by Lilya's remark, and designated with one hand the driver, who was keeping an impassive expression.

"This is Staff Sergeant John Bainbridge, General Dows' personal driver when she is in Vandenberg. She chose him, not me."

"I see! General Ingrid Dows has a rather, uh, sulfurous reputation in the Soviet Union, on top of being justly known there as a redoubtable combat pilot and as a strategic and tactical genius."

Julia Miller grinned while shrugging.

"Hey, she still has the body and face of a beautiful woman of twenty, despite being 48. Who could blame her for taking advantage of that?"

"I don't! In fact, me and most other Soviet women are deeply jealous and envious of her."

"And so are American women! Let's load your suitcases in the trunk and let's get going! We have a good 200 kilometers to do to get to Vandenberg. Once there, we will drop your suitcases in your assigned room, then we will go have supper at the officers' mess."

“Sounds like a plan!”

Two minutes later, the staff car pulled out of its parking spot and started rolling towards the nearest entrance to Highway 101, which followed the California coast. Taking that highway and heading North, the staff car first went through Los Angeles as Julia and Lilya conversed with each other. However, Julia quickly realized that Lilya had difficulties not being distracted by the various sights of Los Angeles, something that she could easily understand: despite the fairly good present relations between the two countries, the Soviet citizens who were able to visit the United States, or even non-communist European countries, were still a tiny minority in their country. Thus, Lilya’s curiosity about the United States was only natural. Julia then gently put one hand on Lilya’s right forearm.

“You know what, Colonel Litvyak? Why don’t we talk business only after going through Los Angeles? I know that you spent months as a prisoner of war in Fort Worth, back in the 1950s, but that didn’t give you any chance to properly see my country. Let me describe to you the points of interest along our route. Is there something in particular about Los Angeles that you heard about and that would be of interest to you?”

Lilya was left speechless for a couple of seconds by that unexpected show of personal consideration towards her. Soviet citizens were told from their youngest age to be suspicious of western capitalists. However, Julia’s question seemed to genuinely come from her heart.

“There is something that I read a couple of times, actually. As you may know, one thing that is most prized by Soviet citizens is to either possess or have access to a dacha, a secondary residence away from main cities which allows them to relax and spend some quiet vacation time in it. A popular alternative, especially for the less well-to-do citizens, is to spend some vacation time on the few beaches accessible to Soviet citizens. Unfortunately, due to our country’s geography, such beach areas are quite limited in numbers and are mostly situated in the Black Sea area. I was raised in Moscow, so never lived in sight of the sea. Los Angeles has a reputation for having nice beaches and I would love to be able to swim off one of those beaches on some fine day.”

Julia smiled at that small confession and spoke to the driver.

“Staff Sergeant Bainbridge, how much spare time do we have to arrive for supper at Vandenberg, if you hog the speed limit?”

“Oh, we would easily have a full hour to spare, Colonel.”

“Then, get off the highway at the next exit and let’s pass by the Santa Monica Beach. We may also stop there for a moment.”

“Understood, Colonel.”

“You really didn’t need to do this for me, Colonel.” started saying Lilya, but Julia stopped her with a hand gesture.

“Colonel Litvyak, you are here as a guest of the United States in order to participate in an international space mission with a purely peaceful goal. You will soon go on a two-year space trip, so showing you the Santa Monica Beach is the least of the things we could do for you. You probably don’t know this, but General Dows spoke to me quite a few times about you, mostly to tell me about your exploits in the air against the Nazis and about the fact that the Soviet Air Force started using female combat pilots quite early in World War 2.”

“Aaah, but you then have me at a disadvantage, Colonel Miller, as I know nothing about you.”

“That’s corrected easily enough. And why not use our first names while alone? We are two senior officers with only one rank of difference between us. Call me simply ‘Julia’.”

“Then, call me ‘Lilya’. So, what can you tell me about you, Julia?”

“Well, I signed in as a military aviator just after World War 2, with the specialty of radar officer. I was part of the 99th Composite Wing, an all-female unit at the time, during the Korean War. Then, when the first F-83 fighter-bombers were being delivered, I became radar officer on General Dows’ aircraft and fought with her during the Indochina War. I am sure that I won’t need to tell you much about that war, Lilya, as you lived through it, like me and Ingrid. After that, I continued serving as the radar officer for General Dows during the Palestine Conflict and the Eastern Europe War. When General Dows got transferred back to the United States and got put in charge of our space program, she asked for me to join her Military Space Command, which I gladly did, although in higher positions than simply as radar officer. My first flight in Space was in 1962, as part of the crew of a SP-10 spaceplane flying out of Vandenberg. I flew many missions on SP-10s and also became a qualified spaceplane pilot in the following years. Then, in 1968, I spent a year on the Moon, at our Moon Base Alpha, followed in 1970 by six months in orbit aboard the U.S.S. LIBERTY. Well, that’s about it for me.”

“Not bad! Not bad at all!” said Lilya, truly impressed. “On my part, when I was freed from Fort Worth at the end of the war in Poland, I was returned to the Soviet Union and was then posted to a fighter squadron based near Moscow. As you must already know, I was selected to be part of the first Soviet space crew, thanks to my minuscule weight, along with Yuri Gagarin, in time to be rescued by Ingrid Dows after our VOSTOK II spacecraft malfunctioned while in orbit in 1957. My next flight in Space occurred in 1962, when we launched into orbit our first orbital space station, where I spent eight months in orbit. Since then, I have flown another three times into Space, mostly to do tours aboard our MIR space station. As you can see, you have accumulated a lot more time in Space than me, Julia.”

“But that in no way diminishes your merit or competence, Lilya. Know this, but keep it to yourself for the moment: we will both be part of the crew of the Mars surface exploration crew which will land on the Red Planet during our mission. Ingrid wanted you to know that in advance.”

Lilya couldn't help push a happy yell on hearing that. She was going to be able to realize one of her most cherished dreams: to walk on Mars.

“Julia, you can't know how this makes me happy. Uh, do you know if other Soviet cosmonauts will be part of that Mars mission?”

“What? You weren't told?” replied Julia, appearing genuinely surprised and confused. “There are up to now fourteen other Soviets who will be aboard the U.S.S. LIBERTY with us. They are already in Vandenberg, getting familiarized with their mission equipment. I know that your government is paranoid about keeping secrets, but they could at least have told you that, no?”

To that, Lilya could only shrug in resignation.

“Well, that's the way we do things in the Soviet Union.”

Some 25 minutes later, thanks to the dense Los Angeles road traffic, the staff car finally came to a stop in one of the parking spots along the promenade bordering the Santa Monica Beach. Lilya, having spent many hours in a passenger plane, was happy to be able to get out and walk a bit, Julia Miller at her side. While it was still officially Winter, Lilya found the temperature quite warm, being around fifteen degrees Celsius, while a fresh breeze came from the sea and a few clouds dotted the sky. The fact that there were quite a few bathers on the beach surprised Lilya, who looked at Julia.

“Isn't the water a bit cold at this time of the year to go for a swim?”

"Not really, unless you are really sensitive to cold. The seawater temperature stays pretty much steady all year long, going from a low of fourteen to a high of twenty degrees Celsius."

"That would be considered warm water on the beaches of Crimea. At this time of the year, the water there is between four and ten degrees."

"Ouch! Do Soviets swim in such cold temperatures?"

Lilya gave Julia a sardonic look.

"Hey, we may be tough, but we are not polar bears. Yes, we could swim in such cold water, but it wouldn't be for fun. However, many of my compatriots would agree with the sea temperature here. Also, this beach looks fantastic. I love it!"

"Well, while we don't really have the time today to go for a swim, I promise you that we will come back here in a few weeks, before we leave for Mars. Knowing Ingrid, she will probably want to come swim with us: that will give her a chance to parade around in her tiny bikini outfit."

Lilya giggled on hearing that.

"Ah yes, her bikini... Pictures of her wearing it on the beach in Danang made it to the USSR, thanks to a French magazine. It created quite a furor...and made many Soviet men drool."

"Oh, it also created a furor here, Lilya. We still have plenty of prudish or hypocritical people around in the United States. On the other hand, I was told that she was most welcome on French beaches and in naturist clubs in Germany."

Lilya made a face while wriggling her hand.

"And she managed to spend two years in Space with a bunch of men without causing a riot aboard the ship?"

"Don't get me wrong, Lilya: Ingrid may take her fun seriously, but she can also be deadly serious when she needs to."

"Like during air combat?"

"Exactly!"

They strolled along the beach for another five minutes, until Julia decided that Lilya's Soviet uniform was starting to attract too much attention around the people using the beach. They thus returned to their staff car and drove back on Highway 101 towards Vandenberg, where they arrived after another two and a half hours on the road. As they were approaching the main gate of the base and slowing down, Lilya redoubled her

attention, registering everything of interest she could see. She may have been on a friendly cooperation mission but the GRU, the Soviet military intelligence service, was certainly going to want to debrief her on her return to the Soviet Union. The first thing that attracted her eyes were the guards at the gate: they were military policemen of the U.S. Space Corps but they were also wearing some intimidating-looking sets of body armor and helmets and were heavily armed. They also appeared to be very professional in their demeanor. As the staff car rolled to a stop just short of the gate's steel barrier, Lilya was able to better detail the outfits worn by the MPs. They wore what appeared to be bullet-resistant vests covered with many cargo pockets and pouches, plus wore helmets with visors which looked a lot more like motorcycle helmets than like military helmets. The MPs, some of which were women, also wore elbow and knee protectors and leather gloves with integrated steel knuckles. Their armament consisted of assault rifles, automatic pistols, bayonets and long black riot batons.

"Wow! Your MPs sure look quite intimidating, Julia."

"That's the way Ingrid likes it. Deterring an attack is often the best defense. Besides, this base contains a lot of highly classified equipment and data. And I am not even talking about the squadron of intercontinental ballistic missiles based here, something which is certainly not a secret for you Soviets. We are actually more worried about peace demonstrators and religious extremists trying to either block the access points of the base or infiltrate it."

One of the MPs then asked them their identity cards, with Julia making sure then to explain the presence of Lilya in the car. However, they were able to pass the gate promptly and without incident, allowing Lilya to ask a question to Julia in a surprised tone.

"Religious extremists? Why the hell would they want to cause trouble at an American military base?"

Julia sighed with visible frustration as she remembered what she had seen over a year ago.

"It all started when we publicly announced that life had been found on Mars by the crew of the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION. It apparently fired up hundreds of preachers and religious officials into calling us blasphemers and heretics because we supposedly contradicted and insulted their precious religious scriptures by claiming that there was life somewhere other than on Earth."

"The idiots! Can't they make a distinction between religion and science?"

"Apparently not!" said Julia philosophically.

After rolling for a few minutes inside the base, the staff car parked in front of the base administrative center, where Julia spent some twenty minutes to get a security pass, a room key and a meal card for Lilya, then went to a three-story accommodation complex attached to the base's officers' mess. Climbing the central staircase to get to the upper floor, Julia led Lilya to one of the doors lining the main hallway and unlocked the door, pushing it open and waving Lilya in.

"Your home for the next few months, Colonel. You have a mini-suite with private bathroom. I hope that it will be to your satisfaction."

Walking in and dropping her suitcases in the middle of the suite's living room, Lilya looked around her and felt satisfied at once: the place was comfortably furnished and appeared to be of relatively recent construction. It was certainly much better than the bland, shoddily-built and poorly furnished apartments given to cosmonauts and their families in Star City, the space center situated near Moscow and where cosmonauts lived and trained. There was both a television set and an AM/FM radio in the living room, plus a telephone, while a plush carpet covered the floor. Going into an adjacent room, she found a bedroom with large windows and a large closet, plus a telephone and a radio/alarm clock resting on a bedside table next to a large bed. Going out of the bedroom and exploring the rest of the suite, she found a fully-equipped bathroom, plus a closet near the entrance.

"Very nice indeed! All your officers are lodged on this same standard, Julia?"

"Senior officers." corrected Julia. "Junior officers have smaller suites, but they still have private bathrooms. Enlisted ranks have single rooms with a bathroom shared between two rooms. As for the married members, we have separate housing units for them on the base, complete with schools and daycare centers. The base has a small but well-equipped hospital, plus a small shopping center. There are also more shops and restaurants in the various agglomerations around the base. As a guest foreign officer from the Soviet Union, your pass will allow you to go mostly everywhere on the base, except of course in the sector containing our ballistic missile squadron. If you agree to it, we could now go to the Officers' Mess and have supper there."

"I won't mind that one bit, Julia. Lead the way."

Going down to the ground level but staying inside the building complex, the duo followed a series of hallways until they arrived at a large double door marked as the entrance to the officers' dining room. As Lilya had expected, her Soviet Air Force uniform attracted nearly immediate attention on her from the diners present in the large room, but those diners quickly enough returned their attention to their meal after staring at her for a second or two. Lilya then followed Julia to a table where a man and a woman in uniform were eating supper. The man wore the rank of brigadier general, while the woman wore the rank of major general. Julia stopped at attention next to the table and spoke to the female general.

"General Meserve, this is Colonel Lydia Litvyak, who arrived at LAX at three this afternoon."

Both generals rose to their feet, with Meserve offering her hand for a shake to Lilya.

"Welcome to Vandenberg Space Base, Colonel Litvyak. I am Major General Gertrude Meserve, commander of this base. This is Brigadier General James Mathison, who will command the U.S.S. LIBERTY during its mission to Mars. You will be under his command for that mission, Colonel Litvyak."

"Pleased to meet you, General. Be assured that I came to the United States in a spirit of cooperation and friendship. I also wish to thank the United States for seeking the cooperation of the Soviet Union for this international mission."

"Well said!" replied Meserve. "Have you eaten supper yet? If not, please sit down and join us, both of you."

Lilya and Julia promptly sat down at their table as Meserve waived to a mess steward. Lilya promptly received a menu which she then consulted with interest. Her eyes opened wide on seeing one particular item on the menu.

"You serve Beef Stroganoff here?"

"Tonight, at the least." replied Gertrude Meserve. "The menu varies every day and often includes international dishes. The same goes for the enlisted ranks cafeteria. General Dows insists on having a high quality of food served in the bases of her Space Corps, like she did when it was still the Military Space Command. You won't find typical army slop in our messes, Colonel."

"I can only applaud her attitude, General. I will certainly try your Beef Stroganoff, to see how good your cooks are with Russian cuisine."

"Oh, you will find that we have probably the best cooks in the American military, Colonel Litvyak."

Lilya and Julia promptly gave their orders to the steward, with Lilya then asking a question to Mathison.

“Do you have a firm departure date for the Mars mission, General?”

“An exact date, no! However, the next launch window for Mars, when it will be closest to Earth, will be in the August-September 1975 period. We thus firmly want to launch in that time period. We will have seventeen months to train and prepare for that mission, but those months will be quite busy, that I promise you.”

“And the goals for that mission, General? Will it simply repeat the first Mars mission, or will we concentrate on something else entirely?”

“We actually want to build on what the first mission led by General Dows found on Mars. We will thus land again most of our surface crew in the same portion of Capri Chasma, in the Valles Marineris, already explored by the first mission. The main goals of the mission, apart from doing a detailed exploration of the system of caves and underground aquifers found by General Dows, will include the building of a base inside the biggest of the caves found, where it will be well protected from the radiations raining constantly on Mars. For that, the U.S.S. LIBERTY will carry prefabricated modules which will allow the quick and easy construction of a substantial base on Mars. The LIBERTY will also carry aboard one of its attached cargo landers a mini-submarine which will be used to explore the underground lakes and rivers found by the first mission. Finally, two heavy rovers will land in other parts of Mars, in order to widen our exploration zone.”

Lilya, struck by those words, half-opened her mouth.

“But that would be a truly fantastic mission, General! I would certainly be most honored to be part of it.”

“So will I, Colonel. While the specialized equipment and modules for our mission are being built and then sent to orbit, we will have plenty of time to train you on the various space systems found aboard the LIBERTY. We have some very sophisticated training simulators and ground replicas that you will be able to use here to that effect.”

Most happy and satisfied, Lilya then grabbed her glass of water and raised it high.

“Then, I propose a toast to the success of our future mission. To Mars and back!”

“TO MARS AND BACK!”

CHAPTER 9 – PUSHING THE ENVELOPE

13:08 (California Time)

Thursday, May 8, 1975 'C'

Space Corps hangar, Muroc North

Muroc Air Test Center, California

U.S.A.

There was a fairly large crowd of civilians present in the big Space Corps hangar, including a number of reporters, press photographers and television camera crews, the lot supervised and controlled by a good number of Space Corps MPs. There were as well over twelve Secret Service agents present, as President Robert Kennedy was in attendance. Ingrid had pushed for many reasons for the first official flight in Space of the new Lockheed ASP-100 spaceplane to be made a public event. First, the preliminary test flights in the atmosphere and high stratosphere had revealed no hidden design or construction vice which could turn today's flight into a disaster. Second, showing the ASP-100 in public would help prevent paranoia and fear about it in the Soviet Union, by removing a veil of secrecy that could unnecessarily stoke the apprehension of the Soviet leaders. For the same reason, Ingrid had fought hard to include as observer on the flight Lylia Litvyak but had encountered some ferocious opposition from many American generals and politicians. It had finally taken the intervention of Robert Kennedy to decree that Litvyak would be on the flight in order to cultivate the present good relations with the Soviet Union. As part of the deal, a few Soviet reporters and cameramen were present in the hangar today, on top of the Soviet Ambassador and of his military attaché, with at least a couple of the Soviet 'reporters' being probably undercover clandestine agents. However, for just that reason, the hangar and this zone of the base had been thoroughly sanitized in advance to hide from sight anything that was truly sensitive in terms of military secrets. Finally, one last reason for Ingrid to push for an official event was to calm down the grumbles from the Congress about the amount of money and resources spent on yet another classified military project. While the United States had been launching spacecraft in orbit since 1957, it had done so by either releasing spaceplanes from a heavy transporter at high altitude or via classic rockets, while the

Soviets still did all their launches via multi-stage rockets. The only exceptions had been the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION and U.S.S. LIBERTY, which had taken off from Muroc in 1968 and 1970, respectively. However, those two spaceships had been designed for space work only and were unable to land back on Earth. The ASP-100 THUNDERBOLT would thus be the first ever craft able to routinely take off and land, using conventional runways, while being able to reach Earth orbit by itself.

In the front line of the crowd of observers, not far from President Kennedy's group, Ambassador Yuri Gorchov bent sideways to whisper into the ear of his military attaché, Major General Oleg Voronzof.

"So, what do you think of this ASP-100?"

"That it looks like a true technological marvel, Mister Ambassador. It could easily feature in any science-fiction movie. If it indeed proves capable to reach orbit by itself and stay there before landing back on Earth, then the Americans will have something that we could only dream of having right now. However, the payload capacity of this ASP-100, as advertised by the Americans this morning, seems quite limited, so I think that it will be used mostly for military missions, like strategic photo-reconnaissance, while still using their existing SP-10 spaceplanes to orbit larger payloads."

"It makes sense. What I have problems believing is the fact that we were invited here to watch the launch."

"The answer to that, Mister Ambassador, lies in three words: General Ingrid Dows. She is known as a true 'goodie-two-shoes' and has the ear of President Kennedy. While she proved to be a redoubtable adversary for us on the battlefield, we assess her to be unusually open-minded and tolerant and is no warmonger."

"So, she is somewhat naïve?"

"No, Mister Ambassador!" was the immediate reply from Voronzof. "General Dows is anything but naïve. She is too savvy in terms of geo-politics for that. She is simply uncommonly good-natured and truly wishes for peaceful relations with us. There is nothing nefarious about her in my personal opinion, and so thinks the GRU⁷."

Ambassador Gorchov nodded his head at that and paid back attention to the spokeswoman from the U.S. Space Corps, a tall and pretty brunette in her late thirties who was doing a quick presentation speech to the visitors present. At the end of that

⁷ GRU: Soviet military intelligence service.

speech, she left her microphone to Ingrid Dows, who was already wearing her spacesuit but had her helmet visor up and open.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to Muroc for this inaugural first flight in Space of our new ASP-100 spaceplane. While I will readily acknowledge that the ASP-100 was primarily designed for military-related missions, I do want to emphasize that it is also more than capable of doing peaceful missions, like the emergency rescue in orbit of manned spacecraft unable to return to Earth, like I did in 1957 with the SP-10A STARBLAZER to rescue in orbit then Major Lydia Litvyak and Major Yuri Gagarin. It can also carry on crew exchanges aboard orbital space stations, be they American or Soviet, and can also be sent to repair in orbit malfunctioning satellites or spacecraft. In this spirit of peaceful cooperation, I have invited Colonel Lydia Litvyak, who is scheduled to depart in three months for a two-year mission to Mars aboard the U.S.S. LIBERTY, to be part of this flight as an observer. I will be the copilot on this flight, while the pilot will be Colonel Neil Armstrong. Lieutenant Colonel Julia Miller will complete our crew as our sensors officer. For this flight, we will take off on our own power from this base, using a regular runway, then will climb to orbit, where we will spend a day or so effecting a few tests before landing back here in order to prove the versatility and flexibility of use of the ASP-100. Now, are there any questions before I get into my spaceplane?”

A flurry of hands went up at once, with many reporters trying to shout over each other. Ingrid then pointed at the celebrated CBS television news anchor, Walter Cronkite.

“Mister Cronkite, you’re first!”

“Thank you, General Dows!” replied the mustachioed 59-year-old news anchorman, who had a full camera crew with him. “I must say that your ASP-100 is a very sleek-looking machine indeed and is quite impressive. What kind of performances are you expecting from it?”

“What I expect from the ASP-100 is to be able to take off from any standard commercial or military runway, climb on its own power to orbit and achieve a stable orbit around Earth, where it will be able to stay for up to four weeks before reentering the atmosphere and land back conventionally at its point of departure, or at any other airfield in the World. What we hope to achieve over the performances of our actual fleet of SP-10 spaceplanes is mostly a much faster response time and better flexibility in employment, all things that should dramatically lower the cost of each launch.”

"Talking of cost, General, how much did your ASP-100 cost to the American taxpayers?"

"Well, while that figure is actually classified, most congressmen would answer you with a grumble and the words 'too much'." said Ingrid while smiling, triggering a round of laughter around the crowd. She however became serious again and looked around the crowd while speaking.

"Please believe me, ladies and gentlemen, when I say that I did my best to keep the expense to American taxpayers as low as possible while giving to the American people a space capability which would otherwise have ruined our national finances. Just think about our first Mars mission and try to imagine the cost of it if we had used the conventional rocket route. Next question!"

This time, she pointed the TASS Agency reporter present, surprising many by her choice. The Soviet reporter and undercover GRU agent, not believing his luck, spoke loudly to be heard above the crowd.

"GENERAL, IS THE ASP-100 AN ARMED SPACECRAFT?"

"Not for this flight, but it certainly could be armed for certain military missions, mister." was the candid answer from Ingrid, who had expected that question. "I will not be hypocritical about this, ladies and gentlemen. This program was mainly designed for the benefit of my Space Corps, whose principal missions are of a military nature. However, as I said earlier, the ASP-100 can also fulfill many missions of a peaceful nature, while one of the official missions of the U.S. Space Corps is space rescue work, and this irrespective of the nationality of the human being in space who would be in need of rescuing. As for the type and amount of armament that the ASP-100 can carry, sorry but that is classified information. Next question!"

This time, it was Voronzof who bent sideways to whisper into Gorchov's ear.

"She handled that question quite well I would say, Mister Ambassador."

"Indeed! She was frank, without revealing any classified data."

Gorchov and Voronzof would probably have been less cheerful if they had known that the ASP-100 possessed four large missile bays able to accommodate an assortment of heavy missiles armed with either conventional or nuclear warheads, on top of being equipped with a very sophisticated radar and sensors suite to help guide those missiles.

After answering a few more questions, Ingrid declared the interview ended and went to her new spaceplane with Neil Armstrong, Julia Miller and Lydia Litvyak, who

were also already wearing their spacesuits. Filmed by the cameramen present, the four of them then boarded the ASP-100, using an elevator platform attached to the bottom of the crew pod's access airlock. Once inside the eight-meter-long and three-meter-wide crew compartment, Ingrid showed to Lilya one of the six regular padded seats reserved for passengers and mission specialists, which had no instrument panels or flight controls except for an intercom box and a TV viewing screen.

"Sorry if I don't let you sit at the weapons officer's station, Lilya, but I am sure that you will understand why."

Lilya replied with a smile to the woman she no longer considered as an enemy.

"I understand perfectly why, Ingrid. Just allowing me on this flight is already a lot more than I had expected. Thank you for taking me on this flight."

"Hey, as the second person ever to go into Space, you deserved this honor. Besides, this may do miracles to help the mutual relations of our two countries."

"It effectively can't hurt." said Lilya before taking place in the large and well-padded seat, which had been designed to accommodate astronauts wearing spacesuits. On her part, Ingrid went forward and sat in the copilot's seat, to the right of the pilot's seat, in which Neil Armstrong sat, while Julia sat at the weapons and sensors station, situated behind the pilot's seat. Powering up the electrical and electronic systems of the spaceplane while keeping the engines shut off, Ingrid made a gesture to the ground support crew through the thick, multi-layered side window of the cockpit, telling them to start towing the spaceplane out of the hangar. As the ASP-100 was being towed out, Ingrid and Neil Armstrong started their pre-flight check list, watched and listened closely by an intensively curious Lilya, who was growing increasingly excited.

With the spaceplane now out of the hangar, the crowd of visitors and onlookers moved out as well and was garnered in a safe area of the tarmac where a dozen tripod-mounted observation heavy binoculars had been set up for the benefit of the V.I.P. guests in the crowd. Walter Cronkite, like President Kennedy, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown and Ambassador Gorchov, was one of those guests and gladly took place behind his assigned binocular, a powerful optical instrument with a wide field of view, while his camera crew set itself up next to him. He watched on with growing excitement while commenting for the benefits of his viewers.

"The ASP-100 has now lit up its jet engines and has started rolling by itself towards one of the runways built on the Rogers Dry Lake bed. That runway is 7.5 miles-

long and is said to be the longest in service in the United States. Thus, General Dows' spaceplane will have plenty of runway for its first official orbital flight..."

Inside the THUNDERBOLT, Neil Armstrong made the spaceplane roll along the base's taxiways, to finally stop it momentarily at one end of the big 17/35 Runway. After a last instrument check, he looked at Ingrid.

"All is checked and a go, General!"

"Then, let's go! Your aircraft!"

"My aircraft." repeated Armstrong, acknowledging that he would be piloting, while Ingrid would be in charge of checking the instruments. "Ignition of main rocket engine in five seconds. Ramjet in takeoff assist mode. Three, two, one, ignition!"

Lilya suddenly felt herself pushed into her seat with what she estimated to be at least a two G acceleration, while a deafening noise erupted. Pushed by the 700 tons of thrust from the Rocketdyne F-1 liquid bipropellant rocket engine, to which was added the supplementary thrust provided by the mass of air sucked in via the forward inlet of the combined ramjet-rocket engine and then compressed inside the inlet ducts, the 520-ton spaceplane, its propellant tanks full to the brim, quickly took up speed along the runway, its crew shaken by the strong vibrations from their powerful engine. Then, its nose rotated up after a surprisingly short ground roll and the ASP-100 started rising up from the ground at a steep angle, with Lilya still pushed hard in her seat. After only half a minute, Ingrid shouted over the din of the rocket engine.

"MACH 2.3 ATTAINED! LIGHTING UP THE RAMJET TO FULL POWER AND SHUTTING DOWN THE MAIN ROCKET ENGINE."

The deafening roar of the F-1 rocket engine was then replaced by a much more bearable but still quite audible jet noise, while the felt acceleration was cut in half.

"SPEED NOW MACH 3 AND INCREASING STEADILY. WE ARE PASSING 40,000 FEET. WE ARE STILL ON OUR PREPROGRAMMED FLIGHT PROFILE."

"UNDERSTOOD!" replied Armstrong. "LET'S CONTINUE ON TO MACH 5.5 AND 90,000 FEET BEFORE SWITCHING BACK TO MAIN ROCKET ENGINE."

"ACKNOWLEDGED!" said Ingrid. "LILYA, HOW ARE YOU DOING BACK IN THERE?"

"I'M IN FIGHTER PILOT HEAVEN!" replied Lilya while grinning from ear to ear, making both Ingrid and Neil Armstrong chuckle.

On the ground, the visitors followed with stunned incredulity the speedy takeoff and steep climb of the spaceplane, which was now out of sight except for a long smoke trail far away at high altitude. Robert Kennedy turned his head to grin at his Secretary of Defense, Harold Brown, and at General George Brown, who had replaced a year ago Admiral Moorer as the Chairman of the Chiefs of the Joint Staff.

"Did you see the acceleration of our ASP-100? It was incredible! And it is supposed to weigh 520 tons when fully fueled?"

"Just from watching this takeoff, I would say that we have a real winner on our hands, Mister President." replied Harold Brown. "The Soviets should be choking with envy now."

Kennedy, like the two Browns, glanced as one at the nearby Soviet ambassador, who was now speaking in a low voice with his military attaché, with both men looking quite agitated.

"Yep! I think that General Dows' show did impress our Soviet friends."

"MACH 5.6 AND 90,000 FEET ATTAINED! SWITCHING BACK TO MAIN ROCKET ENGINE AND SWITCHING OFF THE RAMJET."

The mighty roar of the Rocketdyne F-1 came back then, again pushing the four astronauts against their seats. However, this time the felt acceleration was much stronger, since about a third of the onboard fuel and oxidizer had already been burned, greatly lightening up the spaceplane. Lilya noticed that both Neil Armstrong and Ingrid seemed to let the autopilot guide the climb of the ASP-100 while they soaked the near 3 G acceleration in their padded seats. After close to two minutes of hard acceleration, the F-1 rocket engine cut itself off, bringing near silence on the flight deck of the spaceplane. Freed from the strong G force, Ingrid consulted at once her instruments.

"We have attained orbital velocity and are at an altitude of 112.5 miles, or 180 kilometers for you, Lilya. We will let our spaceplane complete one orbit, to establish with precision our apogee and perigee, then will work on regularizing our orbit with the help of our orbital rocket engines. This will give us plenty of time to test the various systems of our ASP-100, so let's get to work! Julia, deploy our watch radars while I deploy and test our radiators and solar panels."

"Uh, can I do something to help, General?" asked Lilya from her passenger seat. Ingrid gave her a benevolent smile in response.

“Thanks for the offer, Lilya, but our work stations include many classified systems and instruments. What you could do, though, is to monitor our main radio frequency while we get on with our checks. I am going to transfer to your intercom box both our main frequency link with Vandenberg and the general distress call monitoring frequency.”

Lilya didn't object to being cut out like this, fully realizing that an American astronaut aboard a Soviet station or craft would most probably be also denied access to the more sensitive Soviet equipment. Besides, from the little she could see from her seat, the systems of the ASP-100 looked so advanced that she probably wouldn't know how to operate them properly. Her previous fourteen months spent training in Vandenberg for her incoming Mars mission had clearly shown to her how much ahead the American space technology, and particularly computer and radar technology, was in comparison with Soviet technology. It was again the old story about how top notch Soviet pure science abilities failed to turn into equally top notch Soviet applied technology: somehow, the heavy, rigid and dogmatic Soviet state government machinery regularly managed to stifle true innovation, mostly by putting obtuse party hacks in administrative charge of advanced projects. She thus switched on the two radio channels without further ado and listened to them while admiring from time to time the view of Earth she had through her armored window.

Some forty minutes later, Julia Miller spoke up while keeping her eyes on her multiple radar screens.

“I have our first rendezvous point on my forward radar screen. We should cross path with it in about fifteen minutes.”

“Got it!” replied Ingrid, with Lilya following with a question.

“What is that rendezvous point, General?”

“The U.S.S. LIBERTY. We intentionally launched on a trajectory towards it. Once this spaceplane will be in full regular service, one of its uses will be to carry passengers and replacement crews between the surface and Earth's orbit. A special passenger module has been designed which will fit inside our payload bay. That module will be able to carry up to 32 passengers at a time, or up to three tons of fresh supplies.” Lilya grinned when that answer brought an idea into her head.

“Hey, it could possibly carry one day paying customers to an orbiting space hotel. Wouldn't that be great?”

"It indeed would, Lilya...and it will happen sooner than later. I already have plans for such an orbiting station open to paying visitors, on top of hosting visiting astronomers and scientists eager to use our space telescopes. God knows my Space Corps could use some extra revenues to compensate for the limited budgets I get from Congress. My bet is that hundreds of well-to-do people wouldn't hesitate to pay nice sums to be able to spend some time in Earth orbit. On my part, I would love to be able one day to offer a paid trip to Space to my daughter Hien."

"Vacation in Space..." said dreamily Neil Armstrong. "I too would love to offer such a trip to my family one fine day. I already can see the kind of waiting lists for rooms in such an orbital hotel with a view of Earth."

Some eleven minutes later, Julia gave another warning.

"The U.S.S. LIBERTY is now some twenty miles ahead and slightly above us. It should be visible pretty soon."

"I already have it on our long-range camera." replied Ingrid from her copilot's seat. "Lilya, how would you like to visit in advance the spaceship that will carry you to Mars?"

"I would love it! Could we really join up with it on this trip?"

"Certainly, Lilya! Besides, one of the systems we needed to test is our nose docking port. This will be a perfect time to test it. Neil, start a docking approach path to the LIBERTY. I will get our navigation computer on calculating an exact flight path. Lilya, call the U.S.S. LIBERTY on our main frequency and ask permission for us to dock at its port docking station."

"On it!" said Lilya, feeling excitement mounting inside her, before keying her radio microphone. "U.S.S. LIBERTY, this is the spaceplane THUNDERBOLT. We are on approach to you and request permission to dock at your port docking station, over." An answer came nearly at once, clear and strong.

"THUNDERBOLT, from U.S.S. LIBERTY, permission granted to approach and dock at our port station, over."

"THUNDERBOLT acknowledged, out!"

Lilya then switched her viewing television screen to the view given by the powerful long-range camera installed in the forward cone of their starboard side wing-mounted pod. The orbiting spaceship was already plainly visible as a growing white dot against the black background of Space. Lilya watched with growing wonderment as it gradually

filled the screen, even after she scaled down the magnification of the view to the minimum.

“My God! I knew that it was big, but I couldn’t imagine how big it really is.”

“It is indeed big by any standard: 428 meters long from nose to nuclear rocket engines nozzles, a span of 410 meters with its wingtips up and a saucer section measuring 300 meters in length, 250 meters in width and 28 meters in maximum body thickness.” replied Ingrid, looking with pride at the gigantic spaceship. “It will have a mass of over 68,000 metric tons when it will depart Earth orbit on its way to Mars.”

That last sentence made Lilya look with some reserve at Ingrid.

“How could you get such a massive ship to fly off from a runway by itself and climb to orbit on its own power? It sounds impossible.”

“It does sound impossible...because it is.”

“Uh?”

“Simply said, the U.S.S. LIBERTY weighed only 9,700 metric tons when it took off from Muroc Air Force Base after its completion.”

“Only 9,700 metric tons, she said.” said Lilya in a discouraged tone that made Ingrid giggle.

“Yes, only 9,700 metric tons. Its nuclear engines and their anti-radiation liners were only added to it once it was in a stable low Earth orbit. Also, it carried at takeoff only the rocket fuel and oxidizer it needed to reach orbit, with little of it in terms of liquid hydrogen fuel. In contrast, for its mission to Mars, the LIBERTY will start its journey with 60,000 metric tons of liquid hydrogen meant for its nuclear engines. The LIBERTY managed to take off from Muroc on its own power mostly thanks to its shape, with its saucer section being basically a giant arrowhead-shaped wing, which gave it a lot of extra aerodynamic lift at takeoff and during its climb through the atmosphere. Believe it or not, but the LIBERTY’s wing loading ratio at takeoff was about half that of modern fighter jet aircraft. Add to that the fact that its combined ramjet-rocket main engines had a specific impulse much superior to the best liquid propellant rocket engines we have and it gives you a spaceship as nimble as a fighter aircraft and with twice the climb rate. The trick was to combine all the technologies we were using and making them supplement each other. In fact, one of my main design principles since I started directing the American space program in 1955 is to make as many systems and parts as possible fill at least two purposes. One example of that principle is the liquid oxygen tanks used at takeoff and climb to orbit by the F-1 rocket main engines: since they were

basically empty and contained only oxygen vapors and slush once the LIBERTY attained orbit, they were then easily and safely turned into vast supplies storage spaces. I believe that you copied that feature on the boosters you used to launch into orbit your space station MIR.”

“That’s right! And I understand that the reason you designed such a big ship was in order to incorporate in its saucer section the system of contra-rotating carrousel that our visiting Soviet scientists praised so much, right?”

“Correct! For me it was crucial to provide a way to keep the crew of the ship into an artificial gravity environment as much as possible, to avoid all the medical and health problems caused by long periods spent in zero gravity. Also, it is much easier to provide adequate anti-radiation protection in a big ship than in a small ship, thanks to economies of scale.”

Lilya crossed her arms then and stared at Ingrid with a smile.

“General, did anybody ever call you a genius?”

“Me, a genius? Well, of course I am!” replied Ingrid, grinning, making Julia and Neil laugh briefly. She then returned her attention to the approaching spaceship, helping Neil to guide their spaceplane towards the 24-meter-wide exhaust nozzle of the left side main engine pod, hooked under the ship’s saucer section. They were soon level with that exhaust nozzle, with the docking port surrounded by five big Rocketdyne F-1 rocket engines, themselves surrounded by the burning chamber of the huge ramjet engine becoming visible to the spaceplane crew.

“Swiveling our nose radome out of the way.” said Ingrid while pushing a few buttons. “Extending our nose docking ring. Automated docking approach system engaged.”

“In line with the LIBERTY’s docking port.” replied Neil Armstrong. “Automated docking approach system is in command. Approach velocity now at five feet per second and decreasing... four feet per second... two feet per second... one foot per second... Distance to docking ring: fifteen feet and decreasing... Contact! Verify coupling integrity.”

“Verifying coupling integrity.” said Ingrid. “I have green lights across the board. I am starting to pressurize our nose docking airlock.”

Ingrid then watched attentively as the pressure and temperature rose inside their nose airlock, while the crew of the LIBERTY did the same for the spaceship’s airlock. One

reading however started to worry her after a few seconds, once the airlock of her spaceplane was fully pressurized.

"I am detecting a slight but progressive loss of pressure inside our nose airlock. Let me check if the pressure will stabilize."

She soon let out a mild swear word, sounding frustrated.

"Damn! The pressure is continuing to drop. We still could use our airlock in an emergency, but we definitely have a problem here. I am afraid that we will have to abort and decouple from the LIBERTY."

"I concur!" replied Neil Armstrong. This will have to be checked in detail once back in Muroc. I am depressurizing our nose airlock. Ingrid, advise the LIBERTY that we have to abort our docking operation and are returning to Muroc."

"Will do!" said Ingrid before twisting her head and giving a contrite smile to Lilya.

"Sorry about that, Lilya. You will have to wait another three months before you can see the inside of the LIBERTY."

"I understand, Ingrid. Better be safe than sorry."

Lilya, a bit disappointed but still quite thrilled by her space flight so far, sat back in her seat and watched the blue orb of Earth under them as the THUNDERBOLT backed away from the LIBERTY. For her, any occasion to be in Space was a personal joy. To be in Space for a peaceful purpose rather than for war only added to her joy.

CHAPTER 10 – REVEALING A SECRET

14:20 (Washington Time)

Tuesday, June 9, 1975 'C'

U.S. State Department headquarters

Foggy Bottom District, Washington, D.C.

U.S.A.

There was little noise in the small office used by Hien and three other linguists of the State Department, save those of fingers working computer keyboards and hands flipping the pages of thick dictionaries or lexicons. On her part, Hien was working on translating into Mandarin Chinese a State Department letter addressed to the Hong-Kong consulate of the People's Republic of China. Despite having signed a peace treaty with the PRC nearly eighteen months ago, the United States still did not recognize it officially as a separate country, due to many reasons, something that forced all official communications between the two countries to be sent via the British colony of Hong-Kong. First, the main obstacle was the insistence of Chinese leaders that Taiwan was part of the PRC and would one day fall under its direct control. Second, the United States was not ready to accede to the PRC's demand that the United States stopped recognizing Taiwan as an independent country, especially since huge efforts were still being made to rebuild the government of Taiwan and help the Taiwanese after the nuclear destruction of Taipei in December of 1973 by a Chinese ballistic missile. Thirdly, the U.S. Congress, which was still very much ferociously anti-communist, still had not ratified the 1973 peace treaty with China despite the best efforts of President Robert Kennedy.

The quiet, studious atmosphere of the office was suddenly broken by the entrance of two big men wearing suits, who didn't bother to knock on the door before barging in. Concentrated on her translation work, Hien did not notice immediately the entrance of the two men and looked up from her work only when the two of them stopped in front of her desk. She was not a little shocked and alarmed on seeing that the men wore passes identifying them as members of the Office of Security, commonly

known as S.Y. The S.Y. was responsible for the physical protection of State Department facilities and employees but also was in charge of counter-espionage and security vetting of State Department personnel. Before Hien could say a word, one of the men presented a S.Y. badge and spoke in a cold voice.

"Miss Pham Thi Hien?"

"Yes, that's me!" answered Hien, now less than reassured.

"Agent Deacon, of the Office of Security. We would need for you to accompany us: we have a few questions for you."

"But, why?" asked a flabbergasted Hien as her three colleagues looked on with a mix of incredulity and incomprehension.

"Just follow us, miss." was the man's terse answer. With dread filling her and feeling mortified at being taken away like this in front of her colleagues and friends, Hien had no choice but to save her work on her computer, then to get up from her chair and walk around her desk. She did try to get an answer before leaving her office while sandwiched between the two security men.

"Where are you taking me?"

"To our offices. Please stay quiet while we walk, Miss Pham."

The trio then left the translation office, leaving the one man and two women inside stunned and worried.

"My God! What is happening?" asked to nobody in particular Mary Kim, one of Hien's best friends. John Li, the lone man in the office and the senior employee of their lot, shook his head in disbelief.

"I don't know, but it looks like the S.Y. is suspecting Hien of something."

"Suspecting Hien? Of what?" nearly shouted Jiang Lin, the other woman left in the office. "Don't tell me that they are suspecting Hien of being a spy: that would be absolute nonsense!"

"I agree that this would be nonsense, Lin, but the way those two S.Y. goons took her suggest just that. Remember the bad old days of McCarthyism⁸, when a simple anonymous accusation or innuendo could cost you your job or ruin your life? Well, not

⁸ McCarthyism: Period of the early 1950s in the U.S.A., named for Senator Joseph McCarthy, then Chairman of the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, who accused countless Americans of being communists, and this on the basis of anonymous accusations, innuendos and a complete lack of proofs.

all adepts of Joseph McCarthy have disappeared from Washington. Whatever this is about, I better go inform Mister Jacoby of this.”

Getting up from his chair, John Li then quickly walked out of the office and went to the office of Joseph Jacoby, the head of the translation department, presenting himself to Jacoby’s secretary.

“Is Mister Jacoby in, Miss Pleasance?”

“Yes, he is, Mister Li. You wish to speak with him?”

“Yes, and it’s urgent.”

“Uh, one moment, please.” Said the secretary before grabbing her telephone and calling her boss.

“Mister Jacoby? Mister Li wishes to see you about an urgent matter... Very well, sir.”

Putting down her receiver, the secretary then looked up at John.

“You may enter Mister Jacoby’s office, Mister Li.”

“Thank you, miss.” said John before walking to Jacoby’s door and knocking on it, getting a muffled answer at once.

“Come in!”

Opening the door and entering quickly, then closing it behind him, John approached the desk of his direct supervisor in a few quick steps. Joseph Jacoby was widely known as an expert in European languages and was also considered an honest and decent man who cared about his subalterns.

“Yes, John? What is happening?” asked Jacoby, a concerned expression on his face.

“Two men from the Office of Security just barged into my office and escorted out Hien, supposedly to ask her questions at their office.”

“Pham Thi Hien, the translator the Secretary of State used in Vietnam during the signing of the peace treaty with China?”

“Her exactly, sir. They refused to tell us what was happening. I thought that you needed to be informed of this right away.”

“You did well to come and inform me of this, John. I will inquire about this at once. Thank you for coming.”

“My pleasure, sir.” said John before walking out, leaving Jacoby to think alone for a moment before grabbing his telephone and calling the offices of the S.Y., where he was connected to Sub-Director Karl Ackerman.

"Ackerman here!"

"Sub-Director Ackerman, this is Joseph Jacoby, head of the Translation Department. I was just informed that two of your men just grabbed one of my translators, Miss Pham Thi Hien, and escorted her out for questioning. Can you tell me what the hell is happening here?"

From neutral, Ackerman's tone then changed to guarded.

"I am sorry, but Miss Pham's case is confidential and can't be discussed on the phone."

"What do you mean, confidential? Miss Pham is one of my best and most dependable linguists and I consider her to be absolutely loyal and honest. What kind of accusations do you have against her, if any?"

"Again, this is a confidential matter pertaining strictly to the Office of Security. Don't bother to show up at my offices, as you are not cleared to get information about her case, Mister Jacoby."

"Her case? HER CASE? What the hell is your department thinking? Miss Pham is the adopted daughter of our most decorated and celebrated military officer and she survived the nuking of Taipei only out of sheer luck."

"Yeah, a very convenient piece of luck for her. I would counsel you to refrain from asking further questions about her, Mister Jacoby. Goodbye!"

Ackerman then hung up, leaving a stunned and angry Jacoby.

"Her case! What is wrong with those idiots at S.Y.?"

His receiver still in his hand, Jacoby thought for a moment, then formed another number on his telephone, getting a secretary after two rings.

"Misses Lawrence? This is Joseph Jacoby, from the Translation Department. I need to speak urgently with the chief of staff of Secretary Muskie..."

Hien felt both anxiety and resentment as she was being escorted down to the ground level of the headquarters, where the S.Y. had its offices. She was very conscious of the way the people they were crossing in the hallways looked at her, to then start whispering between them while watching her. In the not so distant past, being escorted like this would start an instant storm of nasty speculations and rumors that would often ruin for good the reputation of the person being escorted, with their personal file too often ending up with negative notes added to their dossier, even when they were not found guilty of anything. Hien didn't have only friends at the State Department: some

were jealous of her rapid rise in the favors of Secretary of State Muskie, while others were old partisans and supporters of ex-Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, who had been fired years ago by President Dewey, presumably after Dulles had tried to discredit Ingrid Dows via an anonymous smear campaign. In fact, the more that she thought about it, the more Hien believed that her troubles were due to being Ingrid's adopted daughter, rather than to anything else. Unfortunately, such indirect accusations were still too common in Washington politics. Once inside the S.Y. offices, she was led to a small interrogation room furnished simply with a small table and three chairs. The only other thing worthy of note was the big wall 'mirror' covering much of one wall of the room. One of the two agents then pointed one of the chairs to her.

"Please sit down, Miss Pham. Someone will come and see you shortly."

The two agents then left, locking the door behind them and leaving Hien alone on her chair. Despite knowing that she had done nothing wrong, she still reviewed mentally her past actions, trying to think of something that could have been misinterpreted by someone else. She however could think of nothing of the sort and tried her best to calm down, knowing that someone was most probably watching her through the false mirror.

After a wait of maybe two minutes, one slightly obese man with gray hair entered the interrogation room and sat down across the table from her, putting a closed file and a notepad on the table. He then stayed silent for a moment while staring coldly at her, something Hien understood at once to be a tactic to try unnerving her. Unfortunately for the interrogator, Hien was far from being simply a young woman in her twenties who occupied a junior position at the State Department and she was ready for about anything. The man finally spoke after a good minute of silence.

"Miss Pham Thi Hien, you were brought here to answer a few questions about yourself. Be honest and forthcoming and everything will be fine."

"I am always honest and forthcoming and I have nothing to hide, mister. Am I accused of anything?"

"I will be asking the questions, Miss Pham. A few irregularities were noted about you in the recent past and we need to clarify them. First, tell me which languages you are proficient in and how you learned each of them."

Surprised by that question, Hien nonetheless answered the man without hesitation.

"Well, Vietnamese was my native language, since I was born in Indochina. As a war orphan, I was raised and educated by French nuns in Da Nang, who taught me

French. Then, I was adopted by my mother, General Ingrid Dows, who taught me English at home and during her postings following her tour in Vietnam. I learned German while she was posted in Germany, while also perfecting my English and my French there. I also continued to practice my Vietnamese at home with my mother, who speaks Vietnamese, along with many other languages. Once my mother was posted back to the United States, she started teaching me Chinese, both Mandarin and Cantonese variants, at home and when she had some spare time for that. I also did a lot of self-learning and practicing, using taped lessons and language method books. I continued learning languages and perfecting them in high school, then in college and university, with the firm intention of becoming a diplomat once adult. I also have to say that I have a natural talent for languages. Well, that's it in a nutshell, mister."

The interrogator nodded his head, apparently impressed.

"That is impressive, Miss Pham, but it doesn't clarify a few things about you."

"What do you mean?"

In response, the man opened the file in front of him and, taking a sheet of paper in it, read parts of it before looking back at Hien.

"Miss Pham, could you explain the following: multiple witnesses who heard you converse with diverse people at the State Department and during your trips overseas say that they saw you speak fluently numerous languages which you haven't mentioned to date and which are not noted down in your personnel file as being certified to be proficient into. In particular, you were noted to converse with fluidity in Russian, Swedish, Spanish, Greek, Arabic, Korean, Japanese, Swahili, Hindu and Farsi. There are also reports that you can read Latin and a number of other dead languages."

Hien kept a straight face as she stared back at her interrogator. What the man had said was correct and would normally be difficult to explain, or even believe, for most people. However, Hien was not an ordinary person, not anymore. Ingrid had started awakening the memories of her past incarnations while she was still a teenager. That mirrored Ingrid's ability to remember her own past incarnations, something that had been made public in 1953 without her consent, when she was still fighting in Vietnam. As for Hien's similar ability, it was still a secret today, and for good reasons. The unauthorized revelation of Ingrid's ability by then Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had created much controversy and it had taken the direct intervention of President Dewey to quash the doubts that had then spread about Ingrid's loyalty towards the United States. Hien was thus less than thrilled about this line of questioning from her S.Y. interrogator.

"Well, Miss Pham, what do you say about this? Do you have an explanation for this, especially about your ability to speak Russian? Where and when did you learn Russian?"

"Where is easy: at my home. When? On my own time. I now see that you are on a fishing expedition and are trying to somehow paint me as some kind of Soviet mole. Well, I can tell you that you are wasting both your time, my time and the State Department's time with your unwarranted suspicions. I have proven many times my loyalty to the United States and I won't let your Office of Security smear my name, especially if you are doing this to get at my mother. Know that I will place a redress of grievance up my chain of command the moment that I will walk out of here. And if it turns out that your S.Y. is doing this to hurt my mother, then you better realize that her chain of command ends up directly with the President. Now, either charge me with a clear and concrete accusation based on facts rather than innuendos, or end this farce now and let me go."

Her interrogator, not having expected such aplomb from a young woman in her twenties, was left speechless for a moment. He then tried another card and replied to Hien in a hard tone of voice.

"Miss Pham, you do not call the shots here: we do! Furthermore, if you don't cooperate with us, we will then pass your case to the F.B.I., who will then investigate you in depth to ensure that you are not indeed a risk to the national security. While they will make their investigation, your security clearance will have to be suspended."

Hien frowned at those words: without a security clearance, it would become impossible for her to work at the State Department. However, she was definitely not ready to let the S.Y. win at this game.

"You do that and you will be shooting yourself in the foot, mister. If I remember correctly, a S.Y. director was fired in 1961 by the then Secretary of State, for abusing his authority and making false accusations. As for your precious F.B.I., it had one of its past directors fired by the President for trying to smear the reputation of my mother. I strongly recommend that you either let me go now or put me under arrest for suspicion of espionage. However, if you do the latter, then expect the proverbial shit to hit the fan pretty quickly, with your S.Y. ending up looking like a bunch of bungling idiots as a final result."

A flash of anger appeared in the eyes of the interrogator and he shot up of his chair, but then decided to keep his mouth shut and stormed out of the room, locking the door

behind him and walking to the surveillance room next door, where three other S.Y. men had been watching the interview through the one-way mirror. One of the three men, who was his section supervisor gave him a questioning look.

“So, what do you think of her story, Collins?”

“That she is way too combative and sure of herself for a simple young female translator, sir. I am sure that she is hiding something.”

“Yes, but what exactly? The only thing we have on her are those reports about her unexplained linguistic abilities.”

One of the other S.Y. men present, a lawyer specializing in national security infractions, suddenly opened his eyes wide, struck by something.

“Sir, when you said that this girl has unexplained linguistic abilities, it made me remember a similar case: that of her adoptive mother, General Dows. She is also known to be able to speak a stupendous number of languages. That was publicly explained by Dows in 1953, when she revealed that she had gained via divine intervention access to the memories of her past incarnations. She in fact claimed to have an accumulated 7,000 years of past lives souvenirs in her head.”

“So? Did you really believe that story, Jensen?”

“I did, sir, and apparently so did President Dewey, who fired Secretary of State Dulles for blowing that secret in the open. F.B.I. Director Hoover was fired by the President not long after that.”

“And what are you saying exactly, Jensen?”

“That this Pham Thi Hien could well have inherited or gained the same ability to remember her past incarnations than her adoptive mother, sir. That would easily explain her present uncommon linguistic abilities. Don’t forget that General Dows is also known by the nickname of ‘God’s General’. Dows may well have given her abilities to her adopted daughter, sir. If that’s the case, then there would be no legal basis for us to detain Miss Pham or to revoke her security clearance.”

The section supervisor was thoughtful for a moment, weighing the opinion of his lawyer. He finally took a decision and headed for the door while giving a terse order to his men.

“Wait here! I will go talk with her.”

Watched by his surprised men, the supervisor went to the interrogation room and entered it, finding Hien waiting with apparent calm on her chair. He sat at the table, across from her, and spoke to Hien in a polite tone.

“Miss Pham, do you remember your past incarnations, like your mother does?”
Understanding that her secret was going to come out one way or the other, and sooner rather than later, Hien decided to put her cards on the table and answered the S.Y. man calmly but firmly.

“Yes!”

“How far do your past souvenirs go, miss?”

“A bit over eleven thousand years, mister. Are you planning to make this public knowledge?”

For a moment, the S.Y. man could not say or do anything while staring back at the young and pretty Asian woman who had just calmly confessed to him of having millenniums of experience inside her mind. He then shook himself back to reality.

“No! Certainly not!”

“Then, I would like to leave now, so that I could return to my translation work.”

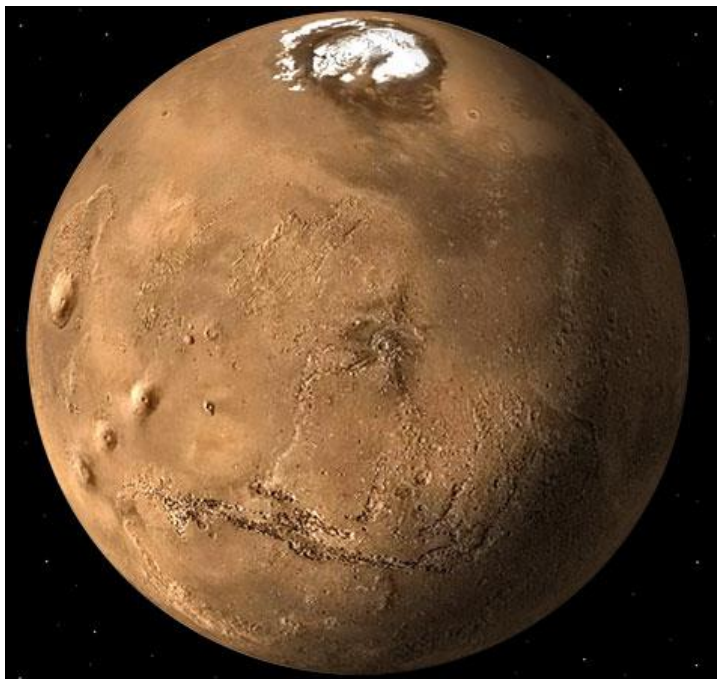
The S.Y. supervisor took only a second to take a decision then.

“You may go, Miss Pham. I am truly sorry for any inconvenience this may have caused you.”

“Thank you, sir!” replied Hien, hiding her relief while getting up from her chair. She then walked out of the interrogation room and headed back to the translation department, leaving behind the S.Y. supervisor to try calming down the turmoil inside his head.

“How the hell am I going to explain all this to Director Dijkstra?”

CHAPTER 11 – ON THE WAY TO MARS



09:19 (California Time)

Thursday, July 31, 1975 'C'

Port aft access airlock of the U.S.S. LIBERTY

Low Earth orbit

Lilya Litvyak was near the end of the queue formed by the 27 passengers of the spaceplane THUNDERBOLT, which was now docked to the gigantic U.S.S. LIBERTY. Lilya had been quite surprised by the composition of her fellow travelers who were joining the crew of the American spaceship three days before its departure for Mars: only five of them were Americans, while the rest were foreign scientists or specialists, like Lilya. Also, Lilya was one of only two military members in the group, the other one being a French Air Force officer. Commandant Pierre Vadeboncoeur was actually a most pleasant man, on top of being a fighter pilot, like Lilya. That Vadeboncoeur had fought Soviet pilots during Stalin's failed attempt at invading Poland and the Baltic States in 1953 had not soured Lilya's relations with him, her having judged Stalin's actions at the time to be an act of folly from a paranoid, power-drunk dictator. In fact, French-Soviet relations had become quite good in the past few years, while those between the Soviet Union and the United States were now at least at the thawing point. Once inside the

wide locker room situated on the LIBERTY's side of the docking airlock, the passengers of the THUNDERBOLT were greeted by the commanding officer of the U.S.S. LIBERTY, Brigadier General James Mathison, a veteran astronaut from the U.S. Space Corps. Like his crewmembers present in the locker room, Mathison wore the dark blue work uniform of the Space Corps, while the newcomers wore spacesuits with their visors opened.

"Welcome aboard the U.S.S. LIBERTY, ladies and gentlemen. Since you are probably anxious to get out of your spacesuits, we will lead you at once to your respective cabins, where you will be able to change and freshen up. Then, I will see you in the main crew lounge in ninety minutes, where you will get a pre-departure mission briefing. On this, grab your kit bags and follow me. Make sure that you always have one of your magnetized boot soles touching the deck's surface, so that you don't end up flying inside the communication tubes."

The scientists and specialists, most of whom were not experienced astronauts, then cautiously followed Mathison out of the locker room and into a cylindrical communication tube leading up towards the saucer section of the ship. One graying astronomer still managed to fly off the deck mid-way, with one of the crewmembers escorting the new arrivals having to grab him by one leg and return him to the deck, where the magnetized soles of his spacesuit's boots could get a grip on the paper-thin plate of steel covering the floor. Lilya, having been a cosmonaut for twenty years now and being in fact the dean of the Soviet cosmonaut corps, had no trouble staying down on the deck of the tube and was actually finding amusing the klutziness of her companions in a zero-gravity environment. However, things got a lot better for the newcomers when they arrived at the two huge contra-rotating carrousel habitats which made up the main section of the ship. Each carrousel, separated from the other by airtight partitions and sets of airlocks, measured 160 meters in diameter at its top deck, with a usable deck width of four meters. Lilya couldn't help stare for a moment at the curved deck of the top level of Carrousel 'A' when she stepped on it and felt the 0.9 G artificial gravity created by the centrifugal force of the rotating carrousel. The deck actually disappeared in the distance as the curved ceiling hid it from direct line of sight. From her familiarization classes she had followed to learn about the U.S.S. LIBERTY's layout and ship's systems, she already knew that the upper level decks of the two carrousels each had a circumference of 502 meters at floor level, while the circumference of the lower deck, two levels down, was 565 meters, with an astonishing total usable deck surface per carrousel of 6,400

square meters. Half of the width of the upper level she now stood on was occupied by various crew facilities, like the crew lounge, the crew cafeteria and a bar-lounge, each featuring large display screens camouflaged as windows with views to the outside, where pre-recorded video scenes taken in various locations on Earth were displayed in one-year-long closed loops. The other half width of the deck was in essence a closed-loop running track, on which crewmembers could either walk or run to exercise themselves. The managers of the Soviet space program had called all that 'extravagant and wasteful luxuries' but Lilya strongly disagreed with them. Her past missions aboard the MIR space station had shown her how important the human psychological factor was to the efficiency and good health of cosmonauts. She thus could only applaud the Americans' decision to equip their two spaceships with such carrousel, which in essence provided Earth-level artificial gravity and a pleasant living and working environment to its crew during its two-year-plus mission.

From that point, the group of new arrivals split up in smaller groups, each led by a crewmember holding a list of cabins and of their occupants. On her part, Lilya was led to Cabin A-12, on the middle deck of Carrousel 'A', by a young American man wearing the dark blue two-piece, loose-fitting work utility uniform of the U.S. Space Corps.

"Here you go, Colonel: your cabin for this trip to Mars. It shares a bathroom with Cabin A-11, which is occupied by a woman, so you won't have to worry about, uh, undue contacts."

"By undue contacts, I suppose that you mean having a man sharing the bathroom with me, Sergeant?" asked Lilya, amused.

"Yes, Colonel! In fact, the subject of interpersonal relations between crewmembers will be covered by General Mathison during his incoming meeting in the main crew lounge."

"The main crew lounge... We didn't have a proper crew lounge aboard MIR. Well, thank you for guiding me, Sergeant. I will be on time for the meeting at the crew lounge."

"Yes ma'am!" replied the NCO, saluting her. Lilya returned his salute, then opened the sliding door of her cabin and entered it, her kit bag in one hand. She already knew what the layout of the standard cabins was on the U.S.S. LIBERTY, but her classes had not prepared her for the level of attention to comfort and relaxation she found inside. While everything had been designed to be both light and of simple

construction, the pastel blue-green walls and indirect lighting made for a relaxing environment. One of the walls of the living room she was now in featured a large, flat television screen of the kind Americans could now buy on the market and which made most Soviet citizens green with envy. That television screen was in turn made to look like a window. Seeing an envelope taped to the large chest situated under the TV screen, a curious Lilya let down her kit bag and went to grab the envelope and open it. Extracting two folded sheets of paper from it and looking at them told her that they were explanations notes on how to use the television. One paragraph in particular excited her at once: it described a feature of the set that allowed a particular type of video scenery to be played in closed loop, to make the screen look like a window to an Earth vista, on top of being able to play a wide variety of movies, TV documentaries, sport events or general address messages from the ship's commander. Switching on the television, Lilya followed the instructions which then appeared on a small side-display, in order to review the choice of Earth vistas available. Her heart jumped with joy when she saw a particular choice as she scrolled down the list of vistas available.

"Lake Baikal?! Hell, I'm a taker!"

Selecting that choice, she then saw a familiar scenery appear on the screen, displayed in vivid colors and showing the huge open expanse of Lake Baikal, along with one of its forested shores, as if seen from the window of a house situated on the shore of the lake. There was even a soundtrack that went with the video, with the noise of birds singing and waves washing on the shore. Going to sit on the comfortable sofa set opposite the wall screen, Lilya watched for a minute the video, which the explanations sheet said had been filmed in continuous mode during a whole year from an old house next to the lake. She finally got up with regret from her sofa and switched off the television set, then went to the alcove set at one end of the living room, where she was able to get out of her spacesuit, which she then secured in place to a special support frame before connecting her spacesuit to a diagnostic and recharging box. Next, she carried her kit bag to the adjacent bedroom, finding there a comfortable bed of standard size with drawers built in its base. She took a few minutes to distribute her personal belongings into the captain bed's drawers and in a small closet, finishing by hanging up on a wall hook a framed photo of her parents. Next, she went to quickly inspect the small but well-equipped bathroom she shared with another cabin. The two access doors of the bathroom, one per cabin, could be locked from the inside to provide intimacy while using it, but also had large multilingual signs reminding users to unlock the doors when not in use. Lilya

nodded her head in approval as she looked at the shower stall, toilet and sink inside. She then noticed another multilingual sign on one of the walls, next to the sink unit, and got closer to read it.

“Do not use bathroom if flashing red lamp announces an incoming zero-gravity environment. A zero-G toilet and shower stall for emergency use are situated at the end of the hallway, next to the staircase to the upper level. In case of sudden loss of centrifugal gravity, this toilet will automatically seal itself to avoid any leakage... hum, they really thought about everything on this ship.”

Lilya didn't have to think long before deciding who had made all this possible: this had the hallmarks of Ingrid Dows' attention to details and care about seemingly innocuous things which actually ended up making big differences in a design. On top of being a deadly adversary in any air combat, Ingrid Dows was also acknowledged in Moscow to be a top notch aerospace engineer and a highly skilled astronaut who also had proven to have an uncommonly open mind, as her invitation for a total of no less than seventeen Soviet men and women to participate in this Mars mission showed. More than satisfied with her living quarters, Lilya looked at her wristwatch and saw that she still had plenty of time before the scheduled meeting with General Mathison. Deciding to take that spare time to explore a bit the ship, she left her cabin and climbed to the upper deck level of her carrousel.

Once on the upper deck, Lilya started walking calmly down the running track while looking at the facilities which she encountered. The side of the track next to the partition wall separating the two carrousel of the ship slid along with a one-meter-wide fixed sidewalk that allowed crewmembers to transition from the artificial gravity of Carrousel 'A' to the zero-gravity of the airlocks which linked the carrousel to the rest of the ship. However, Lilya knew that, apart from the contra-rotating carrousel, which consisted of two huge pressurized rings turning inside magnetic levitation closed-loop tunnels, the rest of the ship, except for small sections containing the command complex, the nuclear reactor plants and the nuclear rocket engines, was little more than a huge collection of fuel and oxidizer tanks contained inside an arrowhead-shaped aerodynamic body that had acted as a lifting body and wing for its maiden takeoff and which now provided thermal and anti-radiation protection to both the tanks and the ship's living and working systems. Even with its tanks presently filled with more than 60,000 tons of cryogenic liquid hydrogen destined to fuel its twelve PHOEBUS-2B nuclear rocket

engines during its return trip to Mars, the U.S.S. LIBERTY would easily float if somehow put down on the surface of the ocean. Still, Soviet rocket designers and political leaders could only be jealous of this extraordinary ship of space, which had no equal but its sistership, the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION. From what she had overheard during her months of training in Vandenberg, Lilya knew that the CONSTITUTION was presently being refurbished and improved in advance of its future second space mission. However, she still didn't know what that mission would be. Another trip to Mars, maybe? Right now, only Ingrid Dows and a very few key American managers and leaders knew the answer to that. In fact, many things concerning the American space program were still a mystery to most people. The one thing that Lilya knew was that a sort of gigantic ramp some twelve kilometers long was being built in Vandenberg. Due to its sheer size, its existence had been impossible to hide, but its exact future function was still the matter of speculations. Lilya strongly suspected that it was going to be some sort of launching ramp for rockets, but couldn't figure out what kind of advantage such a huge and expensive-to-build thing would bring to the American space program.

After walking by the crew cafeteria, the bar-lounge, the tea lounge, the quartermaster section, the ship's library, the cinema room, the administrative section and the command section, Lilya ended up at her starting spot and, after a look at her watch, decided to go to the crew lounge for the meeting. There, she found about half of the people who had arrived aboard with her already seated and waiting. Seeing the handsome Commandant Pierre Vadeboncoeur among the ones present, she went to sit next to the French Air Force fighter pilot and smiled to him.

"High again! What did you think of your cabin, Commandant?"

"That it is positively marvelous. That television system showing Earth vistas is a true stroke of genius, in my opinion: it will do miracles for the crew's morale during this long mission."

"Indeed! May I ask what vista you selected to be your 'outside' view?"

"You may, Colonel: I chose the view of Paris taken from near the top of the Eiffel Tower. It will remind me of my native home city. And you, Colonel?"

"Please, let's drop this rank business during this mission. Simply call me 'Lilya'."

"And you may call me 'Pierre'. So, what vista did you choose, Lilya?"

"Lake Baikal. It is probably one of the most beautiful lakes you could find in the World, on top of being by far the largest."

Vadeboncoeur's face then reflected dreamy thoughts as he spoke softly.

"Lake Baikal... One of my old comrades who fought with the Normandie-Niemen Squadron in the Soviet Union during World War 2 told me about it, having visited it during the war. He loved the place, its savage and pristine beauty and its vastness."

"I love it too. Seeing it will greatly help me to relax after work. Ha, here is General Mathison!"

The pair, like the rest of the people in the crew lounge, fell silent as Mathison took a standing position at one end of the section occupied by the new arrivals. After quickly looking around at the attendees, he then started speaking in a strong, firm voice.

"Good morning, or should I say 'good evening' to you, ladies and gentlemen. While you flew off from Vandenberg in the early morning, this ship functions on Greenwich Universal Time. You thus may now set your watches to 19:47 hours."

Mathison waited a few seconds while the new crewmembers set their watches to the new hour, then resumed his presentation.

"Now, I know that you all received detailed indoctrination courses about this ship, its layout and its systems and facilities. I will thus mostly cover more human-related points of our mission to Mars. First, as you know already, our mission is destined to be a follow-up to the CONSTITUTION's mission and will build on what it found on the Red Planet. Basically, we will build a semi-permanent base inside the largest cave and tunnel complex found by General Dows, which is connected to an extensive underground aquifer of brine. Inside those caves, that base will be well protected from the radiations constantly raining on the surface of Mars. Once that base will be operational, two of our teams will start covering the areas of the Valles Marineris which have not yet been explored on the ground by our first mission. Two other exploration teams will be launched separately and will land respectively near Mars' North Pole and on the volcanic plateau of Tharsis Rise. From there, we will decide our next moves depending on what we find. You will notice that the crew for this mission is markedly larger than the one of the CONSTITUTION on its first mission. That's because we will send more people than the CONSTITUTION down on the surface of Mars, with more materiel and vehicles, in order to explore a much larger area. Also, an extensive mapping and analysis team will work from this ship to learn as much as we can from orbit about Mars and its surrounding space. That's basically it for the moment about our mission goals. Now, about the human factors. Let's talk first about sex."

Mathison smiled in amusement as all the people present suddenly froze and stared at him or bent forward to better listen.

“As the French often say, we Americans have a reputation for being rather prudish, at least in public. That is even more true when it comes to our government and armed forces. However, the U.S. Space Corps was created and is commanded by General Ingrid Dows, who would be the first to acknowledge that she has a reputation as someone who likes her fun and is quite liberal-thinking. I will thus list to you now her directives about interpersonal relations between the members of this crew during this long space mission. I emphasized the word ‘long’ because two years of forced celibacy can be a very long period indeed for young and healthy adults when stuck aboard a ship with companions of the opposite sex. General Dows’ rules are actually simple: abstinence is still the safest rule of conduct during space missions, but if you have to break that abstinence, do take your precautions. I have no wish to return to Earth with a nursery and daycare full of babies and small children. Romantic disputes are also not conducive to an efficient and quiet work environment. If you decide to enter into a relation with another crewmember, please be discrete about it. Also, don’t impose yourself on others of the opposite sex. I will be very severe about cases of sexual harassment, so make sure that your relation is strictly consensual, on both sides. Basically, conduct yourselves like responsible and respectful adults and be discrete about your private lives. Next, alcohol consumption. You all know that there is a bar-lounge on this ship that will sell alcoholic drinks to the crewmembers, but that doesn’t mean that you can get drunk at will. The bartenders will have the authority to refuse further drinks to crewmembers who will start showing signs of intoxication. Written records of individual consumption will be kept by the bar and you can be assured that I will keep a sharp eye on those records. I have nothing against the occasional drink, but don’t turn into a bar fixture or I will be the one to fix your case. Those rules will apply to all, Americans and foreigners alike, and any reports of misconduct will be forwarded to your respective governments on return from this mission. So, if you hope to go on another space mission with us in the future, please behave! Well, that’s it for my morality class. In terms of crew entertainment, we have a library, a cinema with a well-stocked video and film library and we will also receive regularly from Earth retransmissions of televised news bulletins, sport matches and other public entertainment events. It will also be possible for you to send and receive personal messages to and from Earth. Do you have any questions at this time?”

A few hands rose at once, with Mathison pointing at a Dutch woman who was an expert in bio-chemistry.

“Yes, Doctor VanDusen?”

“General, I heard rumors that a baby was born aboard the CONSTITUTION during its trip to Mars. Is that true?”

Mathison sighed, having preferred to keep that little detail under wraps.

“Yes, it is true, Doctor VanDusen. It was a perfectly healthy boy and he was 22 months old by the time that the CONSTITUTION returned into Earth orbit. For your professional information, the pregnancy and birth went without a hitch, thanks to the artificial gravity and excellent medical facilities aboard the CONSTITUTION. While I don’t wish to duplicate that experience on the LIBERTY, we have the facilities and supplies to handle similar cases...if they happen. Next question!”

This time, it was an American geologist who spoke up.

“My name is William Conway and I am a geologist, General. Will there be religious services available aboard this ship during our trip?”

“Uh, not really, Mister Conway. Please understand that, while vast, the space on this ship has to be fully dedicated to our primary mission and our living quarters are already filled with scientists and specialists like you, so we couldn’t afford the luxury of having a dedicated chaplain aboard. However, you will find a small interdenominational chapel on Deck A-2, where you will be able to pray in peace and quiet.”

What Mathison didn’t say was that the relations between the U.S. Space Corps and the various religious orders in the United States were decidedly on the frosty side, thanks to the controversy concerning the reports of Martian life brought back by the CONSTITUTION. Thankfully, nobody else raised the subject of religion and he was soon able to declare an end to the meeting. However, he discretely made a sign to Lilya Litvyak to stay a while longer and went to speak with her under one of the lemon trees planted around the lounge.

“Colonel Litvyak, know first that I am genuinely happy to have you aboard my ship for this mission. Our two nations may have fought each other in recent past years, but this is a peaceful scientific mission with an international crew and we certainly can use a veteran cosmonaut like you. Be assured that I will use your competences to the full on this mission. Right now, I can tell you that you will be the deputy commander of our surface exploration crew on Mars, on top of leading one of our four exploration heavy rovers, with a crew of ten persons directly under your command in that rover.”

Not having hoped for this much before, Lilya came to attention and saluted Mathison.

“You can count on me, General. Thank you for your confidence in me.”

“And I know that you will not disappoint my confidence in you, Colonel Litvyak.” replied Mathison while returning her salute. More than satisfied, Lilya then pivoted on her heels and walked away, watched by Mathison.

‘She may be a Soviet officer, but she seems like a really decent person.’ thought Mathison to himself. *‘Hopefully, politics will not rear its ugly head on my ship during this mission.’*

08:03 (Universal Time)

Saturday, August 2, 1975 ‘C’

Bridge of the U.S.S. LIBERTY

Low Earth orbit

“Attention to all the crew! This is your commander speaking! We will boost out of Earth orbit in five minutes. You must be wearing your spacesuit by then and be strapped to your seats by the time our engines will ignite.”

Having done his public address on the ship’s intercom, James Mathison then looked at his flight crew of three men and one woman.

“Status review on our engines, people!”

“Our twelve nuclear rocket engines are at idle power and ready for ignition, General.”

“Chemical rocket engines ready for ignition, General.”

Mathison nodded his head at that. On the trip to Mars by the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION, its ten powerful F-1 chemical rocket engines, which burned a mix of kerosene and liquid oxygen, had not been used, their fuel and oxidizer tanks having intentionally been left empty to minimize the mass of the ship for its boost phase. However, this time the tanks of the U.S.S. LIBERTY had been filled to the brim for their departure, to add extra thrusting power in the initial boost phase. Because of the wide goals of its mission, the LIBERTY had been loaded up with the maximum mission payload possible, on top of having a crew nearly double that of the CONSTITUTION on its first Mars trip. General Dows had thus decided to use the ten Rocketdyne F-1 rocket engines of the LIBERTY,

which were originally planned to be used only during the maiden takeoff and climb to orbit of the spaceship. Now, their total thrust of 7,000 tons would be added to the 410 tons of thrust from the twelve PHOEBUS-2B nuclear rocket engines which were the main space engines of the ship. Still, that massive amount of thrust would only result in an initial acceleration of 0.11 G, due to the staggering mass of 67,900 metric tons of the fully fueled U.S.S. LIBERTY when it would boost out of orbit. However, contrary to the F-1 chemical rocket engines, which had fuel for only a few minutes of burn, the PHOEBUS-2B nuclear rockets were going to burn for over one hour before shutting down, leaving the LIBERTY to coast in freefall down its trajectory to Mars. What few knew apart from Ingrid Dows and senior commanders of the Space Corps was that newer, more fuel-efficient engines were being developed for the second deep-space mission of the CONSTITUTION. From what Mathison knew, those new magneto-plasma engines, while having a weak thrust, had a fuel efficiency ten times better than those of nuclear rockets, which were themselves more than twice as fuel efficient as the best conventional chemical rockets. With those new engines, what would normally be space trips taking many years would be cut to months, thus opening the way for manned exploration missions to the confines of the Solar System. The future indeed looked bright for the U.S. Space Corps and for the American space program.

Carefully watching the master clock on the bridge, Mathison waited until the last thirty seconds before giving more orders.

"Start throttling up the nuclear engines! Set the chemical engines to full thrust and be ready to ignite them at my signal. Navigator, are you satisfied with our calculated boost time and trajectory?"

"Yes, General!"

"Flight engineer, rise gradually our nuclear engines to full thrust. To all the crew, full engines ignition in fifteen seconds... Five, four, three, two, one, ENGINES IGNITION, FULL THRUST!"

Mathison's voice was then nearly covered by the thunderous roar of the ship's engines, which was transmitted via the structure of the ship. Mathison felt himself being slightly pushed into his seat by the 0.11 G acceleration. However weak that acceleration felt, it was enough to make the massive ship leave its low orbit and rise, gradually accelerating towards the orbital velocity needed to insert itself into its calculated Mars transfer orbit.

Mathison then grinned inside his spacesuit's sealed helmet as the chemical rockets were still roaring.

"Mars, here we come!"

CHAPTER 12 – MISSING NUKES



15:53 (China Time)

Tuesday, September 9, 1975 'C'

Office of the Chinese Communist Party Chairman

Temporary capital of Xi'an, People's Republic of China (PRC)

Deng Xiaoping was sometimes tempted to drop everything and quit, so immense was the job of rebuilding China after nearly three decades of mismanagement and incompetent administration by various political demagogues. However, he knew that, if he gave up, his replacements would probably be more of the same kind of incompetent demagogues who were big on political slogans but short on economic management skills. Thus, the thoughts of more mismanagement of the country kept him persevering in his job, trying to reform China's economy while keeping a solid grip on both the party and the country. The fact that he had to move the administrative center of China to the old imperial capital of Xi'an, after the nuclear destruction by the Americans of both Beijing and Shanghai, had only made his job more complicated. At least, the clique of old guard generals who had secretly jailed him with the eventual goal of executing him was gone, either killed in the American retaliatory strikes or purged after younger officers had revolted and taken Deng's side.

Deng was in the process of reading the latest and rather discouraging statistics about national rice production when his intercom buzzed, prompting him in pressing its 'talk' button.

"Yes?"

"Comrade Chairman, General Xu Aoban is here to see you. He says that it is about a most urgent matter."

"Very well, let him in!"

Deng stayed in his chair when Xu Aoban walked in, but gave him a welcoming smile.

"What can I do for you, General Xu?"

Xu didn't smile back, keeping instead a concerned look as he offered a file to Deng across his desk.

"I am afraid that I have bad news for you, Comrade Chairman. This is a report from the officer in charge of cleaning up the debris at the site of our Lop Nur nuclear test facility."

"And?" replied Deng, starting to feel dread after hearing the mention of Lop Nur.

"Major General Liang Dong reports in it that a weapons storage bunker situated at the periphery of the crater caused by the American nuclear bomb which destroyed our facility was finally dug up. Unfortunately, the two nuclear bombs which were supposed to be in that bunker when the American strike occurred were nowhere to be found. We basically have lost track of those two weapons."

Suddenly angry, Deng shot out of his chair and nearly screamed in Xu's face.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN, YOU LOST TRACK OF TWO ATOMIC WEAPONS?"

"Just that, Comrade Chairman." replied Xu with difficulty. "According to the surviving archives in Lop Nur, the bunker still contained two thermonuclear warheads when it was last inspected the day before the American strike. However, that bunker was found to be empty when our men dug up its entrance."

"But, nuclear weapons are not supposed to disappear like this! They are supposed to be tightly controlled, with written records of every time they are moved."

"That is normally the case, Comrade Chairman. However, we suspect that the general in charge of the Lop Nur facility while you were in prison may have illegally moved those two weapons, without following the standard procedures. Since that general is now dead, along with all of his staff, it will be quite difficult to retrace the movement of those two atomic bombs."

Deng sat back heavily, dread filling him.

"How powerful were those two bombs, General Xu?"

"They were two of our newest, airdropped thermonuclear bombs, each with a yield of three megatons, enough to completely destroy a large city."

"And how easy would they be to detonate, General?"

Xu instinctively shrank at that question, realizing that Deng was not going to like his answer.

"Actually, not having been declared fully operational, they had not yet been connected to a coded command box, Comrade Chairman. A simple switch could be connected to the firing circuits of our bombs, which would then be ready to be detonated by various means, including timing mechanisms, direct command wires or radio signals." That left Deng speechless for a moment, too horrified to speak.

"So, you are saying that we have two missing nuclear weapons and that someone may have them and would be able to detonate them at will?"

"In a nutshell, yes, Comrade Chairman."

Hiding his face in his hands for a second, Deng then pointed an index at Xu.

"General, finding these two nuclear bombs is now our top priority in terms of national security. Understood?"

"Yes, Comrade Chairman! I will advise you the moment that I get more information about them."

Xu then saluted Deng before pivoting on his heels and walking out of the office. Now alone, Xiaoping sat back in his chair, both discouraged and worried. The question of whether to inform the Americans about this or not, in order to avoid retaliations from them if they were hit by one of the missing weapons, came to his mind. However, he dismissed that idea after a few seconds of reflection: confessing such a lack of control would make China lose face completely and may in fact attract preemptive strikes from the Americans. He suddenly swore violently to himself when he realized that, maybe, the Americans would not be the sole possible target for those who may have stolen those two nuclear weapons.

07:46 (China Time)

Monday, September 15, 1975 'C'

Office of the Chinese Communist Party Chairman

Xi'an, PRC

Deng had a bad feeling the moment that he stepped into the antechamber to his office and found General Xu waiting for him there, sitting in a sofa and watched by Deng's secretary. Xu got on his feet when he saw Deng enter and saluted him.

"Comrade Chairman!"

Deng nodded his head in response and pointed the door of his office.

"Good morning, General! Please follow me in."

The two of them walked into the office, with Deng closing the door and locking it behind him before looking at Xu.

"So, what do you have for me, General?"

"New information about our two missing bombs, Comrade Chairman. I am afraid that things are becoming even worse."

Deng closed his eyes for a moment while inhaling deeply, then looked back at Xu.

"Go on, General!"

"Well, what I have are mainly speculations based on secondary information, Comrade Chairman. After analyzing all the remaining intact data and paperwork at Lop Nur, we found the log book of the facility's main access gate. In the night after the last recorded inspection of the weapons storage bunker, a small army convoy of three vehicles entered the site, to then exit some three hours later. The officer that annotated the log book then scribbled in it that General Jin Tao, in charge of the facility, personally ordered that the convoy be let in and out without inspection. What really got our attention was the fact that the officer of the watch also noted down that a Korean officer accompanied the Chinese personnel of the convoy. My bet is thus that, for some crazy reason, our old clique of generals gave away two of our thermonuclear bombs to Kim Il-Sung's regime, and this without any official transfer paperwork and with no formal authorization from the Party leadership."

Cold sweat broke out at once on Deng's forehead: even by the standards of the Chinese Communist Party, Kim Il-Sung was considered a brutal, soulless and nearly psychopathic leader. That such a man could be in possession of two thermonuclear weapons was enough of an idea to horrify about anybody. Feeling his head swim, Deng hurried to go sit on a nearby sofa and took a moment to regain control of his emotions. He then looked back at Xu, who had patiently waited while standing still.

"Alert our agents in Korea and make them discretely look for any sign of our two missing weapons. Do not let the Koreans know that we are investigating them."

“Understood, Comrade Chairman! We will inquire in the most discreet manner possible.”

18:19 (China Time)

Tuesday, September 23, 1975 ‘C’

Main gate of the Chinese embassy in Pyongyang

Democratic People’s Republic of Korea

With twice as many Korean policemen than usual posted on the outer side of the main gate of the embassy he was guarding with his men, Lieutenant Hua Yanbin strongly suspected that something was afoot. The approach of a senior member of the embassy staff, who he knew to be an undercover agent of the Ministry of State Security, only reinforced his impression. He did salute Chan Wenyuan when he stopped closed to him near the iron grill gate. Chan, who wore a long raincoat to combat the light drizzle falling this evening, frowned on seeing the abnormal number of Korean policemen standing on the other side of the gate, some of them with their backs nearly glued to the gate itself.

“Lieutenant, make those goons back off from our gate. I am expecting one of our citizens who must gain access to the embassy grounds.”

“Yes sir!” replied Yanbin, who then got very close to the gate and spoke in a strong voice in Korean to the senior Korean police officer present.

“Hey, could you move your men away from our embassy gate? They are nearly infringing on embassy grounds.”

To Yanbin’s irritation and anger, the Korean simply gave him a disdainful look but said nothing and didn’t move away with his men. Getting pissed, the young lieutenant looked at his four soldiers on duty at the gate.

“CHAMBER A ROUND IN YOUR RIFLES AND FIX BAYONETS! SERGEANT SOONG, CALL OUR RESERVE SECTION AND TELL THEM TO COME TO THE MAIN GATE AT THE DOUBLE.”

“YES SIR!”

The senior Korean officer, who apparently could understand Chinese, looked with alarm as Yanbin’s soldiers loaded their rifles and started to fix bayonets on their AK-47 assault rifles. That was when Yanbin spoke to him again, this time in a noticeably stronger tone.

"I ASKED YOU TO MOVE YOUR MEN AWAY FROM THE GATE. IF YOU DON'T, WE WILL HAVE TO PROD YOU AWAY WITH OUR BAYONETS. YOU HAVE FIVE SECONDS TO COMPLY."

With Chan Wenyuan watching on that scene, the Korean officer hesitated for a moment, then gave a brief order to his men, who then took three steps away from the gate, but no more. That Korean then smiled to Yanbin in a most insulting way.

"Satisfied, Lieutenant?"

Yanbin was furiously tempted to draw his pistol and shoot that arrogant bastard, but he managed to contain his anger.

"Don't force me to repeat my warning, Captain."

Both the Koreans and the Chinese stared hard at each other, weapons firmly held at the ready and with tension now quite high. A moment later, Chan approached Yanbin and whispered in his ear.

"Our citizen is now approaching from the left. Whatever happens, she must gain access to the embassy grounds. Unlock the gate and stand ready to cover her entrance."

"Yes sir!"

Yanbin, looking to his left, saw a woman carrying an umbrella and walking on the sidewalk, approaching the main gate at a regular step. Himself getting close to the gate, Yanbin unlocked the iron pedestrian grill next to the guardhouse and discretely signaled to his men to get closer. However, the Korean officer saw that and started barking orders to his policemen, who then formed a human barrier to block the approach of the woman. The latter hesitated and slowed down, now a mere ten paces from the pedestrian gate. She then spoke in Korean to the policemen.

"I am a Chinese citizen! Let me enter the embassy of my country."

"Show me your papers!" replied the Korean officer. In response, the woman started opening her purse and searching in it while advancing towards the Koreans...and the gate. Chan Wenyuan, tense as a steel bar, spoke again to Yanbin in a low voice.

"She must gain access, Lieutenant: she has information vital to the national security of our country. Don't hesitate to use force if need be."

"But that could cause a serious diplomatic incident, sir."

"Our country may face much graver consequences than a simple diplomatic spat if that woman is prevented from bringing in her information, Lieutenant."

Understanding that something of grave importance was now at play and seeing that his backup section was arriving at a run, Yanbin looked briefly at his four soldiers.

“Be ready to effect a brief sortie with me to snatch that woman and bring her into embassy grounds.”

Things then happened very quickly. As the Korean officer was about to take the passport offered by the woman, the latter broke off in a sudden sprint, pushing the Korean officer out of her way. Unfortunately for her, a Korean policeman then tripped her, making her fall on her belly a mere six paces from the pedestrian gate. Yanbin then knew that he had to move now.

“LET’S GRAB HER, MEN!”

Throwing the pedestrian gate open, Yanbin violently pushed away the first Korean who tried to block his path to the woman. Now nearly on top of the woman and with eight Korean policemen converging on him and the woman, Yanbin grabbed the woman’s right forearm and started dragging her towards the gate, with his four soldiers covering his flanks with their rifles, their bayonets pointed at the now hesitant Koreans. He and the woman were nearly at the gate when the enraged Korean officer, who had his pistol out, shot once, hitting the woman squarely in the back and making her scream in pain. Transported with rage, Yanbin in turn raised his pistol and shot the Korean officer between the eyes while still dragging the woman. With now twelve Chinese soldiers pointing their assault rifles at them, the eight remaining Korean policemen hesitated for an instant, giving time to Yanbin to drag the woman through the pedestrian gate and into embassy grounds. His four soldiers quickly retreated from the street and closed the gate, locking it and pointing again their rifles at the Koreans.

“FORM A HUMAN WALL BETWEEN THE KOREANS AND THIS WOMAN, QUICKLY!”

Now on safe ground, Yanbin was able to finally check on the woman. The Korean’s bullet had pierced her left lung, passing very close to her heart but missing it. However, pink foam was already coming out of her mouth and her eyes were glazing up. Kneeling next to her, Chan Yenyuan spoke urgently to her, realizing that she could well die within seconds.

“Ziyi, what did you learn? Tell me, quick!”

When the woman spoke, it was in a near whisper, with Yanbin able to hear her at the same time as Chan did.

“Weapons...already on their way...to America...they...th...”

Her last word was left unfinished, while her eyes became fixed. Checking quickly her pulse, Yanbin found none and gave a discouraged look to Chan.

"She is gone, sir. I am sorry that I couldn't save her."

"You did all that you could, Lieutenant. On her part, Ziyi did her duty to the ultimate end. Have her body carried inside the embassy by your men but keep a solid guard force at the gate. I must now send an urgent message to Xi'an before the Koreans could try to jam our radio transmissions."

Yanbin looked with shock at the state security man, realizing that something of extreme importance was now happening.

"The Koreans...jamming our transmissions? May I ask what is happening, sir?"

Chan gave him a somber look and answered in a near whisper, so that the soldiers around him could not hear him.

"Keep this to yourself, Lieutenant, but the sheer survival of our country is now at stake. I now have to go. Treat her body with utter respect: she is worthy of being called a true national heroine."

Chan then got up and ran away towards the embassy's main building, leaving Yanbin and three of his soldiers to delicately lift the young woman's body and carry it inside.

19:38 (China Time)

Official residence of Chairman Deng Xiaoping

Old imperial palace in Xi'an

Deng Xiaoping was finishing his supper with his wife when General Xu Aoban was introduced into their dining room by a servant. Xiaoping noticed at once the agitated state of Xu.

"General Xu? What do you have for me?"

"Could we speak in private, Comrade Chairman? I have urgent and alarming news for you."

"Then, let's move to my private study. If you will excuse me, dear."

"Go right ahead, my dear husband."

Leaving the dining room with Xu, Deng led him to his upper floor private study, where he closed the door behind him before looking at his visitor.

"So, what is it, General?"

“Barely more than one hour ago, one of our agents who had infiltrated the Korean leadership entourage tried to get inside our embassy in Pyongyang, having warned our resident senior agent there that she had some very important information to pass. Unfortunately, it seems that the Koreans got wind of that and reinforced their police checkpoint at the embassy’s gate. Our agent still attempted to get inside the embassy grounds but got shot in the process and died shortly thereafter. She however had time to say a few last words to our senior agent after our soldiers succeeded into grabbing her. Her exact words, according to our senior agent, were ‘Weapons already on their way to America’. She unfortunately couldn’t say more before dying, Comrade Chairman.”

“But it was already plenty.” replied Xiaoping, his expression now hard as stone. “We can safely bet that the Koreans did not send our two thermonuclear bombs to the United States simply as gifts and you can imagine the reaction of the Americans if two of their cities get incinerated by thermonuclear bombs.”

“I unfortunately can, Comrade Chairman.”

“If one or both bombs explodes on American territory, would the Americans be able to tell who sent them, General?”

“Who sent them: not really, Comrade Chairman. However, our scientists told me that the original manufacturer of a nuclear weapon can be identified by the type and proportion of radioactive isotopes released by a nuclear explosion. Since the Americans were able to collect air and ground samples around Taipei after it was destroyed by one of our missiles, they will have no problem establishing that those two stolen bombs were built in China.”

Xiaoping had to go sit behind his work desk, horrified by what that meant for the future of his country. After a long moment analyzing that information in his mind, he could think of only one possible solution to avoid a cataclysmic end to China and extended a hand towards the telephone set on his desk.

“I believe that we now have no choice but to warn the Americans about the threat against them, if we want to avoid their blind, massive nuclear retaliation.”

07:08 (Washington Time) / 20:08 (China Time)

Oval Office, The White House

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

Robert Kennedy, still unshaven and wearing a robe over his pajama, grabbed his telephone receiver on the presidential desk and brought it to his left ear. The only other person present in the Oval Office was his military aide, who had warned him that an unscheduled call from China's Deng Xiaoping had come through. Thankfully, Xiaoping had a translator with him, so Robert didn't have to wait for a Chinese linguist to come to the White House.

"Chairman Deng, to what do I owe you this unexpected call?"

He heard in the background a translator repeat his words in Mandarin before getting a translated response to his question.

"Mister President, I am calling to warn you of a very grave and imminent danger threatening your nation. I recently discovered that, during the time I was being jailed in China by the generals who attacked Taiwan, those same generals apparently gave to the Koreans two of our thermonuclear bombs, which were in storage in Lop Nur at the time."

Blood rushed to Robert Kennedy's head on hearing that and he nearly shouted in the receiver.

"They gave two hydrogen bombs to the Koreans? Were they mad?"

"Probably, especially if you consider their foolish decision to nuke Taipei and launch an invasion of Taiwan nearly two years ago. Anyway, on learning about this, I ordered my intelligence network in Korea to investigate this matter. I got back some crucial information about two hours ago via an agent who died in the process of passing on that information to us. She couldn't say much before dying but her last words were 'The weapons are already on their way to America'. I am calling you to both warn you about this imminent threat and also to assure you that China did not initiate or encourage this attack by Korea. Mister President? Mister President?"

Robert was finally able to get out of the near-catatonic trance that had frozen him speechless.

"Yes, I hear you, Chairman Deng. Sorry for the delay in responding to you. Do you have any idea where these two bombs are headed and when and where they will arrive in the United States?"

"Unfortunately, we know nothing more than what I just told you, Mister President. However, my military staff believes that the most probable mode of delivery will be by ship, with the bombs hidden among some kind of cargo."

"That sounds logical to me. How powerful are these two nuclear devices?"

It was the turn of Deng to pause before answering in a reluctant tone.

“They are thermonuclear devices with a yield of three megatons for each weapon, Mister President.”

Robert Kennedy felt as if a shower of ice cubes was poured over him on hearing those last words.

“Very well, Chairman Deng: we will mobilize all our available means to counter that threat from Korea. I am ready to believe you when you say that China’s present leadership is not responsible for this and I promise restraint towards China in our response. However, I can’t promise any leniency towards Korea, especially if any American city or port is destroyed by those two bombs.”

“That is most understandable, Mister President. I would however urge you to contemplate the effects that traveling clouds of radioactive dust from strikes against Korea would have on my country, which sits next door to Korea.”

“I understand your concerns, Chairman Deng, and I promise you that we will keep our response commensurate to whatever happens next. I will keep you apprised of any new developments on our side. Thank you for warning me, Chairman Deng.”

Robert then slowly hung up his receiver and thought for a few seconds about what to do next. Grabbing again his telephone receiver, he used a direct encrypted line to the Pentagon and called the National Military Command Center, getting a response after one ring.

“NMCC, Colonel Blanchard speaking!”

“Colonel Blanchard, this is the President speaking. We have a grave national emergency situation on our hands. Chairman Deng of China just called me to warn us that Korea has managed to steal two Chinese thermonuclear bombs and that they have information saying that those bombs are now on their way to the United States, possibly hidden aboard some cargo ships. First, I want you to put all our armed forces on alert and to raise our readiness status to DEFCON 2. Make sure in particular that our Pacific Fleet goes to maximum readiness as quickly as possible. Next, I am calling an emergency security meeting of the Joint Chiefs and of the National Security Council, to be held at the NMCC conference room. Alert the Joint Chiefs and tell them to come to the Pentagon as quickly as they can. On my part, I will be departing the White House for the Pentagon as soon as I can warn my national security staff about this meeting. Do you have any question, Colonel Blanchard?”

"Only one, Mister President: do you want the bombers of our Strategic Air Command to start loading nuclear weapons in their bomb bays, so that they would be ready to react quickly to any scramble order?"

Robert only had to think for a second before answering that.

"I do! However, no armed bomber is to take off until we can decide if a nuclear strike is needed and where."

"Understood, Mister President!"

Both Robert and Blanchard then hung up, with Robert taking a deep breath to calm down.

"What a lousy way to start a day!"

02:23 (Hawaii Time) / 07:23 (Washington Time)

Soviet cargo ship AMUR STAR

Port of Honolulu, Oahu

Hawaii

Captain Yevgeni Kaposhnikov was quite busy on the open wing of his bridge, giving orders to his crew and talking on the radio with the American tugboat helping his ship to dock in the port of Honolulu. The trip from Vladivostok had been rather uneventful, if you excepted a couple instances of bad weather, and he would soon be able to unload his mixed cargo of frozen fish and of containers filled with various goods. He was finally able to relax when the mooring lines of his ship were tied to the quay and his engines were at full stop. Looking around the darkness at the lights of Honolulu, he smiled at the idea that he was soon going to be able to go swim at one of the celebrated beaches of Hawaii, where pretty women in skimpy swimsuits were said to be legion. Looking down at his forward deck, where two sailors were putting in place a gangway between the ship and the quay, he saw his sole passenger, a businessman from Hong-Kong, standing against the ship's railings. Mister Wang then took a sort of box out of a pocket of his jacket and touched what seemed to be a button on one of its faces. That was the last thing Kaposhnikov ever saw before a bright sun exploded in his face, instantly incinerating him into dust.

02:24 (Hawaii Time)

Bridge of the cruiser U.S.S. TRUXTUN (CGN 35)

Sailing towards Pearl Harbor

“JESUS!”

Petty Officer Second Class James Maxwell, who was on duty as a watchman on the bridge of the nuclear cruiser U.S.S. TRUXTUN, had to quickly turn his head, an impossibly bright flash of light having just appeared from the direction of Pearl Harbor and Honolulu. His exclamation was however quickly replaced by a shout of pain as his exposed skin felt like it was burning up. Not able to withstand whatever was burning his skin, Maxwell hurried back inside the enclosed bridge, half-blind from the sudden flash of light. The other men on the bridge were similarly affected by that flash, with one watchman who had been watching in the direction of Pearl Harbor now starting to panic while his arms thrashed around.

“I’m blind! I can’t see a thing!”

The officer of the watch, a young navy lieutenant, was not doing much better, not having a clue about what had just happened. However, his expression of confusion soon changed to one of utter horror as he saw a giant fireball rise in the distance the night sky.

“My God! Pearl Harbor just got nuked!”

Nearly jumping on the bridge intercom and grabbing its receiver, the young officer called the captain’s cabin, getting a sleepy answer after three long rings.

“Yes? What is it?”

“Captain, this is Lieutenant Jones, on the bridge. Pearl Harbor just got nuked! A giant fireball is now rising in the sky from our base.”

“WHAT? I’M COMING! SOUND THE GENERAL ALARM!”

“Yes, Captain!” replied Jones, who then slapped vigorously with one hand the general alarm button near him, starting the loud modulated blaring of a horn. Only then did Jones remember that his wife and two young children had been waiting for his return at their small apartment in Kalihi Kai, near Pearl Harbor. His legs gave way and he collapsed on his knees, sobbing uncontrollably.

“NOOO! PLEASE GOD, NOOO!”

In the port of Honolulu, the explosion of the Chinese three megaton hydrogen bomb created a fireball with a radius of 1.95 kilometers and temperatures in the thousands of degrees Celsius. Since the explosion occurred on a ship in the harbor, very close to sea level, that fireball vaporized a huge amount of water, sediments, rock, concrete and other materials found in the port, turning them into millions of tons of contaminated particles which would later rain back on Earth as radioactive fallout. The buildings within 3.14 kilometers from Ground Zero⁹, including those built of reinforced concrete, were completely leveled by the blast wave which followed the fireball, while everything in that zone received an instant radiation dose of 500 rems¹⁰ or more, enough to ensure the death of over half of the victims within days, or at most weeks. The wife and two children of Lieutenant Jones, who were sleeping in their apartment in the district of Kalihi Kai, about four kilometers away from Ground Zero, had little time to react before dying, with their wood and brick apartment block first bursting spontaneously on fire when hit by the intense thermal radiation of the bomb, which was intense enough to inflict third degree burns as far as seventeen kilometers away. Then, the blast wave of the bomb hit their building, basically blowing it away into small pieces. Those same thermal radiation and blast wave next hit the Honolulu International Airport, utterly destroying its various terminals and hangars and blowing away like vulgar toys the aircraft parked on the tarmac. The military airbase of Hickam Field, adjacent to Honolulu Airport and which shared some of its runways, experienced the same fate, with dozens of expensive military aircraft destroyed in an instant. Next to be hit west of Ground Zero was the sprawling naval base of Pearl Harbor. While some of the more solid buildings of the base, built of reinforced concrete, resisted partially the blast wave of the explosion, many more, especially in the case of the storage warehouses and hangars made of aluminum or steel sidings, were completely blown away. The dozens of huge fuel storage tanks which constituted the fuel reserves for the U.S. Pacific Fleet were ripped open and their content ignited when hit by the thermal radiations and blast overpressure, with their thousands of tons of burning hydrocarbon fuel being blown towards the Northwest and spreading like a giant flamethrower, adding to the destruction around the base. At the docks and quays of the naval base, dozens of moored ships and

⁹ Ground Zero: The central point of a nuclear detonation.

¹⁰ Rem: Unit of radiation damage caused to an unprotected human body. A dose of 600 rems, also called semi-lethal dose, will cause the death of at least half of the persons hit, with death happening within hours or a few weeks at the most.

submarines of all kinds were subjected to the mix of thermal radiation, shower of nuclear radiation and blast overpressure, faring in various degrees depending on their size and construction. The submarines present in Pearl Harbor, being very low on the water and having thick steel hulls meant to resist high water pressures at depth, fared the best of the lot but ended with their external hulls becoming radioactive hulks from the shower of neutron particles from the explosion. Moored destroyers, fleet tankers, service tenders and tugboats, all with relatively thin steel hulls, fared much worse, many of them seeing their hull plates buckle inward, creating instant flooding, while their superstructures were both fried and deformed, with their sensitive and fragile radar antennas ripped away. While much bigger than the destroyers and cruisers around them, the two aircraft carriers moored at quayside in Pearl Harbor, the nuclear-propelled U.S.S. ENTERPRISE and the oil-fueled U.S.S. KITTY HAWK, still fared rather badly, the dozens of aircraft parked on their flight deck being blown off into the sea while the explosion's blast wave and thermal radiation entered the main hangars of the two carriers via the wide hull openings of their side aircraft elevators, creating more havoc and starting fires inside the carriers. The aircraft parked on Ford Island, in the middle of Pearl Harbor's bay, and in Ewa, on the western shore of the bay, were also blown away and destroyed by the blast wave.

Even after washing over the naval base, the blast wave and thermal radiation from the explosion, along with a significant quantity of harmful nuclear radiations, were still strong enough to cause significant property damage and human casualties to small cities and towns like Pearl City, Waipahu and Ewa Beach, while the coastal towns of Kaneohe and Kaitua to the Northeast of Honolulu were similarly devastated, along with the Marine Corps base next to Kaneohe. While the rest of Hawaii was comparatively much less touched physically by the explosion, its respite would be a short one indeed, with radioactive fallout and rain soon pouring on top of it, rendering most of the archipelago unfit for occupation for many years and killing off in a matter of weeks most of the fauna and flora, while the waters around Hawaii were going to be hopelessly contaminated by radiations.

07:55 (Washington Time)

NMCC, The Pentagon

Arlington, Virginia

Having come from her Arlington home in record time, thanks to the nearly empty streets at this early hour, Ingrid entered the NMCC at a near run after flashing her security pass at the two M.P.s guarding the command center. Inside, she was met by Colonel Blanchard, the night duty officer at the NMCC. Ingrid was immediately struck by the shaken and ashen expression on the army colonel.

"What is happening, Colonel? I was only told that there was a sudden national emergency and that I was needed here for an emergency meeting with the President."

"That was half an hour ago, General. I myself knew little, except that the President called the NMCC to say that he had just received a telephone call from Chinese Chairman Deng Xiaoping, warning him that the Koreans had managed to steal two Chinese thermonuclear bombs, each with a yield of three megatons, and that their intelligence had just learned that those bombs were on their way to the United States. Our forces are now at DEFCON 2 and the President called for a joint meeting here of the Joint Chiefs and of the National Security Council. Then, a few minutes ago, we started getting panicked radio reports saying that Honolulu, along with our base in Pearl Harbor, has been destroyed by a huge nuclear explosion at about 02:25, Hawaii Time."

Ingrid needed a moment to digest that awful information before she could speak.

"My God! Have those reports been confirmed yet?"

"Yes, General! The cruiser TRUXTUN, which was approaching Oahu, saw the nuclear fireball and mushroom over Honolulu and is now cruising off Honolulu and observing what it can of the coastal area."

"Who else but me has arrived for the meeting, Colonel?"

"You are the first one to arrive, General."

"Well, I can thank the fact that my house is in Arlington, next door to the Pentagon." said Ingrid before realizing something. "Wait! Did you say that the Koreans managed to steal TWO Chinese bombs?"

"That's what the President was told by Chairman Deng, General."

"Then we have another three-megaton bomb on the loose and probably about to also arrive on our national territory. The bomb that struck Honolulu, I suppose that it had arrived by ship, right?"

"The TRUXTUN effectively reported that the bomb's ground zero seemed to be centered in the port area of Honolulu, General."

"Then, that second stolen bomb is also probably traveling on a ship headed to our coasts. Has the Navy been told about that detail?"

"Not yet, General: Brigadier General Merriweather told me to wait for the President and the other service chiefs to arrive and assess the situation before passing on more information or directives. Besides, our Pacific Fleet must now be considered basically destroyed, from what we can hear from Oahu."

Ingrid was tempted to shout at Blanchard but didn't: that kind of cover-your-ass, pass-the-buck attitude was still symptomatic of the way too many American senior officers waited for directives from above instead of using their initiative.

"Very well! Could I see the reports you have received to date about Hawaii?"

"Of course, General! Follow me!"

Ingrid followed Blanchard to an unoccupied desk inside the NMCC's main operations center, where she was offered a seat. Blanchard then had a young captain bring to her copies of the latest messages and reports received by the NMCC.

Ingrid was still analyzing the reports from Hawaii when President Kennedy arrived, accompanied by his National Security Advisor, Polish-born Zbigniew Brzezinski. She immediately got up and saluted Robert Kennedy, who nodded his head.

"Thanks for coming this quickly to the NMCC: I really could use some of your legendary advice this morning."

Ingrid didn't miss the brief flash of annoyance which appeared then in Brzezinski's eyes. In theory, he would be the main person the President would use for advice about questions of national security. While Robert Kennedy genuinely appreciated and respected Brzezinski's opinion and advice, he also used extensively Ingrid's wisdom and experience gained from her past incarnations and from her actual experience of modern wars and conflicts. However, this was no time for anyone to play the prima donna in Ingrid's opinion, so she ignored Brzezinski's reaction and spoke to Kennedy.

"Have you been informed about Hawaii, Mister President?"

"Uh, no! What about Hawaii?"

Seeing that Colonel Blanchard was belatedly coming to greet Robert Kennedy, Ingrid decided not to undercut him by briefing herself the President and pointed at the NMCC night duty commander.

"You better listen to what Colonel Blanchard learned a few minutes ago, before going into the conference room, Mister President. On my part, I will go wait there and make a few calls in advance to my Space Corps."

"Then, go ahead, Ingrid. I will meet you back there."

"Understood, Mister President!"

A few minutes later, a shocked and angry Robert Kennedy, still accompanied by Zbigniew Brzezinski, joined Ingrid in the NMCC's conference room.

"Those Korean bastards! They will pay for this, I swear!"

"Yes, they eventually will, Mister President, but right now we have a more pressing problem: where is the second stolen bomb? If it gets to one of our major coastal cities, then the carnage it could cause would be frightening."

"I know! Do you have an idea of where and when it could be headed?"

"The where is difficult to say, Mister President. It could be anywhere along one of our three coasts. The when is: very soon."

"Uh, how could you be sure of that, Ingrid?"

"For a couple of simple reasons, Mister President. First, those two bombs were given to the Koreans by the Chinese generals who struck at Taiwan and jailed Deng. That was nearly two years ago. The Koreans thus had plenty of time to carefully plan how they would use those bombs while safeguarding the element of surprise. I insist on this, Mister President: we may hate the Korean leaders for this, but this is no hasty, uncoordinated operation: it is meant to strike us hard and hurt us while letting the Chinese carry the blame for it. The second bomb is most probably on a ship right now and about to enter one of our ports. The Koreans would not want to let us time to mount preventative measures against this approaching second bomb. I thus firmly believe that this second bomb is only hours away from entering one of our major ports, using a non-Korean cargo ship as an unsuspecting carrier."

Robert Kennedy opened wide his eyes, struck with horror and foreboding, while Brzezinski nodded his head slowly.

"An impeccable logic, I must say. I concur with General Dows on this, Mister President. We should immediately close all our main ports on the Pacific coast and institute a strict regimen of ship inspections at sea, at a safe distance from our ports, using teams armed with radiation detectors."

"Mister Brzezinski," said at once Ingrid, "while I agree with your method to stop that second bomb from reaching American shores, I say that we should apply it to all three of our coasts, meaning the Pacific, Atlantic and Caribbean coasts."

"The Atlantic and Caribbean coasts? What makes you think that they could be the targets of that second bomb, General?"

"The fact that the Koreans had months to prepare their operation, Mister Brzezinski. Nothing stopped them from using some foreign cargo ship to carry their concealed bomb, a ship that would have sailed south instead of east and would have taken a route leading to our Atlantic coast, or to our Caribbean coast, timing its trip so that it would arrive at its destination at about the same time as the ship that carried the first bomb arrived in Hawaii. I however believe that our Atlantic coast is more at risk in this case: our coastal cities there are much larger and more important economically than the ones along the Caribbean coast. If I would be Kim Il-Sung, I would love to destroy New York or Boston, instead of simply destroying, for example New Orleans or Galveston. San Francisco and Los Angeles would also constitute most worthy targets for the Koreans."

"Again, I must concur with General Dows, Mister President. We must immediately institute a severe program of ship boarding and inspection at sea against all approaching cargo ship, and this along our three coasts."

"I agree with you two, but we will need both the Navy and the Coast Guard to do these inspections at sea. Where the hell are the other service chiefs? Time is of the essence here."

"They probably took the time to shave before starting to get dressed after having been awakened by a phone call from the NMCC, Mister President." said Ingrid in a sardonic tone. "Have you ever seen one senior officer or civilian official show up to any urgent presidential meeting without shaving first?"

That made Robert Kennedy hide his face in his hands in discouragement.

"You are too right about that, Ingrid. I should proclaim a rule saying that, in case of an urgent meeting concerning national security, participants must not take the time to shave before coming. Jesus! It is such minor details like this which could literally kill us now. Ingrid, could you go and ask Colonel Blanchard to call our other Joint Chiefs and tell them to hurry?"

"Yes, Mister President!"

As Ingrid walked away at a hurried pace, Brzezinski gave a knowing look to Robert Kennedy and spoke in a low voice.

“Decidedly, General Dows seems to be able to think about everything in advance, Mister President.”

“That is one major advantage of being able to remember thousands of years of your past incarnations, Zbigniew: you would then have already seen about every dirty tricks and tactics in the books long ago. If it would not be for the fact that she was foreign-born and thus not eligible to be a candidate for the presidency, Ingrid would have made a perfect president: wise, with a vast experience of life, at ease with all cultures and languages and knowledgeable in multiple domains.”

The next member of the Joint Chiefs to arrive at the NMCC’s conference room was General George Brown, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Robert Kennedy pounced on him the second that he walked in, with Ingrid closely following behind him.

“General, were you informed about the bomb that destroyed Honolulu and Pearl Harbor?”

“I was just told about that by General Dows.”

“Then, I need you to immediately order a strict quarantine regime along all our coasts, General. All approaching ships, be they American or foreign, will have to adopt at once waiting stations at sea, at least twenty miles away from our coasts, and wait there to be boarded and inspected by teams equipped with radiation detectors.”

“Shouldn’t we wait for Admiral Holloway before discussing this, Mister President?”

Brown’s question had the effect of positively enraging Robert Kennedy, who slammed a fist on the conference table.

“DO YOU REALLY THINK THAT WE HAVE THE TIME TO WAIT AND DISCUSS SO THAT YOUR PRECIOUS CHAIN OF COMMAND COULD BE RESPECTED, GENERAL? WE HAVE A THREE MEGATON THERMONUCLEAR BOMB WHICH IS PROBABLY ABOUT TO ENTER ONE OF OUR PORTS! WE NEED TO IMPLEMENT A COASTAL QUARANTINE RIGHT NOW, BEFORE ONE OF OUR MAJOR CITIES GETS RAZED BY THAT SECOND KOREAN HYDROGEN BOMB. GET ON THE PHONE AND GET THE NAVY AND COAST GUARD TO IMMEDIATELY DECLARE A COMPLETE QUARANTINE OF OUR COASTS.”

“Uh, I’m on it, Mister President.” replied the chastised Brown before he sat down at the table and grabbed the receiver of the secure telephone nearest to him to start making calls. On her part, Ingrid went to the main NMCC operations room and ordered Colonel Blanchard to start passing the order to all naval and coast guard units to close all the American coasts to incoming ship traffic until further order.

To Robert Kennedy’s intense dissatisfaction, it took over one more hour before all the service chiefs and the other members of the National Security Council had arrived, with Admiral Holloway being dead last to show up. Ordering them rather dryly to sit down, the President then looked severely at the lot of graying men.

“Gentlemen, when I ask for an emergency meeting here for national security reasons, I expect you to jump in your cars at once and get here. I don’t care if you are not shaven or are still wearing pajamas! Right now, Honolulu and Pearl Harbor lie as radioactive ruins, while a second three megaton bomb may be about to enter one of our ports. General Brown, on my direct order, has already distributed a country-wide directive to immediately block any approaching ship from entering our coastal waters. Those ships, except of course for our warships and those of our NATO allies, will have to adopt waiting stations at least twenty miles away from our coasts, and that until inspection teams equipped with radiation detectors can board and search them thoroughly. I don’t care if some big cruise line protests that it will make them fall behind in their trip schedules. Better that than see New York being vaporized by that second hydrogen bomb! Two more things: first this coastal quarantine applies to all three coasts of ours, be it the Atlantic, Pacific or Caribbean coast. Second, I prohibit any information about the nature of this emergency to be leaked to the medias. In particular, I forbid anyone to say to the medias or to members of the Congress that we were warned by China that the Koreans stole those two bombs. The Korean leadership is probably hoping that we won’t be able to figure out who sent those bombs and that we will then strike blindly in retaliation at either China or the Soviet Union. Kim Il-Sung, who most probably knows the details and timeframe of this operation, is probably already hunkered down in some deep underground bunker in North Korea, in case we figure out that he is the culprit in this. Let him think that we are confused about who sent those bombs: maybe that will make him come out of his bunker after a few days of calm over Korea. Now, before I continue, I want you, Admiral Holloway, to ensure that the coastal

quarantine I ordered is effectively in place and operational within the next hour. Use the crypto links in the NMCC operations center to do your calls.”

“I’m on it, Mister President.” replied the Chief of Naval Operations while getting up from his chair. As he walked out of the conference room, Kennedy looked at the remaining participants around the table.

“Lady and gentlemen, after preventing that second hydrogen bomb from reaching our coasts, our next most important task will be to decide how we will react to this treacherous attack while also rendering all the aid possible to our unfortunate citizens in Hawaii. Take as a given that we cannot count anymore on our Pacific Fleet: it is now all but utterly destroyed, except for its few ships which were at sea at the time.”

“How to respond is simple enough, Mister President.” replied General David Jones, the head of the U.S. Air Force. “We nuke Korea out of existence without further ado!”

To the surprise of all, the first reaction Jones got was a sarcastic slow clapping of hands by Ingrid, who then stared hard at Jones as if he was some inattentive kid in a primary classroom.

“Bravo, General! You would thus vaporize or incinerate the millions of poor Korean peasants and city inhabitants for whom we fought so hard 27 years ago to try to prevent them from falling under the brutal grip of Kim Il-Sung. Do you think that those millions of low-class Koreans have any culpability in this crisis? Of course not! The only guilty bastards here are Kim Il-Sung and his select band of sycophantic generals and Communist Party hacks, all of whom are probably presently safe and secure in their underground bunkers. Have you also thought about the effects that large clouds of radioactive fallout will have on the neighboring countries, many of which are our allies or friends, like Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines? We need to THINK our answer to this, not simply do a knee-jerk reaction.”

“And what do YOU think that we should do, Dows?” replied Jones, stung by her words.

“I will tell you what I already did, General Jones. First, I have ordered six of my spaceplanes to immediately take off and climb to orbit, where they will operate as our national level reconnaissance assets. One of those spaceplanes was tasked by me to do repeated passes over Hawaii, concentrating on Oahu. It will take high resolution pictures in both normal spectrum and in thermal and infrared modes and will also measure from space the amount of radiations at various points on and around Oahu. All

that data will be retransmitted electronically at once to the NMCC here, for redistribution to our various services and commands. Second, I have directed my nuclear weapons division to assemble at once as many teams of radiation specialists as it can, complete with protective gear and portable radiation detectors and to then send them to our various Coast Guard and Navy facilities along our coasts, along with helicopters to carry them to ships needing to be inspected. I am temporarily placing those teams under the tactical control of our Navy and Coast Guard. However, if I hear that some Navy or Coast Guard commander ignored their advice, then I will lodge an immediate protest with General Brown.”

“What if some ship refuses to let your teams board and inspect them, General Dows?” asked the Secretary of Defense, Harold Brown. Ingrid answered him at once, without a trace of hesitation.

“Then, I would say ‘sink that ship without further ado’, Mister Secretary. We simply cannot risk the lives of millions of our citizens just to go easy on the ego of some ship captain.”

Harold Brown nodded his head slowly at her answer.

“A radical solution, but an appropriate one in view of the present circumstances. If we ever have to get to that extreme, I will politically cover our actions. I am sure that Secretary of State Muskie will do the same to calm any bruised egos abroad.”

Seeing the way Robert Kennedy then looked at him, Edmund Muskie nodded his head as well.

“I will also support the actions of our boarding teams at sea. Now, to return to the subject of our response to Korea’s act of war, what are you advocating, General Dows?”

“What I have in mind is the following, Mister Secretary.” replied Ingrid, who then spoke for a few minutes in order to expose her own plan, carefully listened to by the President and the other participants.

11:28 (New York Time)

Bridge of the luxury cruise liner CARIBBEAN PRINCESS

Thirty nautical miles east off the coast of the state of New York

The captain of the CARIBBEAN PRINCESS, a salty old sea dog, was glaring at the U.S. Coast Guard cutter that had cut its path and ordered him a full two hours ago to

stop approaching the American coast and to start circling around at low speed. His first officer then walked onto the large, modern bridge of the cruise liner and went to Captain Erik Nordfeld, stopping near him and saluting him.

"Captain, the passengers are growing restless and are asking why we are not proceeding to New York. Some of those passengers are quite rich and influential and they are threatening to complain to the owners of our cruise line."

"Well, from the tone of the few messages we got from the Coast Guard, I doubt that those rich and influential passengers would make any impression on the captain of that Coast Guard cutter."

"Did they give any reason yet for stopping us like this, Captain?"

"None! The only precision they gave was that they would fire at us if we didn't follow their orders."

"Are they mad? They would be ready to fire at a cruise liner?"

Nordfeld was silent for a moment before replying to his first officer.

"Jackson, I have seen all kinds of things as a captain, including during the Second World War. This reaction by the U.S. Coast Guard is so extreme and so unusual that I believe that only a truly grave situation could push them in doing this. Tell our passengers that we have to obey the orders from that cutter and invite them to go have lunch. I am sure that this situation will resolve itself within an hour or two at the most."

"Understood, Captain! I will go calm them down as best I can."

As First Officer Jackson was leaving the bridge, Captain Nordfeld did a new scan of the horizon with his binoculars. There was now a good fourteen ships of various types and nationalities now turning in slow circles in view of his cruise liner. The shout from one of his sailors acting as lookout then made him swing his binoculars towards the Coast Guard cutter.

"CAPTAIN, AN HELICOPTER COMING FROM THE COAST IS NOW OVERFLYING THE CUTTER AND IS HEADING TOWARDS US."

Examining for a moment the approaching helicopter, Nordfeld saw that it was a rather large machine with two overhead rotors. He also saw the markings on the sides of the helicopter.

"A U.S. Space Corps helicopter? What the hell?"

Many of the 4,200 passengers of the liner also saw the helicopter approach, creating quite a reaction. Nordfeld, seeing that the helicopter was going to land on the ship's top stern helipad, gave a directive to his bridge officer while quickly walking out.

"Lieutenant, reduce speed to four knots and continue turning in circles. I am going to meet the crew of that helicopter."

"Aye, Captain!"

If Nordfeld already felt anxious and curious, that changed to outright alarm when he arrived at the helipad and saw over a dozen armed soldiers come out of the helicopter, wearing some sort of protective coveralls with hood, along with gas masks, rubber gloves and rubber boots. Going towards the first of the soldiers coming at him, Nordfeld addressed him in a near shout, in order to be heard above the rotor noise.

"CAN YOU TELL ME WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON, MISTER?"

"WE HAVE TO SEARCH YOUR SHIP, CAPTAIN. PLEASE DON'T ASK WHY. THE ONLY THING THAT I CAN SAY IS THAT THIS IS A TOP PRIORITY U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY OPERATION. YOU ARE TO OBEY OUR DIRECTIVES AT ONCE AND WITHOUT DISCUSSION."

"CAN ME AND MY CREW HELP IN ANYWAY, IN ORDER TO MAKE THIS AS QUICK AS POSSIBLE?"

"THAT WOULD BE APPRECIATED, CAPTAIN. I WOULD BE GRATEFUL IF YOU COULD PROVIDE US WITH FOUR OF YOUR OFFICERS WHO COULD THEN GUIDE MY INSPECTION TEAMS AROUND THIS SHIP."

"THAT I CAN DO, MISTER. FOLLOW ME INSIDE WITH YOUR MEN."

Going back inside the ship with the group of soldiers, Nordfeld went to the nearest intercom box and grabbed the handset inside, then switched it to 'ship-wide intercom' mode.

"Third Officer Newman, Ensigns Woolworth, Smithers and Rickman, please come to the stern helipad at the double."

Nordfeld repeated his announce another time, then closed the intercom box and looked at the leader of the military squad, who had made his men take off temporarily their gas masks, so that they could breathe better. Nordfeld was not a little surprised to see that one of the 'men' was actually a young woman. He however didn't comment on that and waited until his four deck officers arrived at a run.

"Aaah, good! Gentlemen, you are to act as guides around our ship for these soldiers. Don't ask questions and do your utmost to help them as much as possible. Give them access to whatever parts of the ship they will want to visit and inspect. Understood?"

"Yes, Captain!" replied in unison the four young officers. The military squad leader then split his group into four teams of three soldiers, with one soldier per team holding a strange box with a sort of short rod connected to it. With the soldiers and their guides then dispersing, Nordfeld returned to the bridge of his ship. He just had time to get back in it when his bridge officer on duty raised his voice and pointed at another ship in the distance.

"CAPTAIN, THAT SHIP AT FIVE O'CLOCK HAS STOPPED CIRCLING AND IS NOW HEADING TOWARDS NEW YORK."

Raising his binoculars to his eyes, Nordfeld examined for a moment the ship in question.

"Hmmm, a container ship, and a large one. That Coast Guard cutter is going to knock his bell off soon if it continues to ignore its directives."

What followed a minute later shocked him: the forward five-inch gun of the cutter roared to life, firing a shell towards the container ship, which was some eleven kilometers away from the CARIBBEAN PRINCESS.

"Holy shit! These guys really mean business today!"

11:59 (New York Time)

Japanese container ship NAKAJIMA MARU

Thirty nautical miles east of the coast of the state of New York

The captain of the NAKAJIMA MARU swore out loud when he saw the splash caused in the sea ahead of his ship by the shell fired by the Coast Guard cutter, then twisted his head to look at the 'Taiwanese businessman' who had entered his bridge with a pistol in his hands.

"We have to turn around now and continue circling! If not, that American ship will sink us."

"It is a small ship, with only one gun: it will not be able to sink this ship before we can get to New York. Keep this heading and push your engine to full speed."

"No! This is pure suicide and..."

POW

The sailor manning the wheel of the ship looked on with horror as his captain slowly slumped to the deck, his back sliding down the forward steel bulwark of the bridge and leaving a bloody smear on it. A second shot from the armed passenger's pistol then killed him as well. Park Chung He then hurried to the repeater that sent orders to the engine room and pushed its lever to 'full speed ahead' before taking control of the ship's wheel. Looking at the American cutter, he bitterly realized that the Japanese captain had been right: that five-inch gun was going to be able to sink the container ship well before Park could drive it close enough to New York to cause significant damage to it. Then, his eyes caught on the big white cruise liner ship situated some ten kilometers away: that liner must have thousands of Americans aboard it. Even if he couldn't destroy New York anymore, Park could still cause significant and painful casualties to those hated American imperialists. His mind made up, the Korean agent turned quickly the wheel to the left and pointed the bow of the container ship towards the big liner, which was still turning in slow circles.

On the CARIBBEAN PRINCESS, Captain Nordfeld thought at first that the captain of the container ship had regained his senses and was resuming his circling but quickly grew alarm when he understood that the container ship was now coming at him at full speed.

"Is that idiot intending to ram us or what? HELMSMAN, RUDDER FULL PORT, COME TO HEADING 175! ENGINES TO MAXIMUM FORWARD, NOW!"

"RUDDER FULL PORT, HEADING 175, ENGINES TO MAXIMUM FORWARD, AYE, CAPTAIN!"

On the aft helipad of the cruise liner, Lieutenant Rhonda McIntyre, the pilot of the Space Corps helicopter, was surprised by the sharp turn and sudden acceleration of the CARIBBEAN PRINCESS. Stepping out of her helicopter, she quickly enough noticed the approaching container ship, which was still under fire from the Coast Guard cutter and had started taking hits. Since she knew the reasons for the coastal quarantine and inspection regime, she quickly understood what was going on and called the leader of the inspection team by radio.

"Boarding Team Three, this is Angel Three. A container ship tried to continue towards New York but was blocked by our cutter, which is now firing at it. That container

ship is now heading at full speed towards this cruise liner. A Korean agent must have taken control of that ship and is probably intent on ramming this cruise liner or getting close enough to it to sink it by detonating his bomb, over.”

The reply from the team leader came in after a few seconds.

“How close is this container ship now, Angel Three?”

“It is about ten kilometers away, but the captain of the CARIBBEAN PRINCESS is reacting to this and turned his ship away from the container ship while going to full speed. That container ship is probably not fast enough to catch this liner, but I am afraid that this Korean agent may detonate his bomb once he will understand that he can't get to the liner. We must do something to prevent that, over!”

“Agreed, Angel Three! Seconds now count and it would take many minutes for my team to get back to the helipad. Take off now and use your helicopter's weapons to kill that Korean bastard!”

“Angel Three understood!” said McIntyre before hurrying back into her pilot's seat and looking at her copilot.

“We are going to take off now and try to stop the Korean agent on that approaching container ship before he could detonate his bomb.”

“Understood, Rhonda!” replied Second Lieutenant John Getty, a baby-faced man of 22.

The medium helicopter jumped back into the air mere seconds later, with its two door gunners arming their .50 caliber heavy machine guns. At first, McIntyre flew away towards the East, to make the ship hijacker think that she was simply going to a safe distance and also to get out of his visual field of view. Once far enough, she started a large turn to the left in order to approach the container ship from the rear, where the hijacker could not spot them without having to go out on the open bridge wing. While doing that, Rhonda thought furiously about what she would do once close to the container ship. Clearly, her top priority was to keep the element of surprise intact for as long as possible, in order not to let time for the hijacker, who probably had a remote-control device with him, to detonate his hydrogen bomb. She fully realized that, if she failed, she and her helicopter would be instantly vaporized by the explosion of the bomb. However, thousands of lives were at play now. Making her mind about how to proceed, she spoke to her two door gunners via her intercom system.

"Mack, Rogers, I am going to approach the bridge of that container ship from the stern. Once very close to it, I will slip sideways and fly down to the level of the bridge. Mack, as soon as we are level with the bridge, I want you to empty your machine gun into it and kill everybody you will see inside. We must kill that Korean hijacker before he has a chance to detonate his thermonuclear bomb via remote control. Once the bridge has been well peppered, I will then hover above it, so you two can jump on its roof with your assault rifles and secure the bridge. Do you understand me?"

"Completely, Rhonda. We are ready!"

"Then, here we go!"

Going down to an altitude of only twenty meters, Rhonda approached the container ship from the stern, lining up on its single centerline funnel and mast. Thankfully, the captain of the Coast Guard cutter, who was observing the container ship with his binoculars, saw her maneuver and ordered his gunners to suspend their fire, removing a major worry for Rhonda. Staying just short of the funnel for a moment, she spoke again in her intercom.

"I am about to fly level with the port side of the bridge. Be ready to pepper that bridge the moment it is in your sights, Mack, then get ready to jump on the roof with Roger."

"I am ready when you are, Rhonda."

Rhonda, not wasting any time, then made her helicopter sidestep to the left of the ship and pushed her joystick forward. Just as her right-side door gunner was about to come in line and level with the bridge, the hijacker, probably attracted by the noise of the helicopter's rotors, stepped out of the bridge and on the open port wing. Sergeant Mack Willis felt his heart jump in his chest when he saw that the Asian man in civilian clothes he was now targeting was holding a small box in his left hand, while he had a pistol in his right hand. Reacting without any hesitation, he pressed the trigger of his heavy machine gun, sending a shower of heavy slugs towards the hijacker and the bridge from a distance of less than fifteen meters. Park Chung He was ripped to pieces in a fraction of a second, with one of the .50 caliber slugs also piercing and mangling both his left hand and the box held in it. Even though the hijacker went down at once, Mack continued firing his heavy weapon, in case that the hijacker had an accomplice with him, and turned the bridge of the ship into Swiss cheese. After firing his 100 ready rounds

into the bridge and with his weapon now empty, Mack Willis shouted in his helmet microphone.

“MY MACHINE GUN IS NOW EMPTY, RHONDA. GET US ON TOP OF THE BRIDGE!”

“RIGHT AWAY!”

Being careful not to hit the nearby mast and funnel with her helicopter, Rhonda McIntyre flew it sideways and pivoted it, until she overflew the bridge by a mere meter.

“JUMP NOW, GUYS!”

Mack and Rogers did not have to be told twice and jumped down on the roof of the bridge, holding on with both hands to their assault rifles. As soon as her two gunners were safely on the ship, Rhonda accelerated towards the CARIBBEAN PRINCESS and spoke on the radio, calling both her inspection team and the Coast Guard cutter.

“Boarding Team Three and U.S.C.G. ITHAKA, this is Angel Three. We peppered the bridge of the container ship and I believe that we managed to kill the hijacker. I left my two gunners on top of the bridge, so that they could secure it. I am now returning to the CARIBBEAN PRINCESS to pick up our boarding team and carry it to the container ship, over.”

“Angel Three, from ITHAKA, good job! Your inspection team’s new priority now is to find and confirm the presence of the stolen hydrogen bomb aboard the container ship. Preserve all the evidence that you will be able to find, over.”

“Understood, ITHAKA! Boarding Team Three, haul your asses back up to the helipad at the double, out!”

Only then did Rhonda allowed herself to relax a bit her tense nerves and muscles.

“God, I hope that we will find that damn bomb and will be able to defuse it. What a nightmare this crisis is!”

To everybody’s profound relief, the stolen Chinese hydrogen bomb was found inside a container four hours later by the Space Corps inspection team and then rendered safe by the nuclear weapons technician who was part of the team. In the Pentagon, President Kennedy couldn’t help sigh with relief on hearing the announcement that the missing bomb was now neutralized.

“God! I don’t want to relive such an awful drama ever again! Ingrid, pass my most fervent thanks to your helicopter crew and inspection team. Be assured that they

will also get more than just thanks after this. General Brown, what are the latest estimates about the casualties suffered in Hawaii, both military and civilian?"

"What I have are only very preliminary estimates, Mister President, but I can safely say that the large majority of the population of Honolulu and of its immediate surroundings is now either dead or will die soon from their wounds and from radiation exposure. This means that we lost a minimum of half a million of our citizens around Honolulu, plus at least 20,000 servicemembers in Pearl Harbor and Hickam Field. And I am not even including in this the tens of thousands of tourists who usually frequent Oahu in this season. Overall, we are probably facing a total of about 700,000 dead right now, with a lot more to die in the days and weeks to follow. We are now facing a monumental rescue and relief task in Hawaii."

"Mister President," said Ingrid soberly, "that rescue and relief task will indeed take a lot of efforts, equipment, time...and money. I am thus ready to delay for a year or two some of my newer space-related programs, except for the support to space missions already in progress, like our second mission to Mars. As a consequence, I am ready to voluntarily return to our federal budget three billion dollars which had been allotted to this year's budget of my Space Corps but have not yet been spent, on the condition that this money be reserved solely to the relief of the people of Oahu and to their relocation to uncontaminated areas of Hawaii or to the Continental United States." The other service chiefs looked at her as if she had gone crazy, as military budgets were some of the most harshly disputed items in U.S. federal budgets. However, Robert Kennedy's reaction was one of gratitude.

"Thank you from the bottom of my heart for this, Ingrid. Those billions will truly make a difference for our poor citizens in Hawaii. I won't forget this."

"The only thing I will ask in exchange for this, Mister President, is your permission for me and my astronauts who are qualified combat pilots to fly some of the missions planned for our retaliation plan against Korea."

"That, I will gladly agree to, Ingrid."

"Uh, what about the American public and the Congress, Mister President?" asked Secretary of State Muskie. "There are already loud demands to know what happened today and asking who was responsible for the bomb which destroyed Honolulu. We will soon have to make a public declaration about that and about what we will do to avenge our dead citizens."

"I will prepare a presidential television address for tonight, where I will say the minimum possible. I however forbid anyone to tell the medias or Congress who attacked us. I want to keep that information secret until we have started our strikes on Korea."

"But, Mister President, the Congress is entitled to know about all this."

"So that they could make political hay out of it according to their party affiliations or personal pet peeves? No! Right now, we will only say that the United States was victim of an act of state terrorism and that we are investigating to find who sent those two bombs. I will personally relieve of command any military officer who will leak details about this without authorization from me. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Mister President!" replied in a chorus the participants to the meeting.

CHAPTER 13 – REACTIONS



20:00 (Washington Time)

Tuesday, September 23, 1975 'C'

The Oval Office, The White House

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

"Mister President, in three, two, one..."

Robert Kennedy, sitting behind his presidential work desk and looking straight at the screen of the teleprompter, started speaking at the signal of the television technician while a small army of reporters, press photographers and cameramen watched him.

"Fellow citizens, this is your President speaking. Very early this morning, at around two thirty Hawaii time, or seven thirty Washington time, the city of Honolulu was destroyed by a powerful thermonuclear bomb which also caused grave damages to our naval base in Pearl Harbor. While we still don't know exactly how many of our citizens died as a result of that explosion, we fear that at least 700,000 people died this morning in and around Honolulu, with many more being gravely wounded or being exposed to radiations. Preliminary information points to that nuclear bomb to have been brought into Honolulu Harbor while hidden in an unsuspecting foreign cargo ship. Unfortunately, the sheer power of the bomb vaporized that said ship, along with much of the port, and destroyed all the relevant maritime traffic data that could have helped us identify that ship. Then, at about eleven thirty this morning, Eastern Standard Time, a cargo ship which was about to be boarded and inspected by a Coast Guard ship near New York

tried to evade inspection but was stopped by the heroic actions of the crew of one of our helicopters, who shot dead a terrorist and then boarded the cargo ship, where they found and disarmed a thermonuclear bomb hidden inside a maritime cargo container. That bomb is now being examined by our experts to determine its origin. Since then, some highly sensitive information has told us that the bomb intercepted off New York and the one that destroyed Honolulu were the only ones sent towards the United States by a still undetermined state, in what can only be called an act of war against the United States. Our citizens can rest reassured that no more nuclear bombs are on their way to the United States. All our government agencies are now working hard to both investigate the point of origin of those two nuclear bombs and to render help and assistance to our unfortunate citizens in Hawaii. Whatever our investigation will find, rest assure that the United States will avenge its Hawaii citizens and will make the culprits pay for their criminal act. I will end this address by asking all of you to now join me in a minute of silence for our dead compatriots.”

An oppressive silence followed, as the cameras filmed Robert Kennedy closing his eyes and bending partly his head for a minute, his hands together on top of his desk. He finally opened his eyes again and spoke firmly.

“Our nation was wounded this morning, but it is still strong and resolute and I am determined to find and punish those responsible for the abomination committed this morning, whoever they are. You may rest easy tonight, my fellow citizens, as our valiant soldiers, sailors and aviators are on watch. Thank you and good night.”

As soon as the televised address was declared over, the White House correspondents started as one to shout, trying to place the first question to the President. Robert Kennedy then pointed at the NBC White House correspondent, Tom Brokaw.

“You first, Tom!”

“Mister President, do we have any indication at this time about who is responsible for sending us those two nuclear bombs?”

“No, but we are using all our available means and indicators to answer that question. However, this could take some time, as we cannot afford to accuse the wrong state or foreign government. Be assured that, as soon as we will know who is involved, that someone will be dealt with very harshly. Dan, you’re next!”

"Mister President," started Dan Rather, from the CBS Evening News, "you said that the second bomb heading towards New York had been found and disarmed. How powerful was that bomb and what kind of damage would it have done to New York if it had succeeded in getting there?"

"I was told that it was a thermonuclear bomb, also known as a hydrogen bomb, and was powerful enough to destroy completely Manhattan, on top of severely damaging the rest of the city. We could have lost millions of our citizens there if not for that helicopter crew."

"Will we retaliate with nuclear weapons, once we learn who is involved, Mister President?"

"I will not divulge any information about our eventual military response, mister. However, be assured that our whole range of weaponry will be used as needed."

"Mister President, we know that the Chinese already launched nuclear-tipped missiles against Taiwan two years ago. Could the Chinese be involved again?"

"I will not speculate about this at the moment and will urge you to wait until our investigation provides us with firm leads before throwing accusations around. Next!"

"Mister President, what is being done right now to help the survivors around Honolulu?"

Robert Kennedy became truly somber then.

"We are mustering all the nuclear specialists and technicians available in order to assess the extent of the damages and contamination, while all our available medical units are being rushed to Hawaii, along with engineering troops supported by our Navy and Air Force. As a precaution, all the citizens of Oahu still alive and healthy are presently being evacuated to the Continental United States, to prevent them from being contaminated further by the huge clouds of radioactive dust projected in the atmosphere by the explosion. Also, our meteorological experts are keeping a close tab on those radioactive clouds. Thankfully, it appears that the present dominant winds around Hawaii are pushing those radioactive clouds away from the continent and towards the South Pacific."

The questions session, which often became intense and rather heated at times, was declared over after another five minutes, allowing Robert Kennedy to breathe a sigh of relief once the reporters and cameramen were out of the Oval Office. His job for the night was however far from finished and he called up to his chief of staff.

"Brent, arrange a telephone link with Chairman Deng, in Xi'an, and tell Miss Pham to come in."

"Yes, Mister President!"

Soon, a slightly intimidated Pham Thi Hien was introduced into the Oval Office by the President's secretary and given a chair very close to that of Kennedy behind his presidential desk. Robert couldn't help smile at the very pretty and graceful Asian young woman now sitting next to him. Like his brother John, Robert was an incorrigible skirt-chaser, even though he was married, with children.

"Thank you for coming on such short notice, Miss Pham. Secretary Muskie says that you are his best translator of Asian languages."

"I do my modest best, Mister President."

"Well said! Now, I am going to have a telephone conversation with Chairman Deng Xiaoping. What I want of you, apart from translating our conversation, is to listen carefully to the tone Deng will use, along with whatever background conversation you could hear from his entourage. My secretary will also be with us, so that she could take notes of my conversation with Deng."

"I understand, Mister President."

While waiting for the call to be set up, Robert tried to relax some of the nervous tension he had accumulated during the day by chatting with Hien.

"So, Miss Pham, I gather from your name that you must be Vietnamese from birth?"

"That's correct, Mister President. I was born in Hue but I lost both of my parents to the war when I was only four and was then raised in an orphanage run by French nuns. I was adopted at age five in Da Nang, then followed my mother to Palestine, then Germany and finally to the United States as she got posted around."

"Oh?! So, your adoptive mother served in our armed forces?"

"She still does, Mister President. I am extremely proud of my adoptive mother."

"And what trade is she in?"

"She was a fighter pilot, but now she is an astronaut and commands the U.S. Space Corps, Mister President."

Those words made Robert open his mouth in surprise.

"You mean to say that your adoptive mother is General Ingrid Dows?"

"That's right, Mister President. I couldn't have met a better person to adopt me. However, I vowed when young to become a diplomat, to help prevent or stop wars, and I

eventually joined the U.S. State Department after my studies in international relations at the Georgetown University.”

“Good for you, Miss Pham!”

The flashing of a light on his telephone then told Robert that his line to China was now open and he told Hien to pick up a second receiver reserved for such translated conversations before himself picking his receiver.

“Chairman Deng, this is President Kennedy speaking.”

Robert let Hien translate his words, then listened on to the reply in Chinese and to the subsequent translation by Hien.

“Good evening, Mister President. I just listened to the televised address you gave to your nation. I must thank you for not mentioning my country in it.”

“It would have been most unfair to publicly accuse China of this tragedy after your warning helped us stop in time the second stolen bomb, Mister Chairman.”

“Talking of that second bomb, you said that it was discovered and then made safe. What do you intend to do with it now?”

“It will be studied by my experts, in order to compare its isotopic signature with that left in Honolulu by the first bomb. Then, we will dismantle it. I am sorry, Mister Chairman, but we will not send it back to China. As you may understand, sending it back to China would trigger a political storm here against me and would further embolden those who are ready to accuse you of being a guilty party in the destruction of Honolulu.”

There was only a slight pause then before Deng replied to Robert’s announcement.

“That is most understandable, Mister President. May I ask what will be your next move on this front?”

“You may, Mister Chairman. We will stay quiet for a couple of days while rendering assistance to our unfortunate citizens in Hawaii. Hopefully, that bastard of Kim Il-Sung will then believe that we are going to accuse you instead of him and will emerge from the bunker in which he is most probably hiding right now. Then we will strike, hard, but mostly with conventional weapons, plus a few tactical nuclear weapons of limited yields. That way, we will minimize the amount of radioactive fallout created by our future strikes on Korea.”

Hien translated Robert’s words, then covered the microphone of her receiver to speak in a low voice to Robert.

“Chairman Deng just reacted as if a big weight was lifted off his shoulders, Mister President.”

“Good!” said Robert after covering his own microphone. “The less stressed he is, the less chances that he will make a wrong or premature move.”

Deng’s response then came in, translated by Hien.

“I thank you for this, Mister President. Concerning Korea, know that my intelligence network there informed me that the whole Korean leadership has effectively disappeared from public sight, and this the day before Honolulu was destroyed. Also, all Korean military units were put on top alert at the same time. I believe that this by itself constitutes a confession of guilt by Kim Il-Sung and his regime.”

“I would tend to agree with you on that, Chairman Deng. May I ask you what you will do if Kim Il-Sung ever tries to take temporary refuge inside China?”

This time, Robert heard a distinct change of tone in Deng’s voice, which became noticeably harder.

“Then, I will have the bastard executed at once! What he did was a pure monstrosity, plus he tried to hide his responsibility into this and in turn put my country at risk of being wrongly accused and punished.”

“I certainly will not cry if you execute him, Chairman Deng. On my part, I will do my best to cool down the hotter political and military heads here and cut down the anti-China rhetoric.”

“I appreciate that very much, Mister President. Thank you for your comprehension.”

“And thank you again for your warning, Mister Chairman: it saved New York City from destruction by allowing us to intercept that second bomb. Have a good day, Mister Chairman.”

“And have a good night, Mister President.”

Both leaders then hung up, with Robert letting out a sigh of relief.

“Well, that went quite well, I would say. Do you think that Deng was sincere during the call, Miss Pham?”

“I do, Mister President. He was clearly apprehensive at the start of the call but then relaxed a lot once you told him that you would minimize the amount of strikes against Korea. He also sounded sincere about executing Kim Il-Sung if he ever enters China.”

“Good! That’s one problem solved. Unfortunately, there are many more left, starting with helping our poor citizens in Hawaii. That’s going to be one monumental, heartbreaking task.”

Hien was silent for a moment, then, as Robert was about to get up from his chair, spoke softly.

“Mister President, maybe we could use this tragedy in order to avoid more tragedies in the future.”

“What do you mean, Miss Pham?” asked Robert, intrigued.

“That, now that the whole World can see how horrible those nuclear weapons are, even when used in limited numbers, maybe we could push for a major arms limitation treaty which would drastically cut the number of nuclear weapons held by the great powers. We could try to convince the Soviet Union and China to reduce with us our mutual nuclear arsenals, to each keep only a minimal number of warheads which would be enough to hurt gravely an adversary but not enough to endanger the whole World, thus effectively deterring their own use. I believe that a total of, say, 200 nuclear warheads each for us, the USSR and China would be an attainable goal for an arms limitation treaty, if we move while the horror of this attack is still fresh in everybody’s mind.”

Robert sat back in his chair and stared pensively at Hien for a moment.

“I like your idea, Miss Pham. I believe that no sensible political leader around the World can be really comfortable with the thought of holding a nuclear arsenal sufficient to destroy the whole planet multiple times. I will certainly discuss your idea with Secretary of State Muskie.”

“Thank you very much, Mister President. If this could be done, I would consider it the biggest achievement I could wish for in my life.” replied a happy Hien.

07:46 (Universal Time)

Wednesday, September 24, 1975 ‘C’

Crew main lounge, Carrousel ‘A’, U.S.S. LIBERTY

Halfway to Mars

The 171 assembled crewmembers of the U.S.S. LIBERTY, only two persons short of the whole crew, noticed at once the somber expression on Brigadier General James Mathison’s face when he arrived at the main lounge for the general emergency

meeting he had called fifteen minutes ago. Lilya Litvyak, who had seen that kind of expression more than once with her past commanders during wars involving the Soviet Union, understood at once that this was going to be some kind of bad news. She was soon proven right as Mathison started speaking stiffly.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the U.S.S. LIBERTY, I am afraid that we just received some very bad news from home. Last early morning, a three-megaton thermonuclear bomb hidden aboard a still-unidentified cargo ship that had entered Honolulu Harbor detonated, completely destroying the city and causing grave damages to the nearby naval base of Pearl Harbor. The latest casualty estimates put the number of dead at over 700,00, with the whole city of Honolulu and its port basically destroyed. The rest of Oahu and its surrounding waters are now heavily contaminated by radioactive fallouts and are now unfit for life.”

Mathison made a short pause as many in the crowd let out anguished exclamations or started crying. He then continued in a voice half strangled by emotion.

“A few hours later, another cargo ship, a Japanese container ship that had been hijacked by a passenger tried to break through the coastal quarantine which had been declared after the destruction of Honolulu, but the crew of one of our armed helicopters was able to kill the hijacker and take back control of the ship. Four hours after that, a second three-megaton bomb was found hidden inside a maritime container aboard that ship and was subsequently rendered safe. If not for that heroic helicopter crew, New York City would have ended the same way as Honolulu, with even more horrific casualties. Our forces and civil rescue teams are now doing everything possible to help our unfortunate citizens in Hawaii, while also conducting an investigation to find the monsters who shipped those two hidden bombs. I will now call for a minute of silence and prayers for our dead citizens in Hawaii.”

Lilya's mind went in overdrive as a sad silence fell on the lounge: she was certain that Soviet leaders would not have been stupid or irresponsible enough to commit such a monstrous act. As for China, the generals who had nuked Taipei two years ago had all been either killed in the American retaliatory strikes or had been purged by Deng Xiaoping when the latter had been freed from the jail where those generals had put him. To her knowledge, the United States, the Soviet Union and China were the only countries to possess thermonuclear bombs, while Israel and India had only fission bombs. Then, who could have done this? Mathison's voice then cut her line of thinking.

"Whatever happens next, I want you to remember that we are an international crew engaged in a peaceful space exploration mission. I will not tolerate any instance of hostility or unproven accusations by any American crewmember launched towards non-American members of my crew. Those who will not respect that rule will be severely disciplined by me and will have their ship's privileges cut for the duration of our mission, after which they will have to contend with a bad conduct report from me. Is this understood?"

"YES SIR!" replied the crew in a loud chorus.

"Alright, you are all dismissed. Colonel Litvyak, please stay for a moment."

A bit apprehensive, Lilya waited for the other crewmembers to have left the lounge, then walked to Mathison, stopping at attention in front of him and saluting him. Mathison returned her salute and spoke in a soft tone to her.

"Colonel Litvyak, I simply want to reaffirm my confidence in you and in the other Soviet citizens presently aboard my ship. I firmly believe that your country had nothing to do with this. In fact, I will now inform you of a still top-secret piece of information about those two bombs. General Dows specifically authorized me to divulge that information to you, the senior Soviet officer aboard, on the condition that you keep it to yourself for the moment. That same information was passed to General Secretary Brezhnev in Moscow by President Kennedy. Basically, the same Chinese generals who attacked Taiwan two years ago then secretly gave two of the thermonuclear bombs in the Chinese arsenal to the Korean leader, Kim Il-Sung."

"Kim Il-Sung?! But that man is a psychopathic megalomaniac! Who would be crazy enough to give him nuclear weapons?"

"Very crazy people indeed, Colonel. Know that we were informed of this by no other than Chairman Deng Xiaoping, who unfortunately learned about them too late to be able to prevent this tragedy. In return for warning us, we assured him that China was not going to be targeted by our retaliations. President Kennedy has also told General Secretary Brezhnev today that we would not strike the Soviet Union. Secretary Brezhnev in turn promised to close the Soviet borders to any Korean leader trying to flee in advance of our strikes."

Lilya felt a wave of immense relief wash over her then.

"At last, goodwill and cooperation between our two countries. It is a shame that it took such a tragedy for this cooperation to materialize, General."

"Indeed! You may now go resume your interrupted period of sleep, Colonel: you are due to be on duty on our bridge in six hours."

"I will be there, General. Thank you for your confidence in me and in my compatriots."

"You are welcome, Colonel. Dismissed!"

After a last exchange of salutes, Lilya pivoted on her heels and walked away, relieved. However, taking out of her mind the awful images of what had to be the scene in Honolulu was not easy.

09:35 (Hawaii Time) / 14:35 (Washington Time) / 19:35 (Universal Time)

U.S. Army medium helicopter, flying above Honolulu

Island of Oahu, Hawaii

U.S. Senator Daniel Inouye was in tears as he contemplated from the air the blackened and burning ruins of what had been the city of Honolulu and its port. His family home had been in Honolulu, where he was born in 1924, and all indications were that his parents had died in this nuclear blast. So had many of his old friends and of his comrades from the 442th Infantry Regiment, in which he had served in World War 2, earning in the process a Medal of Honor while losing his right arm. While still looking down at the ruins, he spoke to General George Brown, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who had come with him from Washington and was sitting next to him in the helicopter.

"General, do we know if Governor Ariyoshi or Lieutenant Governor Kiyoshi Doi survived this bomb?"

"They are nowhere to be found and I am afraid that they were killed in the blast. So was Senator Fong. Right now, you are the highest surviving political representative from the state of Hawaii, Senator. I can assure you that our people are presently doing everything humanly possible to help your surviving citizens. Unfortunately, the radioactive fallouts and radioactive rains caused by the explosion are quickly making the whole of Oahu too dangerous for occupation, even for short term visits. We thus had to abandon completely Pearl Harbor and our other military installations on Oahu, save for Wheeler Air Force Base, which is being used presently to evacuate by air the surviving population of the island towards the continental United States. Once that evacuation is

completed, Wheeler will then have to be abandoned as well. The way the radiations are dispersing, I am afraid that we will also have to evacuate soon the islands of Molokai, Maui, Lanai Kahoolawe and Hawaii, leaving only the island of Kauai as possibly habitable. However, any future fishing in the waters around Hawaii, including around Kauai, is now impossible: the marine life will become radioactive and will eventually die out in this whole area of the Pacific. As for our ships which were in Pearl Harbor but did not sink, they have to be considered as total losses: they are now too radioactive to be manned.”

Inouye felt fresh tears roll on his cheeks at these words.

“So, Oahu is destined to become a quarantined radioactive cemetery, General?”

“I am afraid so, Senator. The best we can do now is to help as much as possible your surviving citizens to rebuild their lives in the rest of the United States.”

“That will take time...and lots of money. I will have to push for emergency relief funds to be voted as quickly as possible by the Congress.”

“On this, I do have some good news for you, Senator: we already have three billion dollars slated for relief and relocation available right now in the federal budget. We in fact have already started to use those funds for the relocation your citizens.”

“Three billion dollars?! But I was not aware that we had such a sum available, General. Our federal budget for this fiscal year was basically already parceled out and committed to our various programs.”

“You can thank General Dows, the commander of the Space Corps, for this, Senator. The morning that this disaster happened, she volunteered to return to the federal coffers three billion dollars which were slated to be used in her space program but had not been spent yet, something that will incidentally push back her space projects by a couple of years, She did that on the condition that those funds would be strictly reserved to finance the relocation and relief work in Hawaii.”

“General Dows is an angel!” said Inouye in a strangled voice. “I will have to thank her personally for this.”

“Well, she is nicknamed ‘God’s General’, isn’t she?” replied Brown with a smirk.

17:02 (Washington Time)

Office of the Senate’s President Pro Tempore

U.S. Congress Building, Capitol Hill

Washington, D.C.

Republican Representative Leslie Arends looked around him in confusion after entering the office of the Senate's President Pro Tempore, Senator James Eastland: there were both members of the Senate and of the House present, plus Vice-President Walter Mondale.

"What's going on? Why have we been asked to assemble here? And why are you here, Mister Vice-President?"

"I will answer all your questions once you sit down, Leslie." replied in a polite and sober tone Mondale. Once Arends was sitting in one of the sofas of the office, Mondale started speaking, gravity in his voice.

"Gentlemen, I am here at the behest of the President on a question of urgent national security. Basically, President Kennedy wants members of the Congress to stop their speculations on who sent us two thermonuclear bombs and to stop screaming publicly that we should nuke China or the Soviet Union, or both, to cinders without delay.

"And why would we do that?" replied at once Jesse Helms, a republican senator who chaired the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee. "Those damn Commies incinerated Honolulu and tried to do the same to New York, for God's sake!"

"Why? Because neither China nor the Soviet Union are the guilty party here." The congressmen present looked at each other in surprise before James Eastland, the Senate's President Pro Tempore and a hardline anti-communist and segregationist, protested.

"Then who could it be? China and the Soviet Union are the only communist countries to possess nuclear weapons."

"That was true until two years ago, when a clique of dogmatic Chinese generals effected a secret coup against Chairman Deng Xiaoping and threw him in a jail, with plans to execute him later on. What I am now going to tell you is top-secret information, so don't repeat this to anyone else once out of this room, or there will be consequences. Basically, those hardline Chinese generals used their short stint in power to strike Taiwan with two nuclear-tipped missiles and to attempt a sea invasion of Taiwan. At the same time, they also secretly gave two of the thermonuclear bombs which were part of the Chinese nuclear arsenal to the Korean dictator, Kim Il-Sung. That fact was unfortunately found only recently, when Chinese crews cleaning up the ruins of the Lop Nur nuclear test center belatedly found a weapons storage bunker empty, although it was supposed to contain two three-megaton hydrogen bombs. Chairman Deng ordered

his intelligence services to find those two bombs and learned that they had gone to Korea in secret during the short reign of the generals. To his credit, Chairman Deng called President Kennedy to warn him as soon as he knew about the bombs being in Korea and that they were on the way to the United States.”

“Wait a minute!” nearly shouted Senator James Strom Thurmond. “Why would we believe that commie bastard? He was probably trying to hide his culpability in this.” Mondale nearly laughed in derision at Thurmond’s statement.

“By warning us that there were two bombs on the way to the United States and by helping us to prevent the destruction of New York? Use your head! First, if we would not have been warned by him, we would never have been able to prevent the destruction of New York, which is our national financial capital. Second, if Deng would have been the one who sent those two bombs, he would have sent a lot more than just two bombs and would have kept his mouth shut to preserve the element of surprise. Instead of having only Honolulu destroyed, we would then have probably lost all of our major coastal cities to bombs hidden aboard cargo ships. Even then, Deng perfectly understands that the destruction by surprise attack of a dozen or more of our cities would have been followed by a massive retaliatory strike by us which would have basically erased China off the map. He had little to gain and everything to lose by sending us hidden bombs. On the other hand, you gentlemen are doing exactly what Kim Il-Sung was hoping for: to blindly accuse China and the Soviet Union and call for strikes on those two countries, thus leaving Korea free of retaliation. As for your indignant screams asking for us to retaliate at once, know that such a retaliatory strike is being prepared. However, such a strike takes time to prepare and coordinate. What we want is to effectuate a single, heavy blow against Korea that will not leave time for Kim Il-Sung and his clique to realize that we know that he is the culprit, instead of China and the Soviet Union.”

“Why do we care?” replied an angry James Eastland. “Let’s use this chance to erase all three of these communist regimes off the map and be done with that pest! I am sure that the American people will want that.”

Mondale threw a murderous look at Eastland and nearly shouted out his reply.

“One bomb already cost us over 700,000 dead, and you advocate that we start a nuclear exchange where hundreds of nuclear warheads would rain down on us and on our enemies? You would be ready to sacrifice tens of millions of innocent civilians on both sides just to satisfy your anti-communist demagoguery? If you really do, then I

would question both your sanity and your sense of decency. If you ignore the President's directive and use my information to further your political goals, then you will be charged with compromising national security by divulging highly classified information, in which case your position as a senator will not protect you."

Mondale then looked around at the other members of Congress present.

"Again, what I am going to tell you now is top-secret information. A massive, coordinated airstrike, using both conventional and nuclear weapons, will be launched by us late tonight against Korea, with the main targets being the Korean leaders and their military forces. We will do the maximum then to keep Korean civilian casualties as low as possible. Korean peasants are as much victims of Kim Il-Sung's dictatorial regime as our Hawaii citizens are. Do you have any questions, gentlemen? Yes, Mister O'Neill?"

"I learned earlier today that a major portion of the acquisition budget of our Space Corps has been relabeled and given a new fiscal account number, with the caveat that this new fiscal account be reserved strictly for rescue, relief and assistance work on behalf of the citizens of Hawaii. To my knowledge, no such budget modification was discussed or voted by the House, which is supposed to control federal spending. What gives and who derogated to budgetary rules like this?"

Walter Mondale sighed and sat on Eastland's desk before answering O'Neill.

"I hope that you are not going to object to a measure meant to provide help to our poor Hawaiian citizens, Tip."

"Uh, of course not, Mister Vice-President. I was just curious to know who did this budgetary change without informing the House Ways and Means Committee first."

"For your information, the commander of our Space Corps, General Dows, on learning of the nuclear strike on Honolulu, spontaneously volunteered three billion dollars of money in her budget which had not been spent yet to be transferred to a special rescue and relief budget meant to help our Hawaiian citizens. I believe that she should be commended for this, rather than been accused of not following House rules."

"Three billion dollars, voluntarily taken out of her own Space Corps budget? I never heard of a service chief doing this before."

"And it shows what kind of caring, devoted officer she is." replied Mondale. "With this said, I expect you all to keep to yourselves what I told you and to cut the anti-China and anti-USSR crap for the time being."

Walter Mondale then walked out of the office, watched by the stunned congressmen. As soon as he was gone, the senators and representatives inside started an intense and at

times confrontational discussion between themselves, trying to agree on how to react to all this.

01:48 (Japan Time)

Thursday, September 25, 1975 'C'

Main tarmac, Misawa Air Force Base

Northern Honshu, Japan

Two of the Air Force ground maintenance technicians waiting on the main tarmac near a lineup of six F-83E fighter-bombers painted in the livery of the U.S. Space Corps whispered to each other as the crews of the F-83Es were about to climb in their aircraft.

"Two hotties leading ten men with graying hair: that makes for a strange picture."

"Yeah, especially when they are packing nuclear-tipped missiles. Do you know on what yield these missile warheads were set on?"

"Yeah! Ralph told me that one missile, the one to be dropped by the pair of hotties, was set for a yield of sixty kilotons and delayed, earth-penetration mode. The five other missiles were set at their maximum yield of 340 kilotons and low altitude airburst."

"Ooof! Those are going to cause some serious damage in Korea. Mind you, those bastards richly deserve the payback."

"And what a nice payback it will be." replied his friend while eyeing the long lineup of parked F-83 fighter-bombers and B-50 heavy bombers, around which flight crews and ground maintenance personnel were active.

Not far from the two technicians, Ingrid finished her last-minute briefing with her weapons officer, Major Geena Armstrong, and with the ten other officers from her Space Corps, all veteran astronauts and combat pilots.

"We will take off in five minutes, slightly ahead of the rest of the strike armada. Get in your aircraft and good luck to all of you."

The twelve astronauts then broke off their impromptu tarmac meeting and ran to their respective aircraft. While technicians helped them strap in and removed the safety pins of their ejection seats, other technicians removed the last safety pins from the large missiles carried inside their main ventral bays. Once that was done, the F-83s' turbines were lit one after another, with ground technicians ready with ground starter units in case

that one engine would prove difficult to start. However, all twelve turbo-ramjet engines lit up at once. On a hand signal from Ingrid, sitting in the pilot's seat of her F-83E, the six fighter-bombers rolled out of their parking spots and formed a lineup which followed a taxiway leading to one end of Misawa's sole runway. With the six fighter-bombers splitting in pairs and taking off in echelon formation, they were soon climbing in the night sky, followed a minute later by a fleet of heavy bombers and fighter-bombers. That ballet was duplicated by many more combat aircraft taking off from a total of five more airbases on the Japanese northernmost island of Hokkaido, in Okinawa and the Philippines. In total, 216 heavy bombers and fighter-bombers loaded down with missiles and bombs took off, to converge on the Korean Peninsula, around which five electronic warfare aircraft were already turning.

02:35 (Japan Time)

27,000 meters above Pyongyang

"Wow! Look at those fireworks!"

Geena's remark made Ingrid smile with amusement as she also looked down at the dozens of anti-aircraft guns defending Pyongyang, guns which were now filling the night sky below their F-83E with tracer shells.

"It's visually impressive, but it also tells me that, while they suspect that something is over them, they have not actually detected us. Furthermore, the fact that they are firing guns with a maximum ceiling well below our present altitude shows that they don't even know if their enemies are flying low or high. I would say that our electronic jamming is proving effective. We are now four minutes and ten seconds short of our planned T.O.T.¹¹. I will thus make a wide circle around Pyongyang until it is time for us to dive on our objective. In the meantime, make sure that our missile is ready and armed."

"Understood, Ingrid!"

¹¹ T.O.T.: Time on Target. Military term for the precise time a coordinated strike will deliver its first bombs or shells on a specific target. A tactic meant to deliver a maximum of firepower at once and thus preserve surprise until the last moment.

Looking frequently at her watch and at her navigation display screen, she then entered into a steep dive a bit less than four minutes later, while opening her dive brakes and putting her two engines in reverse thrust mode. Now falling at the near vertical at a relatively slow speed, Ingrid pointed the nose of her aircraft towards her objective: the large building in downtown Pyongyang which served as Kim Il-Sung's palace and residence. There was little doubt in her mind that the Korean dictator was probably in his command bunker, deep under his palace, and had been so for a few days already. However, what Ingrid had in store for him would make any underground bunker useless.

"Target acquired and missile locked on it!" announced Geena Armstrong.
"Missile ready for launch!"

"Fire missile now!"

"MISSILE ON THE WAY!" shouted Geena at the same time as Ingrid had to temporarily close her eyes in order not to be blinded by the bright exhaust of her missile's rocket motor. A second later, she reopened her eyes and started pulling hard on her joystick while retracting her dive brakes and putting her engines back on normal mode.

"TIME TO GET OUT OF DODGE BEFORE OUR GIFT-WRAPPED PACKAGE DETONATES!"

Ingrid thanked the fact that her missile was set to penetrate deep into the ground before detonating via a timed fuse, something that would greatly reduce the risks of her plane being damaged by the explosion of her own missile. Still, she pushed her engines to maximum power while veering away from Pyongyang, her heart beating furiously. She may have fought through five wars already, but this was the first time that she was delivering a live nuclear weapon against a real target. In contrast, Geena had just fired away her second nuclear weapon, the first time being from a spaceplane in orbit against the Chinese invasion fleet heading for Taiwan. Every combat aviator normally dreaded having to launch nuclear weapons, because most aircraft would be too slow to completely escape the effects of their own exploding weapon. Many tactics and flight profiles had been tried in the past to resolve that problem, including putting a parachute on the nuclear bomb to slow down its descent, thus giving more time for its launch aircraft to fly away to a safe distance. However, the best tactic was still to flee at the highest speed possible.

Guided by the television camera in its nose, which was coupled to a millimetric wave radar, the 2,000-kilo AGM-61N missile dove at supersonic speed on its target while accelerating constantly thanks to its rocket and ramjet motor. It finally struck its designated point of impact, an unpaved garden surface next to Kim Il-Sung's palace, at a speed of Mach 4.5. Not having to pierce masonry or concrete, it penetrated deep in the ground and actually dove past and below Kim Il-Sung's command bunker, which was covered by a very thick concrete roof, before its thermonuclear warhead exploded with a preset yield of sixty kilotons. The fireball of the thermonuclear detonation, with a radius of 410 meters, was enough by itself to vaporize instantly the underground command bunker as well as the large palace built above it, plus created a huge crater in the ground where the palace had been and projected high in the air thousands of tons of rock, concrete and dirt which were now violently radioactive. The blast overpressure, combined with the earthquake effect of the underground explosion, leveled or collapsed every building within 800 meters, including those made of reinforced concrete. Everybody within 1,600 meters who were in the open received an instantaneous dose of at least 500 rems, on top of being incinerated alive by the flash of thermal radiation. The Korean anti-aircraft gunners around downtown Pyongyang, who were positioned on top of buildings and in the open, were burned alive at a distance of over three kilometers from the center of the explosion. The whole downtown area of Pyongyang was basically razed, burned and turned into a radioactive zone as Ingrid's F-83E made good its escape.

In the region around Pyongyang, five major military facilities and defense industrial complexes were destroyed at about the same moment by 340-kiloton thermonuclear blasts from the missiles fired by Ingrid's wingmen, with the explosions occurring at an altitude of 300 meters. Pyongyang being the seat of power of Kim Il-Sung and his regime, the American High Command had decided to concentrate most of the planned nuclear strikes against the governmental and military targets situated in that area. Only fifteen more nuclear warheads were used on Korea, all north of the old demarcation line between North and South Korea. Those fifteen warheads in turn were directed at known secondary residences or command posts used in the past by Kim Il-Sung and his entourage and at major military bases, notably the main bases of the Korean Navy on the coasts of both the Yellow Sea and of the Sea of Japan. As for the territory which had constituted South Korea 27 years ago, it was spared completely from

American nuclear strikes. Its major cities, like Seoul, Pusan, Taegu and Taejon, were largely left alone, except for limited but violent and pinpoint strikes with conventional precision munitions against the known barracks of the Korean Army and secret police inside the cities. When dawn came to the Korean Peninsula, the few communist leaders still alive found themselves mostly isolated and helpless, the troops and secret police agents they had relied on for years to govern via sheer terror and oppression now decimated.

09:10 (Japan Time)

Bridge of the Soviet cruiser ALEKSANDR SUVOROV (SVERDLOV-Class)

Sailing some 85 nautical miles south of Vladivostok

Sea of Japan

"ARMED BOAT APPROACHING AT TWO O'CLOCK! DISTANCE: 9,000 METERS!"

The captain of the ALEKSANDR SUVOROV immediately grabbed his binoculars and pointed them in the direction indicated by his lookout, taking a moment to examine it.

"Mmm, it looks like a Korean gunboat. It is effectively heading towards us. Let's see what it wants. HELM, STEER TO STARBOARD! NEW HEADING: 270 DEGREES!"

"STEERING TO STARBOARD, HEADING 270, AYE CAPTAIN!"

Captain Nakhimov glanced at his first officer, who was standing next to him and had been ready to hand over the bridge to Nakhimov after completing his night shift.

"I wonder if the crew of that Korean gunboat is fleeing the American airstrikes of last night and trying to gain our protection."

"Well, in view of the airshow the Americans offered during last night over Korea, I would not blame those Koreans for being scared. On the other hand, the directives from Moscow were clear and firm about Korea."

"Yes: observe but do not get involved and do not interfere with the actions of the Americans." said Nakhimov. "After what happened to Hawaii, I can easily understand how pissed they must be. Still, let's see what those Koreans want."

As the cruiser got closer to the much smaller ship, Nakhimov was able to better identify its type.

“A SARIWAN-Class patrol craft, one of the biggest units in the Korean Navy. I would have expected a smaller craft to flee, not this one. Something is definitely fishy here. Yevgeni, call Lieutenant Lavoshkin and his platoon of naval infantrymen on deck, armed and ready to receive this Korean patrol craft.”

“Yes, Captain!”

As his first officer took care of calling on deck the small contingent of naval infantrymen normally carried by the cruiser, Nakhimov continued observing the approaching Korean boat while mentally reviewing the events of the last few days. While the Soviet Union had not been attacked in any way to date by the Americans, the commander of the Soviet Pacific Fleet, based in Vladivostok, had been genuinely worried about a possible American strike. However, a message that had arrived yesterday from Moscow had allayed Admiral Kamarov’s fears while also giving him clear directives about the present crisis. Nakhimov had been able to watch on television an American report retransmitted via nearby Japan which showed the smoking ruins of Honolulu. Those images had pained and revulsed greatly Nakhimov, who believed himself to be a decent, honorable man. Now that he knew that the Koreans were the culprits in that act of war against the United States, he felt exactly zero regret at seeing them being pounded from the air by the Americans. Giving a series of orders to his bridge crew, Nakhimov soon had his 17,200-tons cruiser stop dead in the water, while the 600-tons Korean boat accosted the ALEKSANDR SUVOROV along its starboard side. Nakhimov, who had come down from his bridge to wait near the starboard access ladder swore to himself when he saw a group of civilians come out of the deckhouse of the Korean patrol craft, to be then saluted by the Korean sailors.

“Chyort!¹² It’s that Kim Il-Sung bastard!”

A total of ten civilians, including four women, and eight uniformed Koreans followed Kim Il-Sung up the ladder. As they did so, Nakhimov quickly whispered to Lieutenant Lavoshkin, who was on hand with his 32 naval infantrymen.

“I intend to ask those Koreans to give up their weapons once aboard. Be ready in case they resist my instructions.”

“Understood, Captain!”

¹² Chyort: Russian swear word meaning ‘damn!’ or ‘hell!’.

A minute later, the Korean dictator and what looked like his family and his top ministers stepped on the deck of the cruiser. Nakhimov frowned on seeing that they were accompanied by six armed soldiers who were obviously Kim's bodyguards, but he still saluted the dictator on his arrival and spoke to him in Russian.

"Welcome on the Red Navy cruiser ALEKSANDR SUVOROV, President Kim. I am Captain Vladimir Nakhimov, commandant of this ship. May I ask why you were at sea on that patrol craft?"

Kim Il-Sung, who had spent four years in the Soviet Union during World War 2, replied in good Russian.

"You may, Captain. Me and my family were on our way to Vladivostok, where I intended to ask for asylum, away from the nuclear strikes from those criminal American imperialists who unjustly attacked my country last night."

Nakhimov nearly replied that his story was full of shit but kept his tongue, just.

"I will be happy to bring you and your family to Vladivostok, President Kim. However, I must ask that your bodyguards surrender their weapons to my men before I could lead you to your quarters."

Kim stiffened at once, while displeasure showed up on his face.

"I am sorry, but my bodyguards must be allowed to keep their weapons."

"And I must insist, President Kim."

"This is unacceptable!" replied Kim, raising his voice. "I want to speak with your political officer! I am the leader of a Communist state!"

It was Nakhimov's turn to stiffen, anger flaring in him.

"Mister President, know that we don't have political officers any more aboard the ships of the Red Navy, and this for a good twenty years. I command aboard this ship, not some party hack! Now, please have your men hand over their weapons, or my naval infantrymen will have to force them to."

The head Korean bodyguard, incensed by what he considered an insult to his leader, then made the mistake of raising his right hand to the pistol holster hooked to his belt, only to find himself and the rest of the Korean group facing 32 raised and pointed assault rifles. On a signal from Nakhimov, Lieutenant Lavoshkin stepped forward with two men and took away the Koreans' weapons, including the pistol carried by Kim Il-Sung, who could only look on angrily.

"This is an outrage! You will regret this once I will have complained to Comrade Secretary Brezhnev."

That was when Nakhimov decided that this farce had gone for long enough.

"I do have orders from Secretary Brezhnev concerning Korea, President Kim, and I am applying them now. Moscow knows that you were the one who sent those two hidden nuclear bombs to the United States. Yet, you are now fleeing your own country, leaving your compatriots to pay for your own crimes. LIEUTENANT LAVOSHKIN, ESCORT ALL OF THESE PEOPLE TO THE BRIG. THAT INCLUDES PRESIDENT KIM."

"YOU SOVIETS MADE A PACT WITH THE AMERICANS, IS THAT IT? YOU SOLD OUT TO THOSE DAMN IMPERIALISTS!" shouted Kim Il-Sung as he was being pushed forward by two naval infantrymen. Nakhimov didn't dignify that with an answer, instead staying silent as the Koreans were forcibly led inside the cruiser. Once they were out of sight, he looked at his first officer.

"Yevgeni, tell the commander of that Korean patrol craft to back away and return to Korea, then have us reverse course to return to Vladivostok at best speed. I am going to my cabin to prepare a message for Admiral Kamarov."

14:27 (Japan Time)

Red Navy docks, port of Vladivostok

Soviet Union

Kim Il-Sung was much less arrogant when he and his family and entourage were made to walk down the gangway to the quay at which the ALEKSANDR SUVOROV was now moored to. Down on the quay, the commander of the Soviet Pacific Fleet, Admiral Gennady Kamarov, was waiting for him, backed up by a whole company of Soviet naval infantrymen. Kim Il-Sung then tried one last time to bluff his way out of trouble.

"Admiral, I demand to be able to speak with Comrade Secretary Brezhnev!" Kamarov, not intimidated one bit, threw him a disdainful look.

"Comrade Secretary Brezhnev doesn't wish to speak with you, President Kim. He instead gave me clear instructions about how to handle you."

Kamarov then gave an order to the major commanding the naval infantrymen.

"Major, take the men in this group and line them up against that wall!" Only then did Kim notice the Red Navy camera crew waiting nearby with a tripod-mounted camera. His faked indignation then turned into near panic.

"WAIT! YOU CAN'T DO THAT!"

“Yes, we can and we will.” replied Kamarov as his naval infantrymen forcibly grabbed the Koreans. “By your monstrous and treacherous acts, you put at grave risk of an American nuclear retaliation both the Soviet Union and China. You are a clear danger to World peace and to other socialist countries and you will now have to assume the consequences of your acts. Major, line that bastard against that wall, along with the others.”

Kamarov, soon joined by Captain Nakhimov on the quay, then watched on as the protesting and pleading Korean men were lined up against a nearby concrete wall, while forty Soviet naval infantrymen formed a single line facing them, their assault rifles at the ready. The camera crew then came forward, taking position on one side of the firing squad and getting ready to film.

“SOLDIERS, GET READY... AIM... FIRE!”

Forty assault rifles barked in unison, firing in automatic mode until their 30-round magazines were empty, making the four Korean women who had come with Kim Il-Sung twitch and hide their faces in fear, while Kim and his male entourage were projected back against the wall by the impact of multiple bullets. The naval infantry major then stepped forward with his pistol drawn and approached the bodies lying on the ground, some of which were still convulsing. Filmed by the camera crew, he delivered the coup-de-grace to Kim and to those still moving. Kamarov nodded his head in satisfaction once that deed was done.

“A few less bastards in this World. Hopefully, peace can now return to the Pacific. Our film should satisfy Washington and calm down those American politicians who were clamoring for retaliatory strikes against our country.”

“Hopefully, Admiral. Hopefully.” replied Nakhimov.

CHAPTER 14 – MARS

19:55 (Universal Time)

Tuesday, December 23, 1975 'C'

Command bridge of the spaceship U.S.S. LIBERTY

In low polar orbit around Mars



Artist depiction of the floor of Valles Marineris, with a lander craft approaching.

“Orbit verified, sir. We are now in a stable polar orbit at an altitude of 230 kilometers.”

“Thank you, Major.” replied James Mathison to his ship’s navigator, Major Jason Rockwell. He then switched on his intercom box to ‘ship-wide call’. “Attention all hands, this is General Mathison speaking. I am happy to be able to tell you that we are now in a stable polar orbit around Mars. We can now start the second phase of our mission: observation from orbit and preparations for landing our surface teams.”

Loud cheers of triumph resonated around the ship at that announcement by Mathison. Lilya Litvyak also cheered as she stood inside the belly observation promenade, a pressurized tube shaped like a doughnut situated on the underside of the saucer section and whose outer panels were made of a tough, transparent acrylic. She had gone to the observation promenade, along many other crewmembers, in order to observe Mars as

the ship was placing itself in orbit. Now, more than ever, she was anxious to go down to the surface of Mars and be able to walk on the Red Planet, thus realizing a long-cherished dream.

When James Mathison arrived at his work office in the ship's administrative section of Carrousel 'A', he found Senior Master Sergeant Fred Turner waiting for him and sitting in one of the jump seats lining the external wall of his office. Turner got up as soon as he saw Mathison approach and saluted him, with Mathison saluting him back.

"Sir, I would like to speak in private with you. It is about a question of crew assignment."

Mathison frowned, taken a bit by surprise by Turner's demand: crew assignments had been decided and their lists published months ago. As a senior ranking enlisted man, Turner certainly had plenty of time to raise any problem before now.

"Very well, Senior Master Sergeant. Come in my office."

"Thank you, sir!"

Both entered the small office, with Mathison sitting behind his work desk after offering a chair to Turner.

"So, Senior Master Sergeant Turner, what is it about exactly?"

"It is about my own position as driver of Rover Number Three, sir: I wish to be assigned to another rover."

"Why?" asked Mathison, genuinely puzzled.

"Because I don't want to serve under a Commie, sir. They killed my brother in Pearl Harbor."

Mathison's jaw tightened at once, while anger flashed in his eyes. The designated commander of Rover Three was Colonel Lilya Litvyak, one of the most experienced astronauts aboard the ship.

"Senior Master Sergeant, you are aware that the Soviet Union had nothing to do with the destruction of Honolulu and Pearl Harbor, are you?"

"I know, sir, but Colonel Litvyak is still a Commie and I refuse to have to obey her kind. I thus request to be reassigned to another rover, sir."

That was when Mathison let his anger burst in the open. Slamming one fist on his desk, he jumped on his feet and shouted at Turner, who stiffened in his chair.

"MISTER TURNER, YOU ARE A SENIOR NCO AND YOU ARE EXPECTED TO BOTH OBEY THE CHAIN OF COMMAND AND TO ENFORCE ITS ORDERS AND

DIRECTIVES WITH THE PERSONNEL UNDER YOU. COLONEL LITVYAK MAY BE A FOREIGN OFFICER BUT I FULLY EXPECTED YOU TO OBEY HER AS YOUR ROVER COMMANDER. YOUR REQUEST FOR REASSIGNMENT TO ANOTHER ROVER IS DENIED! INSTEAD, YOU ARE AS OF NOW OFF THE SURFACE TEAM ROSTER AND WILL STAY ON THIS SHIP. NOW, GET OUT OF MY OFFICE!"

Turner paled on hearing those last words: to be part of the Mars surface team was supposed to be the crowning moment of his 28-year military career as a vehicle technician and operator. Now, he could fully expect to have a damning mark entered in his personnel file, something that was going to put a brutal stop to any chance of further promotions for him. He had truly expected Mathison to understand his point of view and sympathize with him on this: a good patriotic American was supposed to be against communism, no? Realizing that there was nothing he could do about Mathison's decision, Turner got up and saluted, then walked out of the office, swearing mentally at his misfortune.

Still furious, Mathison sat back and did his best to calm himself down, then started thinking about how he was going to fill the hole in Rover Three's crew he had just created. It was not as if he could call up a replacement rover driver from Earth and have him aboard in days. Also, that position called for a lot more than just basic military driving skills: that rover was a huge machine weighing over 120 tons when empty of fuel and rolled on no less than sixteen big wheels. That, allied with the harsh conditions and terrain of Mars, called for an experienced, specially trained person with good technical skills and a detailed knowledge of the rover's systems. Such persons were not a dime a dozen on the LIBERTY. Switching on his computer, which was one of the most advanced and performing models available in 1975, but which would have made a computer user from 2020 laugh out in derision, he called up the crew roster of his ship and examined it to see if he had someone aboard who could take Turner's place. He felt both relief and satisfaction when he found fairly quickly a possible replacement for Turner who was at least as qualified as him, but also had as a bonus a degree in mechanical engineering. Grabbing the receiver of his internal telephone set, he switched it to 'ship-wide call'.

"Attention, please! Colonel Neil Armstrong and Colonel Lilya Litvyak are to report to the Commander's office immediately. I say again: Colonel Neil Armstrong and Colonel Lilya Litvyak are to report to the Commander's office immediately. Thank you!"

With that done, Mathison started writing an incident report for the ship's log, plus a letter of blame to be added to Turner's personnel file.

Colonel Neil Armstrong, his second-in-command on the ship and also the designated surface team commander, showed up first at Mathison's office, knocking on his door a mere two minutes later. Lilya Litvyak was not far behind, arriving a minute after Armstrong. Offering seats to both of them, Mathison then started speaking at a measured pace, knowing how all this could be seen by others later on.

"Colonel Armstrong, Colonel Litvyak, I called you to come here because I just had to deal with a delicate personnel matter concerning a member of the surface team, and more specifically the crew of Rover Number Three."

"Uh, don't tell me that a female crewmember got pregnant, sir?" asked at once Armstrong. While Mathison smiled at that, he perfectly understood why Armstrong had immediately contemplated that possibility: to have a female member of the surface team who was pregnant on the surface of Mars would constitute a major headache for Armstrong, as a shuttlecraft would have to speedily come down from orbit to bring that woman back up to the ship. The confines of a cramped surface base on Mars with strictly limited medical facilities was no place for giving birth to a baby, especially if you considered the 37 percent gravity conditions at the surface and the danger from radiations.

"No, none of our female crewmembers got pregnant...yet! Knock on wood about that! What we just got was a case of terminal stupidity compounded with bigotry. In other words, one of the members of the crew of Rover Three, Senior Master Sergeant Turner, just asked to be reassigned to another rover and this because he refuses to serve under Colonel Litvyak."

Mathison noticed that Lilya did not show real surprise then, only some frustration. As for Armstrong, he nearly jumped out of his chair.

"WHAT? WHY, SIR?"

"He gave as his reason the fact that his brother was killed in Pearl Harbor by the bomb that destroyed Honolulu. I told him that the Soviets had nothing to do with that, but he replied to that by saying that he didn't want to serve under a Communist officer. I then told him that he was now off the crew list of the Mars surface team. His attitude and prejudices are unacceptable aboard this ship and he could have created a lot of problems if allowed to land on Mars with the rest of your crew."

"I fully agree with you on that, sir, but what about a replacement for him? Qualified rover drivers are not exactly plentiful around."

"I do have one possible replacement, but I haven't yet contacted that person: I wanted to talk with both of you first."

"And who is that person, sir?"

In response, Mathison pivoted his computer screen, so that both Armstrong and Litvyak could see the small picture which was part of the electronic page shown on the screen.

"Master Sergeant Denise Bateman. Her present position is as the crew chief for the onboard maintenance team in charge of servicing and maintaining the mechanical parts of our rovers. She has 28 years in the service as both a driver and a vehicle technician, is qualified on heavy all-terrain vehicles and has a degree in mechanical engineering, which she earned through part-time studies during her military career. She is also a true combat veteran who served during the Korean War, the Indochina War, the Palestinian Crisis and the East Europe War."

While Neil Armstrong nodded his head, favorably impressed, Lilya bent forward to better look at the picture on the screen.

"I have the impression that I already met her in the past, sir. Did she serve in Da Nang during the Indochina War?"

Mathison reviewed quickly the information on the screen and nodded his head.

"Yes, she did! She was General Dows' personal driver during both the Indochina War and the Palestinian Crisis."

Lilya couldn't help smile while shaking her head at that.

"General, I was shot down during the Indochina War and brought to Da Nang as a prisoner of war after your navy fished me out of the South China Sea. I now remember that I saw Bateman there."

"Damn! I hope that she will not refuse to serve as your driver, Colonel?" said Mathison, now worried. Lilya shook her head in reply.

"I don't think she will: in Da Nang, she was guarded but polite towards me. I believe that we should call her in right now, to see if she accepts this new position."

"My thoughts exactly, Colonel Litvyak." replied Mathison while grabbing his telephone receiver.

"Your attention, please! Master Sergeant Denise Bateman is requested to come to the Commander's office at once..."

As they were waiting for Bateman to show up, Matheson looked questioningly at Lilya.

"Colonel Litvyak, you didn't show surprise when I said that Turner asked to be transferred from under your command. May I ask why?"

"Simply said, sir, I detected his antipathy towards me from day one but, while cold with me, he didn't say or do anything disrespectful towards me, so I let it fly, as you Americans would say."

"You should have told me about his attitude earlier, Colonel: we could have dealt with this before arriving in Mars orbit."

"Maybe, sir, but this is an American ship with an American commander and I was still hoping that Turner's attitude would eventually improve towards me. Besides, I have learned a long time ago that commanding is not a popularity contest. International solidarity and cooperation are what will make this mission a success, sir."

"Well said, Colonel!"

Someone then knocked on his door, making Mathison twist his head and call up.

"Come in!"

Denise Bateman slid open the door and entered, closing the door before saluting Mathison.

"Master Sergeant Denise Bateman, reporting as ordered, sir!"

"At ease! Please take a seat, Master Sergeant."

Mathison eyed with interest the tall, well-shaped blonde as she sat down to the right of Armstrong. She really didn't look like the age of 47 marked in her file and her chest looked quite firm, on top of being very generous, something made more evident by her close-fitting Space Corps interior uniform. Her face was that of a mature woman but without any wrinkles and she definitely still could easily attract men. If he had not just read her personnel file, Mathison would have given her around 35.

"You made it quick, Master Sergeant Bateman."

"My shift was over and I was at the bar, only sixty yards away, when you called for me, sir."

"I see! Well, it happens that we now have a vacancy for the post of driver and vehicle technician for our Rover Number Three and I am hoping that you would accept to fill that post."

Denise immediately grinned, while joy filled her.

"I am going to be able to go down to the surface of Mars? I absolutely accept, sir! May I ask what happened to Senior Master Sergeant Turner, who was the scheduled driver for Rover Number Three, sir?"

"Let's just say that there is a disciplinary matter concerning him that disqualified him for the job. Master Sergeant Bateman, do you have any objections to serving under Colonel Litvyak?"

"Not at all, sir!"

"Then, consider yourself transferred to the Mars surface team. Congratulations, Master Sergeant: you will soon be able to walk on Mars."

A wave of emotions washed over Denise on hearing those words. Getting up from her chair, she came to attention and saluted Mathison.

"Thank you very much, sir. Permission to dismiss?"

"Permission granted, Master Sergeant. Colonel Armstrong and Colonel Litvyak will be able to brief you after this on your new position. You are all dismissed!"

Bateman, along with Armstrong and Litvyak, then walked out of Mathison's office. Once on the racetrack of Carrousel 'A', Neil Armstrong shook hands with Denise while smiling to her.

"Welcome to my team, Master Sergeant. How about celebrating your transfer with a drink?"

"That sounds like a fine idea, sir."

The trio thus walked to the bar-lounge, situated some distance down the racetrack of Carrousel 'A', where they sat on high stools at the counter of the bar. Armstrong then made a sign to the barmaid on duty, Technical Sergeant Belinda Thiessen.

"Belinda, one beer on tap, please."

Thiessen smiled amiably to him while approaching the trio.

"I am sorry, Colonel, but our last keg of draft beer time-expired yesterday. We however have a selection of stronger beers in bottle which will still be good for eight to ten more months."

"Uh, what will happen when those bottled beers will become time-expired as well, Belinda?"

"Then, we will open up our crates of the really good stuff: porter beers and the like, which have shelf lives of two years or more. Of course, we will still have a good

selection of wines, spirits and liquors by then...if the crew doesn't drink our reserves dry before we leave Mars orbit."

"That would probably happen on the MIR space station...if we had stocks of alcohol aboard." said Lilya with good humor. "On my part, I will have a glass of vodka, straight, Belinda."

"And you, Master Sergeant?"

"I will have a German Beck beer, please."

"I will take a Beck as well." added Armstrong. As the stewardess and barmaid prepared their drinks, he looked at Denise Bateman, who was sitting between him and Lilya Litvyak.

"So, Master Sergeant Bateman, how qualified are you on driving our rovers?"

"I am fully certified and tested on them, sir. In fact, I was one of the drivers who helped test our first prototype rover in the Antarctic."

"Oh?! Then, how come that you were not selected at once as a rover driver for this Mars mission?"

Denise's smile faded partly as she bitterly remembered what had happened then, something that both Neil and Lilya noticed.

"What happened then was that I was told that my test results were inferior to those of the drivers who were subsequently designated as drivers for this mission, so they put me instead in charge of the onboard mechanical maintenance crew, sir."

"But you believe that you should have made the cut, right?" insisted Neil, making Denise nod her head once firmly.

"Damn right, sir!"

"Were there other women test drivers in Antarctica, Master Sergeant?" asked Lilya, who was finding this kind of case eerily familiar to her, thanks to her own personal past experience in the Soviet Union.

"I was the only woman in the group, Colonel. In fact, there were only three men with me during those tests. The fourth designated driver, another man, was not part of the test program and was chosen from a reserve pool of drivers back in Vandenberg. However, I didn't want to look like a sore loser, so I kept my mouth shut then instead of protesting."

Lilya and Neil exchanged a knowing glance, with Neil speaking in a low voice.

"I think that I am going to send a message to someone in Vandenberg, asking that someone to discretely check the results of those Antarctic tests. This definitely smells bad."

Denise felt much better on hearing those words: she may have ultimately won today this cherished position as a rover driver after all, but seeing the bastard who had cheated her getting exposed and disciplined would be sweet revenge indeed to her. Lilya raised her glass of vodka at that moment.

"Let's drink to our new rover driver! Cheers!"

"CHEERS!"

08:11 (California Time)

Tuesday, January 6, 1976 'C'

Personnel Evaluation and Selection Section

United States Space Corps Headquarters, The Pentagon

Arlington, Virginia, U.S.A.

Major Eric Turnbull had barely time to hang his winter coat and take place behind his work desk when his superior, Colonel James Soderbergh, entered his office without knocking first. Turnbull, who had been in a good mood this morning, thanks to a nice Christmas and New Year family vacation, felt sudden worry when he saw the hard expression on the face of Soderbergh. He nonetheless got up at attention and saluted him.

"Sir?"

"I need you and Chief Master Sergeant Gorman to come with me: General Dows wants to see us."

"Uh, do you know why, sir?"

Soderbergh froze for a moment while staring at Turnbull, then answered him tersely.

"No, but I bet that it is not to belatedly wish us a New Year. Put your service cap on, then we will collect Gorman."

Turnbull did as he was told and was soon following his colonel to the next-door office, where they found Chief Master Sergeant Vance Gorman about to pour himself a cup of coffee.

"Forget that coffee for the moment, Chief Gorman." Said Soderbergh. "We have to go see General Dows, pronto!"

"Uh, yes sir!"

The trio was soon walking along the wide corridors of the Pentagon, getting to the section containing the senior-most offices of the Space Corps and entering the anteroom of General Dows, where Soderbergh spoke to the civilian secretary working for Dows.

"Can you tell General Dows that Colonel Soderbergh is here as requested, along with Major Turnbull and Chief Master Sergeant Gorman?"

"One moment, please!" replied the mature woman, who grabbed the receiver of her telephone and spoke briefly in it before looking back at Soderbergh. "You may enter her office now, Colonel."

"Thank you, miss!"

Bracing himself against what he expected by now to be some kind of bad news, Soderbergh opened the door of Ingrid Dows' office and entered first, closely followed by Turnbull and Gorman. The colonel's apprehensions solidified when he noticed the presence of a female captain from the Judge Advocate General's office in the room, standing near a window. As for Ingrid Dows, she was sitting behind her work desk and harbored a cold expression. The three newcomers came to attention three paces in front of Ingrid's desk and saluted her, to which she saluted back.

"Colonel Soderbergh, I must first tell you that you can relax: you have done nothing wrong as far as I know. However, Major Turnbull and Chief Master Sergeant Gorman have a few questions to answer."

Soderbergh understood that this was serious when Ingrid did not offer them seats, instead continuing while staring at Turnbull and Gorman.

"For the two of you, know that I received during the holiday season a report complaining about a possible irregularity which had been committed about a year ago. Do you remember the extensive field tests we made in Antarctica in order to certify our Mars rovers?"

"Yes, I do, General." replied Turnbull.

"And, following those field tests, four of our senior NCOs were selected by your personnel section as the designated drivers for the four rovers we intended to send to Mars. That selection was supposedly made based on the performance evaluation of the field test drivers, all of whom were very experienced drivers and heavy equipment operators. After receiving a complaint concerning that selection process, I took the

liberty of personally reviewing the files and documents pertinent to the subject, files which were stored in your section. What I found pushed me into asking our provost marshal to do a quick investigation to confirm my suspicions. He completed that investigation yesterday and then presented me his findings. Now, you two gentlemen are here. Would you like to say something before I continue?"

"General, I frankly don't know what you are alluding to," replied Turnbull, trying his best to look unfazed. Ingrid then focused on Gorman.

"And you, Chief Master Sergeant? Do you have anything to say to me?"

"No, General: I also don't know what you are referring to."

Ingrid took a deep breath, then opened a file on her desk and turned it around, so that Soderbergh could read it.

"If you may examine that file quickly, Colonel, we will then pass to the crux of this present business, which concerns charges of falsification of documents, forging of signatures, professional dishonesty and conduct unbecoming. Specifically, I am charging Major Turnbull and Chief Master Sergeant with altering the reports and evaluations concerning the performances of our test drivers involved in the Antarctica rover trials, in order to unjustly exclude one specific driver at the profit of another driver who had not even participated in those field trials. Well, that driver they tried to favor shot himself in the foot a few days ago and, as a result of his own stupidity and bigotry, has been relieved of his position as a rover driver by Brigadier General Mathison, on the U.S.S. LIBERTY. Senior Master Sergeant Fred Turner will thus stay aboard the LIBERTY instead of going down to the surface of Mars and will be disciplined by me once he is back on Earth. Captain Johansson, of the Space Corps' JAG office, was put by me in charge of prosecuting this case. In the meantime, you two are both relieved of your present positions as of right now and can expect to face at the minimum disciplinary boards or even court martials."

"General, I must protest!" replied Gorman. "I have served for 29 years now, showing dedication to duty during all those years. This must be a misunderstanding, General."

In response, Ingrid shook slowly her head while fixing Gorman in the eyes.

"There is no misunderstanding here when you erase a score and replace it with a new one, then try to imitate the signature of the Antarctica test evaluation officer, Chief Master Sergeant Gorman. All that to deny to a service member with 28 years of service, who also happen to be a combat veteran, a position she was fully qualified to fill."

Turnbull, who was now sweating, didn't miss the murderous look that Colonel Soderbergh was now throwing at him.

09:46 (Universal Time)

Friday, January 9, 1976 'C'

Hangar of Lander/Rover Number Three

U.S.S. LIBERTY, in Mars low polar orbit

"Well, time to board and get ready for the adventure of a lifetime, ladies and gentlemen."

Giving the example, Lilya walked cautiously on the deck of the lander/rover hangar, so that her magnetized boot soles could keep a grip on the thin steel sheeting covering the deck. The hangar, like the rest of the ship except for its carrousel, was in zero-gravity condition, something that necessitated special precautions when moving around, especially if you were trying to load heavy objects inside a lander or shuttlecraft. Lilya and the nine other persons composing the crew of Lander/Rover Number Three, all wearing their spacesuits, entered via the lowered stern cargo ramp of the 36-meter-long craft and made their way forward along the vast cargo bay, heading for the cockpit and crew section in the nose. The first time that Lilya had seen a Mars lander/rover training mockup in Vandenberg, she had been stunned speechless by its size and most unusual design. For one thing, the name 'lander/rover' brought forward to the mind the picture of a sort of heavy ground vehicle carried by a spacecraft. What she had seen instead was a spacecraft that turned itself into a ground vehicle once on the surface of Mars. It had the shape of a huge, blunt arrowhead-shaped lifting-body aircraft with long wings and two wide keels along its underside. Those keels actually housed a total of sixteen large motorized wheels which were retracted inside the keels while in space or when flying through the atmosphere of Mars. Once near the surface, the wheels deployed out of the keels, permitting a rolling landing and turning the spacecraft into a large ground vehicle. The wings, made very large in order to provide at least some lift in the very thin atmosphere of Mars, which averaged only 0.6% of the density of Earth's atmosphere, folded up and out of the way when on the ground or, like in this case, when stowed in a hangar.

The group was halfway down the eighteen-meter-long cargo bay when Swedish bio-chemist Agneta Enstrom pointed at three large cargo pallets and two cylindrical tanks occupying half of the volume of the cargo bay.

"Is this that famous Sabatier processing plant I heard so much about lately, Colonel?"

Lilya stopped, imitated by the others, and nodded her head while pointing at one of the pallets, which carried a big, cube-like piece of machinery.

"This is indeed our Sabatier reactor, Agneta, a truly vital piece of equipment for our rover's mission on Mars. By chemically combining carbon dioxide pumped from the Martian atmosphere with hydrogen from electrolyzed water, it will produce methane for us, which will then be liquified in that condenser and cooling unit on the next pallet. The third pallet supports an electrolytic separator which is going to split the water we will find in the North Pole region into hydrogen and oxygen. With these pieces of equipment, we will be able to refill at will our propellant tanks for our rocket engines, which burn a mixture of liquid oxygen and liquid methane. We will also be able to replenish our breathing oxygen as needed while producing drinking water from the water ice covering the North Pole of Mars. We will thus be nearly self-sufficient in terms of fuel for the next few months and will have nearly unlimited range around the polar cap region."

"I can hardly wait until I can drill my first ice carrots out of the polar cap." said in an enthusiastic tone Gerald Proctor, a geologist specializing in the study of deep ice samples. Lieutenant Colonel Donald Slayton, Lilya's copilot, gave a sarcastic look at Proctor.

"Most of the men I know prefer to drill something else than ice carrots, Gerald."

"No need to precise what they want to drill exactly, sir." replied Denise Bateman, making the others either smile or giggle in amusement.

"Alright, kids: no dirty jokes please!" said Lilya. "Now is the time to get ready for our mission."

With her crew obviously in a good mood, Lilya got to the airlock door at the forward end of the cargo bay but first activated the control mechanism of the big aft cargo ramp, closing it. Once the ramp was closed and firmly sealed, she opened the door of the airlock and entered it. Since the hangar was presently pressurized, she was able to open the door at the other end of the airlock. If the hangar had been in vacuum condition, then the pressure of the air inside the crew section would have made it

impossible to open the airlock door, thus protecting the lander/rover from an accidental decompression. Her crew followed her inside the crew section, which had two deck levels, with Master Sergeant Jennifer Hamilton, their communications specialist, being the last in, closing and securing the airlock door behind her. Using the steep ladder linking the two decks and basically bouncing up to the upper level, the ten astronauts entered the cockpit proper, which was quite large and had enough padded chairs for all of them. While eight of them took place in the chairs lining the aft wall of the cockpit, Lilya and Donald took place in two of the three seats closer to the forward windshield of the craft, strapping themselves in before starting a detailed preflight instrument check. Once that check was completed, Lilya, who was the oldest person aboard at the age of 54, looked behind her at the others.

“Ready for our little excursion, kids?”

“YES, MOTHER!” replied in unison the seven men and three women she commanded. Getting serious after that little joke, Lilya activated her helmet radio microphone and spoke in it.

“Hangar Control, this is WHITE LILY: we are ready to go. Move us into the departure airlock, please.”

“Hangar Control acknowledged! Deactivating the magnetic mooring clamps of the hangar and sliding your support cradle forward.”

Lilya felt renewed emotion as her big craft rose from the deck and moved towards the airtight door of the hangar, which was now opening up. After about three minutes the lander/rover WHITE LILY was gently put down on the exit platform of the departure airlock, where electro-magnets kept it fixed to the platform. With the hangar door now closed behind them, the departure airlock was gradually decompressed, its air being pumped out and recuperated, until the lander/rover found itself into a vacuum. Lilya then spoke again on the radio.

“LIBERTY traffic control, this is the WHITE LILY. We are ready to exit the ship.”

“Understood, WHITE LILY. Opening the departure airlock now. Be ready to jet out on your own power.”

“We are ready, LIBERTY traffic control.” replied Lilya while adjusting her grip on her flight control stick. As soon as the exit door of the departure airlock was fully open, Lilya gently moved her control stick, sending command signals to her space maneuvering attitude control Vernier rockets. The WHITE LILY slowly got off its platform while moving forward towards the exit. Half a minute later, the nearly 700 metric ton

craft had fully emerged from the LIBERTY and was floating under the ship. Lilya activated again her Vernier rockets in order to put a safe distance with the spaceship. In this she was acting methodically and with parsimonious use of her attitude control Vernier rockets and their fuel. She had seen too many rooky cosmonauts in the past who kept forgetting that each reaction in space had to be followed by an equal counter-reaction if you wanted to stop your craft's motion. Those rookies thus made their Vernier rockets work at full power in short bursts, only to have to effect more full power burns in order to stabilize their craft. As a result, they ended up burning a lot of precious fuel for nothing while taking a long time to achieve the required craft attitude. It was much better to give a little nudge at first, then show patience and give an equally little counter-nudge just before you were pointed in the right direction. Donald Slayton, who was letting Lilya do the piloting for the moment, appreciated her precision and method, which marked her as a true space veteran. Once their lander/rover was a few hundred meters under the U.S.S. LIBERTY, safely away from it, Lilya flipped a switch, opening the aerodynamic covers of her two forward retro-rockets. Before firing them up, though, she carefully aligned her craft in the optimum axis for a deceleration and deorbiting maneuver, then gave a warning to her crew.

"I AM ABOUT TO FIRE OUR RETRO-ROCKETS! BRACE YOURSELVES!"

Two seconds later, her two retro-rockets lit up with a roar, creating two large blue exhaust flames past the nose of their craft, while the ten astronauts were pushed forward by the 0.26 G deceleration. With its orbital speed decreasing gradually, the WHITE LILY started falling towards the surface of Mars while getting nearer to its upper atmosphere. However, their entry into Mars' atmosphere was nothing like the reentries into Earth's atmosphere which Lilya had experienced in her past. The very thin atmosphere was actually not dense enough to brake quickly the craft or to heat its outer skin as hot as in Earth's atmosphere. Lilya thus had to let her retro-rockets work for many minutes more as the computerized autopilot of her craft kept it within its calculated descent path. She shut down and masked her retro-rockets at the indicated time, then waited for the Martian atmosphere to do its breaking work. All the while, she kept her large wings folded away in order to protect them from damage. Their craft actually nearly completed a full revolution around Mars before its speed dropped to a safe level, allowing Lilya to deploy the first of a series of braking parachutes. This time the deceleration was much more brutal. They were down to an altitude of less than twenty kilometers and passing through a few atmospheric clouds when Lilya judged that they

had slowed down enough to pass into gliding mode and unfolded and pivoted her wings. Despite their wing span now being a full fifty meters, the little aerodynamic lift they provided made Donald Slayton do a grimace.

"Hell, Mars sure ain't a good place to do gliding competitions, Lilya: it is as if our wings were attached to a brick."

"I agree! On the other hand, the 37% of Earth gravity we are feeling is partially compensating for the lack of lift from this thin atmosphere. We may be a brick, but we still have wings."

"Hey, it could be worse: we could be in an anvil with wings." said their nuclear engineer, Lieutenant Commander Richard Raleigh, attempting a joke. Slayton winced on hearing his remark.

"Please, don't mention the word 'anvil': it reminds me of a real piece of flying crap I once had to test fly."

That was when Lilya let go their braking parachute and raised the nose of her lander/rover by a few degrees, hoping to gain some extra lift by doing that. She grinned when that paid off at once, with her craft now feeling a lot more maneuverable.

"Well well! In case of doubt, raise the nose! We are also decelerating more rapidly now. Donald, how far are we still from the North Pole?"

"We are about 600 kilometers from it and our altitude is now 18,400 meters. Turn to port by five degrees in order to line up with our planned landing area."

"Turning port by five degrees." Repeated Lilya while moving her control stick. A few seconds after making her course correction, she heard the voice of the U.S.S. LIBERTY's space traffic controller on the general radio frequency.

"To all craft, from LIBERTY: be advised that Cargo Lander One and Lander-Rover One are now safely on the ground in the Melas Chasma region of the Valles Marineris."

Lilya, like the rest of her crew, cheered briefly at that piece of news, then activated her microphone.

"LIBERTY, from WHITE LILY: we are approaching the North Pole and will land in about sixteen minutes. We will advise you once on the ground, over."

"LIBERTY acknowledged!"

Lilya then exchanged a look with Donald Slayton.

"I am curious to see if Mars' North Pole is really like what we expect of it from orbital photos and radar scans. Hopefully we won't hit a glacier-like area, with crevasses covered with a layer of ice and snow."

"I think that it is a rather safe bet to expect something pretty similar to what we saw during our training in Antarctica, Lilya. However, our sixteen wheels are large and wide enough to distribute evenly our weight on the ground. Our four meter of belly ground clearance should also allow us to roll over most terrains."

They were then mostly silent during the next minutes, concentrating on piloting their lander-rover down their designated glide path towards the Gemini Scopuli region of the polar ice cap. They became quite active once their craft was some twenty kilometers from their chosen landing point, when they started their landing check list.

"Donald, pivot our engines to the vertical! We are switching to VTOL¹³ mode."

"Pivoting engines to vertical. Controls switched to VTOL mode."

"Deploy the wheels!"

Donald pushed down a small lever on their central instruments console and watched carefully as a series of lights went from red to green.

"All sixteen wheels down and locked!"

"Light our four engines! Set power to 'idle'! Deploy wing flaps!"

A muffled roar started to be heard when their four rocket engines, which burned a mix of liquid oxygen and liquid methane, came to life. From then on, Lilya used those engines, which were mounted on gimbals, to direct her craft, vectoring their thrusts via commands from her flight control stick. Seeing that their descent rate was still a bit fast, she pushed forward the engines throttles, putting her engines at half power, then pushing them a little further to achieve level flight at an altitude of 800 meters. Waiting until they were some four kilometers from their landing zone, Lilya played with her engine power settings and the angle of her engines to fly down and decelerate, with Donald Slayton watching their flight attitude, speed and altitude like a hawk.

"Looking good for approach path. Speed, 340 kilometers per hour. Altitude, 500 meters... Speed now 290 kilometers per hour, with altitude of 430 meters..."

Helped by Donald's readings, Lilya soon had her big craft slowly overfly their chosen landing zone at very low altitude. Seeing a nearly flat expanse of what appeared to be

¹³ VTOL: Vertical Take-Off and Landing.

solid ice, she guided her lander-rover towards it while cutting further down her speed and altitude.

“WE ARE ABOUT TO TOUCH DOWN!” she announced out loud to prevent her crewmembers to brace themselves in their seats. However, the landing proved to be very smooth, partly thanks to the low gravity found on Mars. Lilya throttled down her engines to idle, then shut them down completely before closing back their protective covers and switching to ‘ground driving’ mode. With the sixteen large wheels of her lander-rover containing geared electric motors, she moved her craft forward on the ice some fifty meters, in order to leave the surface of ice that could have partially melted because of her rocket engines exhaust. Only then did she immobilize her craft and applied the brakes before twisting her head to look at her crewmembers, a wide grin on her face.

“WE ARE NOW ON MARS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!”

A concert of loud cheers greeted her announcement, while she exchanged a high-five with Donald Slayton.

“Good job on that landing, Lilya!”

“Your help made it easy, Donald. Let’s fold up our wings, unmask our solar panels and deploy our communications and sensors masts.”

“On it!”

As Slayton got active, Lilya used the small satellite dish housed in the fairing on top of their big vertical rudder to call the U.S.S. LIBERTY.

“LIBERTY, this is lander-rover WHITE LILY. We have landed safely in the Gemini Scopuli region, at coordinates 83° 20 minutes 16 seconds North, 181° 45 minutes 27 seconds East.”

“LIBERTY acknowledged! Congratulation, WHITE LILY. Be advised that Cargo Lander Two and Three are about to land near the designated location of our future base. LIBERTY out!”

With that done, Lilya undid her seat harness and got up, imitated by her nine crewmembers.

“Alright, people, it is now 11:08 hours. We will now go walk outside a bit in rotation by groups of three to four, to get a feel of what it is to walk on Mars ice. Then we will have lunch before starting the serious work. Donald, Denise, Olaf and Gerald, you will be first to walk out via our nose access airlock. Jennifer, you stay up here for a

moment, to monitor our radio transmissions, while we go down to the lower deck. Donald will replace you once he is back from his walk.”

“Understood, Colonel!”

“Which reminds me: from now on, while on Mars, let’s forget this rank business and use only our first names. We are all in this together and working in the name of the whole of Humanity. Call me simply ‘Lilya’ from now on.”

“Yes, Lilya!”

Satisfied, Lilya followed her crewmembers out of the cockpit and down the steep ladder linking the cockpit and upper deck cabins to the lower deck, which contained their living and working facilities, plus the nose airlock of the craft, which was connected to their nose docking ring adaptor. With all of them already wearing their spacesuits, it took only a minute for Donald Slayton, Denise Bateman, Olaf Christensen and Gerald Proctor to be ready and to get inside the large airlock, with Lilya closing and locking the inner hatch. On a head signal from Lilya, Lieutenant Commander Richard Raleigh then depressurized the airlock. Inside the airlock, Donald Slayton waited until the light indicator for the ‘exit status’ turned green before starting to unlock the ground access hatch. Opening the big hatch, he stepped out of the airlock and on a small platform contained inside the nose section of the lander-rover. He waited until his three companions were out of the airlock and had closed and secured the exit hatch before activating the nose ground access ladder. The ladder, powered by an electric motor, pivoted down from its stowage space in the nose belly, with its foot ending on the ice surface over four meters down. Instead of going down first, Donald turned around and smiled to Denise Bateman.

“Ladies first, Denise!”

“Thank you, Lieu...uh, Donald. I will owe you one.”

Feeling like a million dollars, Denise started going down the ladder while holding to its hand rails. Despite her heavy spacesuit, she had no problem climbing down, with the low gravity of Mars, which was a little more than a third of Earth’s gravity, helping her. She was nearly overwhelmed by emotions when her left boot touched the ice of Mars’ surface. Taking a few steps in order to free the area at the foot of the ladder, she then stopped and slowly scanned visually the panorama around her. It was actually very much like what she had seen in the Antarctic, during her training and her rover trials, the only big difference being the color of the sky, which was a sort of grayish pink on Mars. Still, this represented for her an achievement that she could not have even imagined as

a teenager, when she had enrolled in the Air Force in 1947. Her parents would have been proud of her...if they had not repudiated her after she had confessed to them her lesbianism. Compounding the pain of that repudiation was the fact that she had to hide her sexual orientation and still needed to do so to this day, since the American armed forces still considered homosexuality as a motive for immediate dismissal, with a dishonorable discharge ticket that would then close for her the doors to most civilian jobs and would cost her her hard-won military pension. The only military superior who had accepted her as she was after finding out she was a lesbian happened to be a bisexual woman herself and also had to hide her sexual orientation, like Denise. If anything, Ingrid Dows had even more to lose than Denise if unmasked as a bisexual woman. With the years passing and with the continuing pressure of having to hide her lesbian nature, Denise had eventually decided to relieve her crushing loneliness by forcing herself to date men from time to time, choosing male partners who were uncommonly gentle and caring and staying away from the macho types who abounded around the armed forces. That had helped a bit, apart from providing her with plausible examples to defend herself from any possible accusation of homosexuality against her. However, in two years, she was going to be eligible to retire with a full military pension and would then be able to live the rest of her life openly and, hopefully, with a life partner at her side.

Denise was still thinking about her past and future life when Donald Slayton asked her and the two other members of their group to get back inside, so that the second group could step out. Climbing back into the craft and getting into the airlock with the three others, she patiently waited while air pressure was reestablished inside the airlock, then walked back into the lower deck compartment. Going to the spacesuit rack assigned to her, Denise was happy to get out of her spacesuit and then secure it to its support and maintenance rack, plugging it in to recharge its battery and refill its air bottle. Next, she went up to her tiny but well-designed cabin on the upper deck, which measured 2.2 meters by 2.0 meters and included in its restricted space a captain's bed, a work desk with chair and a clothes locker. While very small by any standards, it still provided something vital during long space missions: privacy. Ingrid Dows, contrary to most other commanders and ship designers, understood fully the importance of that human factor for the morale and efficiency of any crew and had directed the design of the craft and ships of her command accordingly. Undressing quickly, Denise then removed the adult diaper which every astronaut put on before stepping in a spacesuit

and put on instead a pair of panties before putting back on her interior work uniform. While working in space while wearing a spacesuit was uncomfortable enough, suffering a sudden bout of diarrhea while in a spacesuit and without wearing a diaper would be downright embarrassing, on top of being an extremely unpleasant situation. Next, she strapped around her wrists, ankles, forearms and waist pairs of bracelets and one belt containing carefully measured quantities of lead pellets, fixing them over her interior work uniform. Making a few moves and flexions afterwards made Diane smile with satisfaction: with those weights fixed to her, she now nearly felt as if she was on Earth, the extra mass of the lead pellets mostly compensating for the low gravity found on Mars. By putting on these weighed down bracelets and belt when not wearing a spacesuit or sleeping, her body was going to be able to retain its normal muscle tone, bone integrity and cardio-vascular capacity. That simple but effective and inexpensive solution, like many other novel ideas and concepts used by the Space Corps, had come from General Ingrid Dows. Now changed and feeling at ease, Diane then left her cabin and went down to the lower deck to have lunch with the others, walking with a normal gait instead of the light, nearly jumpy steps she would make without the body weights.

Going down the ladder to the lower deck, Denise saw that the last group of walkers was now back and in the process of getting out of their spacesuits. Lilya Litvyak, who was present and stood near the long communal table with fixed stools of the compartment, looked at her and spoke to her with her accented English.

"Denise, you told me once that you helped test those new deep space rations that we are going to eat while on Mars. Could you take out a container and bring it here, then explain to us how they are used?"

"With pleasure, Lilya!"

Denise thus turned around and walked to the large walk-in freezer situated aft of the compartment, on its left side. Opening its heavily insulated door, she entered the freezer and unlatched the nearest rations container from its storage shelving, then grabbed it and carried it out of the food storage freezer. Putting the container on the dining table, she quickly went to another, smaller and non-refrigerated compartment which contained their supplies of canned or bagged non-perishable items. There, she chose a box marked as containing lunch menu extras, plus another box marked as 'snack items'. Bringing both boxes to the dining table and putting them down on top of it, she opened the boxes and container but waited until everybody was back in the compartment and

wearing their interior work uniforms with body weights. When Lilya made a sign of the head for her to start her explanations, Denise smiled at the nine persons formed around the table. Six of them were civilians, not professional astronauts, and had received only basic space training, on top of this being their first ever space mission. They would thus know little about space rations and how to eat them off Earth. As for their time aboard the U.S.S. LIBERTY, eating there was done under normal gravity conditions and using fresh ingredients cooked by professional cooks. She thus chose to give a detailed explanation on the rations on the table.

“Welcome to the world of space rations, U.S. Space Corps style! Those rations, which have been adopted recently by the Space Corps to replace the rather unimaginative and mostly unappetizing crap contracted for by the Air Force to be used by the old Military Space Command, were chosen by General Dows in person and then bought and produced following her directives. Since they are meant strictly to be used by astronauts on deep space missions, like ours, and at our permanent Moon base, the quantities produced are quite minimal and are only sufficient to feed a total of only a few hundred people per year. That allowed General Dows to avoid having to follow the usual acquisition contracts rules normally forced on us by the Congress for military bulk buys. General Dows also ensured that the new rations would be better tasting than the old ones, notably by forcing Pentagon dieticians to survive on the old rations for a period of three weeks.”

A round of laughter greeted her last sentence before Denise went on.

“Being General Dows old personal driver from our time in both Vietnam, Palestine and Germany, I was part of the group of Space Corps members recruited by her to suggest, find, select and finally taste what would become the Corps’ new deep space rations. I can thus assure you that they are both very tasty and nutritive, on top of being easy to use in every possible conditions and environment. Here is how they work...”

Taking out of the container and two boxes a number of pouches, tin cans, plastic bags and small paper bags, she spread them on top of the table, so that the others could look at them.

“Main meals are contained in reusable plastic containers like this one, with twelve individual rations per container, and are meant to be kept frozen, in order to keep their long shelf life of five years or more. In turn, the containers are marked as containing either ‘breakfast’, ‘lunch’ or ‘dinner’ menus and also wear a three-digit

number, but no list of the actual types of rations contained inside. By the way, that three-digit number is a random one and is used only to ensure that you don't pick up the same selection of rations over and over again."

"Uh, why is that?" asked Ned Sutherland, their New Zealander geo-physicist. "Don't we want to know what is in each container?"

"No, you don't!" replied a grinning Denise. "This goes back to the times of the first Mars expedition, when General Dows was part of the small surface exploration team. At that time, the macaroni and cheese rations had been skipped over repeatedly by most of the team members, who didn't like that menu very much, with the eventual result after months on the surface of Mars that only macaroni and cheese rations remained as available food. Since then, General Dows has vowed to prevent such selective rations use. She did that by having in each frozen ration container a selection of twelve different rations and by putting the type and name of the rations only on their individual packs. Also, selective foraging of various containers in order to find specific types of rations is forbidden. You have to choose from one ration container at a time or your direct supervisor is supposed to whack your fingers for it."

"And I will enforce that rule, ladies and gentlemen." said firmly Lilya. "You may now continue, Denise."

"Thank you! Next, those freeze-dried ration pouches are already fully cooked and only need to be warmed up in a microwave oven, then eaten straight out of the pouch with either a fork or spoon or, in the case where the gravity environment allows it, like on Mars or on the Moon, the content can be served in throwaway plastic plates or bowls. Next, you have those two boxes here in front of me, which are kept at room temperature in standard storage rooms or lockers. The first box to my left is marked as 'canned snacks' and, like the main rations containers, bear a random three-digit number. As its tag indicates, it contains small snack menus that can be eaten either cold or hot from their cans and are meant as supplements for those with big appetites, or can be used as main menus by those of you with bird-sized stomachs. If you have to warm up or eat those cans, which by the way all have pull-open tops, you will have to use our convection oven for that, as putting a metallic can inside a microwave oven normally results in a spectacular shower of sparks. Those snack menus include such American staples as salted peanuts, dried raisins, sardines in soya oil, cocktail wieners and marinated herring filets. Finally, you have this second small box, marked 'condiments and utensils'. It basically contains sealed sets of plastic, throwaway utensils, plates,

napkins and small individual portions of condiments like salt, pepper, mustard, ketchup, fruit jam, peanut butter, sugar and the like, plus bags of tea and coffee. While we will need three containers of frozen rations per day to cover the breakfast, lunch and dinner meals, each box of snack item and of condiment is meant to cover the needs of twelve persons for one full day. Since there are ten of us here and since the boxes contain twelves rations each, we will end up with some extras every day. General Dows' counsel is to accumulate in an empty container the leftovers from the day and, when full, to use that container instead of opening a fresh container or box."

"That all sounds good and reasonable, Denise, but what kind of actual menu selection can we expect? Shit on a shingle and bully beef?" asked Richard Raleigh.

"Well, there is only one way to find out, I suppose. I will now spread on the table the content of those three boxes and containers and describe them. Please wait until everything is spread on the table before making your choice: no fighting for a particular menu, please!"

"Then, let's use an order of precedence of choice here." said Lilya. "For lunch, we will go by alphabetical order of family name. For dinner, we will go by reverse alphabetical order. If someone really dislikes the last choices available, you are then free to haggle with other crewmembers afterwards in order to exchange your menus. Fair enough? Then, start spreading out our main menus for lunch, Denise. We will proceed afterwards with the snack items."

"Then, here we go! As freeze-dried menus for lunch out of this container, we have...lasagna, chicken fried rice, B.B.Q. chicken breast, beef teriyaki, shrimp Chow Mein, hamburger steak, schnitzel mitt spätzle, roast pork in gravy, sweet and sour pork, spaghetti with meatballs, filet of sole meuniere and jumbo beef hot dogs."

"My God!" exclaimed Jean Dallaire, their Canadian chemist and mineralogist. "This is a truly international choice of menu!"

"And an appetizing one as well." added Gerald Proctor, their American ice geologist. I believe that you are first to choose, Denise, followed by Olaf."

"Goodie! I am grabbing the B.B.Q. chicken breast."

"Rats!" grumbled Master Sergeant Hamilton, getting Denise to pull her tongue at her. Olaf Christensen, their Danish ice geologist and a big, tall man, chose the schnitzel mitt spätzle, while Jean Dallaire jumped on the filet of sole meuniere. When Donald Slayton's turn, who was last, came, the three menus left on the table were the lasagna,

the shrimp Chow Mein and the chicken fried rice. Looking longingly at the hamburger steak pouch grabbed by Jennifer Hamilton, he gave her a pleading smile.

"I will let you choose from those three menus left, in exchange for your hamburger steak, Jennifer."

"And what kind of favor can I expect in exchange?" replied in a sneaky tone the communications specialist, attracting a concert of falsely indignant exclamations and giggles from around the table. Before Slayton could answer that, a smiling Lilya cut him off.

"Sorry, Donald, but you have to stick with the choice remaining this time. Chose something, then we will see what we have as snack menus."

"Oh well, I will go with the shrimp Chow Mein: I like seafood anyway."

"Good! Denise, show us our snack items!"

"Actually, their choice is quite varied and includes more than one piece of each item, Lilya. Mind you, remember that this will count for a full day of meals. For starters, we have twelve small bread buns: four made of multi-grain cereals; four corn bread buns and four white bread buns. Then, we have two small cans of marinated herring...oops, I just saw Agneta's eyes pop wide open. Next, we have two sardine cans, two small cans of cocktail wieners, two small cans of cooked bacon, two small cans of corned beef, two bags of potato chips, two small bags of salted peanuts, two bags of pretzels, two small boxes of dried raisins, two small packs of salted crackers, two bags of cheese nachos, two small cans of marinated pork tongues, twelve assorted energy bars and twelve assorted chocolate bars."

Lilya slowly shook her head, impressed by all that food.

"God! I will never be able to accustom myself back to Soviet space rations after this. It will be like jumping from caviar to black bread."

21:04 (Universal Time)

Female shower compartment, upper deck

Lander-Rover Number 3 (WHITE LILY)

Gemini Scopuli region of northern polar cap

Mars

While Denise Bateman was very satisfied with her day, she was quite tired physically and was anxious to take a shower to wash the sweat off her body. She had

done a full internal and external inspection of the mechanical systems of the rover in prevision for their move to another location tomorrow morning, concentrating particularly on the motorized wheels of the rover. Grabbing a towel and a set of spare clothes, Denise left her tiny cabin and went to the nearby small shower compartment reserved for women. To her relief, she found it empty and available for her use. Entering it, she was about to close the sliding door and lock it from the inside when Agneta Enström approached at a quick pace.

“HOLD, PLEASE!”

Denise took one step back inside the compartment to let in the tall Swedish blonde, then closed and locked the door behind her as Enström smiled to her.

“Thanks! I was afraid to have to wait further and see someone else jump in front of me for the use of the shower. You don’t mind if I wait inside, on the bench?”

“Not at all!” replied Denise, smiling. In reality, she was now telling herself to show self-control, as the Swede was a very pretty, 33-year-old woman with a tempting body. Stepping further back to near the shower stall to let Agneta sit on the small bench at one end of the narrow compartment, Denise then undressed, hanging her clothes on a wall hook. Stepping inside the shower stall, she was about to set the water temperature of the spray when she saw that Agneta had just removed her bathrobe and was now standing facing her, fully naked. Denise, who had been celibate for months now because of their training and trip in space, couldn’t help herself admire the blonde’s body, something that made Agneta smile and speak softly in a low voice.

“So, my impression was right: you are attracted to other women, Denise. Don’t worry: I am also attracted to women...and men as well. We are quite liberal about this in Sweden.”

Realizing that this could turn into a possible personal disaster for her, Denise replied in an equally low voice.

“Please, Agneta! This could end badly for me.”

“What do you mean? Don’t they tolerate homosexuality or bisexuality in the United States?”

“No!” answered Denise a bit too loudly before lowering her voice again. “Homosexual military servicemembers who are discovered are then dishonorably discharged from the service, with the loss of all their military benefits, including the right to a pension and to Veterans Administration medical care. Furthermore, a dishonorable discharge would result in most civilian employers refusing to hire me. My life would be

ruined for good, all for a few minutes of fun! I can't afford that, not when I am two years away from eligible retirement and pension."

Agneta, who genuinely seemed to not know that before, looked both incensed and shaken by her words.

"I...I'm sorry! I didn't intend to cause you trouble, on the contrary. I will leave and wait outside."

"No! Stay!" replied Denise, unwilling to reject the Swedish blonde outright. "Wait here...and watch! I don't think that just watching could be taken as proof of lesbianism, as long as you don't talk about it to others."

Her response made Agneta smile and nod her head.

"That sounds quite satisfactory to me, Denise. I will be waiting on the bench."

"Thank you for your comprehension, Agneta. This is truly critical to me."

Denise then pressed the spray button for the shower head, which was of the Navy's 'miserly shower' kind, where you had to press a button to get a few seconds only of water spray, then had to press the button again as you went. She was soon completely wet and was about to soap herself up when she saw that Agneta was not only admiring her: she was now masturbating herself while looking at her! Denise, feeling her nipples becoming erect and puffing up, just couldn't resist anymore and, while staying inside the shower stall, also started masturbating herself while staring at the Swedish woman. Both of them, mutually stimulating themselves visually while stifling their moans of pleasure, climaxed nearly at the same time after a couple of minutes, exhaling deeply in contentment afterward. Denise then resumed her shower, soaping up and then rinsing away the soap before stepping out and grabbing her towel.

"Your turn, Agneta."

"Thanks!" said the Swede, getting up from the bench and passing by Denise to get into the shower stall. She however intentionally slid close to Denise, making her breasts rub in passing against Denise's breasts while harboring a devilish grin.

"You can visit me any time at my home in Sweden after this mission, Denise."

"I would really like that, Agneta. Remember: don't mention this to anybody, even in your personal messages sent to Sweden through the LIBERTY's communications room."

"I will remember, I promise." said Agneta before planting a quick kiss on Denise's lips. The latter, afraid of renewed temptation, quickly toweled herself dry and

dressed back up, then left to return to her cabin. Once inside her cabin, with the sliding door locked, she leaned against one wall while closing her eyes.

“Damn! Talk about playing with fire.”

CHAPTER 15 – IN THE NEWS

08:14 (New York Time)

Monday, January 12, 1976 ‘C’

NBC Television studios, 30 Rockefeller Plaza

New York City, U.S.A.

“TWO MINUTES FOR COMMERCIAL!”

Using the break in their morning television news show, the two show’s anchors, a man in his mid-thirties and a blonde woman in her mid-forties, drank some water and had makeup artists quickly redo their facial makeup. The female anchor then looked at the producer, standing behind one of the cameras.

“Is our next guest ready to walk in?”

“Yes, Barbara! She arrived at the studio a good twenty minutes ago and got her makeup worked on.”

“Good! Is she in uniform or in civilian clothes?”

“She came in uniform and she looks impressive.”

“Excellent!” said Barbara Walters before looking at her co-host, Jim Hartz. “I must say that I have rarely been this nervous before interviewing someone, Jim. There is so much to say about her.”

“True! If you get stuck, I could always jump in and ask her technical questions about her Space Corps: that’s kind of my specialty after all.”

“Thanks!”

Minutes later, at the producer’s signal, Barbara Walters spoke at the television camera facing her.

“And now, following the previous viewing of the latest pictures from Mars, here is our next distinguished guest: General Ingrid Dows, Commander of the United States Space Corps.”

On cue, Ingrid walked in on the set, wearing her futuristic-looking Space Corps going-out uniform, with an impressive collection of medal ribbons on her left breast. She shook

hands with both Barbara Walter and Jim Hartz before taking the chair offered by Walters, who warmly smiled to her.

“General Dows, let me say first that you must be about the most remarkable person to appear on this show. Your achievements are legendary and so is your devotion to duty and to our country. Welcome on our show!”

“Thank you, Barbara.” replied Ingrid, who had been told to call Walters by her first name during her interview.

“May I add as well that I am a bit jealous of your youthful appearance, General. Could I ask what is your actual age, if that is not too impolite?”

“You may, Barbara. I am actually fifty years old.”

“Fifty years old...” said slowly Barbara as she eyed Ingrid’s nearly juvenile face and her fit, trim body. “Now, it is widely said that your apparent youth is due to a miracle which happened to you in Palestine some 22 years ago. Can you tell us more about that?”

“I can, but I must warn that I have no wish to see that occurrence affect what other people will think of me. I simply wish to be known for what I do, rather than for what I am. Basically, while commanding our Interposition Force in Palestine in 1953, I and my driver were attacked by a group of Jewish extremists while inspecting the ruins of Haifa. We defended ourselves but my driver was killed and I was gravely wounded before one of my military police patrols came to my rescue and killed my remaining attackers. I was then rushed to our field hospital in Ramat David Airbase, near Haifa, for emergency medical treatment. While on the operating table, a powerful spiritual entity that I call ‘The One’ and which had already affected me in the past manifested itself again, healing me completely in seconds and also rejuvenating me back to my teenage years. At the same time, The One resurrected my dead driver, returning her to life and full health. Now, before you ask questions about ‘The One’, let me emphasize a few things: first, it is not ‘God’ as followers of the Bible or of the Koran would understand it. It did not create the whole Universe and it didn’t even create Humanity. Rather, it is an extraordinarily powerful spiritual being who has been shepherding Humanity for millions of years, hoping for us to gradually improve along the millenniums. Every one of us holds inside a tiny part of The One. That part is what we commonly call our soul. We get our soul as our fetus is forming and it leaves us at our death. That soul is however not lost forever after our death. Instead, after returning to the main mass of The One for a period of cleansing, it joins with another fetus, to give it a soul. That process is what

the Hindus would call 'reincarnation'. However, contrary to Hindu beliefs, souls reincarnate only in human beings: they never go inside animals or objects. As for the previous lives that our souls have gone through, we normally can't remember those lives. Some people have claimed in the past that they can remember their incarnations, but they are generally impostors and liars trying to profit from the sensation created by their claims."

"But you do yourself claim to remember your past incarnations, General."

"Yes, I do and I have proven my claims in the past with my military superiors, notably by demonstrating my ability to speak and read dozens of long-dead languages, on top of being able to speak nearly twenty still existing languages. Now, you must understand that the souvenirs from my past incarnations only add to my life experience and wisdom. Those souvenirs don't control me. I am an officer of the United States and am completely loyal to my country. Some tried in the past to discredit me by claiming that my past souvenirs made my loyalty as an American questionable, but I will only say this: I served and fought for the United States in six conflicts by now and was wounded in combat twice."

"Do those six conflicts include the recent retaliatory strikes against Korea, General?"

"Yes! I personally flew three combat missions against Korea in that recent conflict."

Barbara nodded her head while eyeing the impressive collection of medal ribbons on Ingrid's chest.

"You certainly have the medals to prove your valor in combat, General. Now, to return to the subject of the entity you call 'The One', what more can you tell about it to our listeners?"

"The main point I will say is that 'The One', contrary to the God of the Bible and the Koran, does not ask to be worshipped or revered. It simply exists in our background and only wishes for us to become more kind, more tolerant and less violent. I honor him, or I should say 'it' since it has no sex or gender, by working to bring peace and promote justice, tolerance and compassion by my actions and words. Don't take me wrong, though. I do not pretend to be some kind of prophet or spiritual leader. Rather, I hope to give the example by my own actions. Ending the war in Indochina by a peace treaty was one of my proudest achievements."

"Promoting peace and justice is certainly a laudable goal, General Dows. Now, to jump at your achievements in space, culminating with the present mission to Mars, to what do you attribute your technological successes?"

"Mostly to the technological and historical files left to us by Nancy Laplante, the time traveler from the year 2012 who died in 1941 and who was my adoptive mother. Those files allowed us to avoid following many technological dead-ends which could have cost us decades of wasted research and trials, on top of warning us about geopolitical conflicts to come. I am also a qualified engineer, with a PhD in aerospace engineering, and I have personally directed the design of most of our modern combat aircraft and aerospace systems and spacecraft, including that of our CONSTITUTION-Class interplanetary spaceship."

Barbara nodded her head slowly, truly impressed, before looking at Jim Hartz. Her co-host took her clue and asked his first question of the interview.

"General Dows, the United States has by now gone to the Moon, where we have had a permanently occupied base for over a decade now, and is now conducting its second manned exploration mission to Mars. What are your future goals and challenges in space for you and for the United Space, General?"

"The more immediate goals of my Space Corps are threefold, Jim. First, I want to drastically cut the costs of sending payloads to Earth orbit, in order to lower the financial burden on the American taxpayers. I am hoping to do that soon with the inauguration in the next couple of months of a new space launch system that should cut by at least fifty percent the cost per pound put in orbit. Second, I am planning to start building a large permanent orbital space station which will greatly augment the capacity of our scientists to study the Universe from orbit, by providing more space telescopes available for daily use. That orbital space station will also serve as an orbital refueling station for our interplanetary spaceships returning from planetary missions, like our present mission to Mars. I am also hoping to attract the interest of a few commercial consortium to help finance a possible touristic capability to our future orbital station."

Jim Hartz nearly sucked air in then, positively fired up by that mentioned possibility.

"And what kind of touristic capability are you looking at, General?"

"Basically, to add to our future orbital station a space hotel offering short sojourns in space to travelers able to both pay for the high ticket cost of such space hotel rooms and transportation to orbit and to accept the risks inherent in space travel. The feasibility of such a commercial project will depend a lot on the success of my

planned low-cost launch system and on how expensive it will be to build our orbital space station. However, the tragedy that struck our state of Hawaii has delayed most of these projects by a year or two, since part of my previously authorized budget for my Space Corps was transferred by me to the emergency aid funds destined to help our poor citizens from Hawaii.”

“Uh, did you just say that you were the one who decided to transfer part of your own budget to the Hawaii relief fund, General?”

“That’s correct, Jim. While our space projects are important, the welfare and needs of our citizens must come first.”

“I can only admire the generosity and compassion you showed by doing this, General. You said that you had three future main goals and spoke about your low-cost launch system and your future orbital space station. What is your third future main goal, General?”

“Something that will still take some years to develop, but which I think will be our ultimate goal for the decades to come: the sending of a manned exploration mission to the Jupiter and Saturn systems. However, before we can launch such ambitious deep space missions, we will have to drastically improve the efficiency of our space propulsion engines. That means studying and developing new types of space engines. Preliminary studies on such engines are already ongoing, but they will take years to bear fruit, so we will have to be patient.”

“If I may now jump to a bit of a contentious subject concerning our space program, General, many Congressmen have criticized your propensity to invite foreign scientists and astronauts to participate in our various manned space missions. Notably, they object to the fact that you allowed quite a few Soviets to be part of our space missions. I believe that there are a number of Soviets participating in our present Mars mission, correct?”

“That is indeed correct, Jim, and I feel no reasons to have to apologize for that. Making a cooperative effort in space with the Soviet Union can only help appease tensions between our two countries, thus helping to prevent wars while building up international goodwill. Right now, a total of fifteen Soviet scientists and cosmonauts are part of our present Mars mission, six of which are presently on the surface of Mars. We also have a total of 42 non-Americans, including the fifteen Soviets I earlier mentioned, who are part of the crew of the U.S.S. LIBERTY. They come from such diverse countries as France, Sweden, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Chile, New Zealand, Italy

and Japan and they are all eminently qualified to participate in our Mars mission. To those who may complain that they are freeloaders traveling to Mars at the expense of the American taxpayers, be reassured: their respective countries are covering the cost of their participation in a more than fair way.”

“Many American taxpayers will indeed be happy to hear that. Finally, I have a more personal question for you, General. You have now been serving in the United States military since 1942, which means that you will have a 34-year-long service record this year. Are you planning to retire in the coming years, even though you still have a young body?”

This time, Ingrid took a time to reflect mentally before answering in a measured tone.

“I hope to be able to serve further as long as I will be allowed to. I also hope that I will have the chance of leading our first manned mission to the Jupiter System before I retire from the military.”

“And after that, General?”

“After that, I fully expect our biggest aerospace companies to fight each other in order to obtain my services as an aerospace engineer and designer. So, as you can see, I am not worried about my future employment. Neither am I going to simply sit on my ass and do nothing after retiring from the Space Corps.”

“Some would suggest that you could make a top-notch political leader, General.” That made Ingrid do a grimace.

“No way! I am too honest and frank to be a good politician.”

Both Barbara and Jim laughed briefly at that before Barbara looked quickly at her watch, then back at Ingrid.

“Well, I am afraid that we are about at the end of our air time, General. You were certainly a fascinating person to interview and I am sure that our viewers appreciated learning more about you.”

“It was my pleasure, Barbara. If I may make a public promise right now, I want to say that Jim here will be invited by my Space Corps to spend some time on our future space station as soon as it will be built and operational. Then, he will be able to show to your viewers what it is like to be in Space.”

Hartz’ smile immediately turned to a grin and he vigorously shook Ingrid’s hand on camera.

“General, that is the best gift you could ever make to me and our viewers. Good luck in your future space projects.”

“Thank you, Jim. Thank you, Barbara, for giving me the opportunity to present my projects to the American public.”

Ingrid then got up and walked off the set as Barbara faced again the camera.

“And here you have it, ladies and gentlemen: an interview with the famous General Ingrid Dows, military hero, space pioneer and patriot.”

CHAPTER 16 – MARTIAN TRAGEDY

06:19 (Universal Time)

Wednesday, February 25, 1976 'C'

Communications room of the U.S.S. LIBERTY

Low polar orbit around Mars

"Has Rover Number Two sent its morning situation report yet, Sergeant Evers?"

"Uh, no sir, not yet!" answered the African-American communications operator, making Captain Saul Zukerman frown.

"Not yet? They decided to take it easy this morning?"

"I don't know, sir. Usually Captain Shepard's crew is on the ball. Do you want me to raise them on the radio, sir?"

"Please do that, Sergeant!"

The communications watch officer floated to his chair to sit in it, donning his safety belt to stay on it and then watched Evers as the operator started calling Rover Number Two. The communications room of the LIBERTY was situated in the command section of the ship, which did not rotate on its central axis and thus did not enjoy artificial gravity. However, everything in the command section had been designed with that in mind, so it was still quite easy to go around it and work inside it for well-trained astronauts. Saul got progressively more worried as Evers' repeated calls didn't get answers. He finally had enough of it and used his radio console station to call Base Alpha, located inside a cave of the Melas Chasma, in the huge canyon of the Valles Marineris.

"Base Alpha, this is U.S.S. LIBERTY, over!"

"Send, LIBERTY!" was the near immediate reply from the surface, making Saul exchange a look with Sergeant Evers.

"At least these guys seem fully awake... Base Alpha, we have been trying repeatedly to contact Rover Number Two but are not getting any answer. Can you try to contact them on your side, over?"

"Will do, LIBERTY! Please hold on!"

Zukerman then heard the radio operator at Base Alpha call repeatedly Rover Number Two, but with no response. Now truly worried, Saul spoke again on the radio.

"Thanks for trying, Base Alpha. We will try to contact Rover Number Two by other means. Out to you!"

Thinking for a few seconds, Saul then hit the intercom button.

"Duty Operations Officer, this is Captain Zukerman, in the communications room."

"Go ahead, Captain Zukerman." answered the voice of Lieutenant Colonel Aleksei Leonov, the duty operations officer at this hour.

"Colonel Leonov, our rover number two has not yet sent its morning situation report and, when we tried to contact it, we got no answers on the radio. I just asked Base Alpha to try contacting them but they also drew a blank. I am starting to find this worrying, sir."

Leonov, widely acknowledge on the ship as a competent pilot and cosmonaut, was silent for a second before responding to Saul.

"Continue to try contacting our rover, Captain. I will alert General Mathison about this right away."

Saul nodded to himself at those words, satisfied: he would have done exactly that in Leonov's place. Space was no place for complacency or indifference, as any situation could quickly turn into an emergency. The key word here was to play it safe.

Some nine minutes later, Brigadier General Mathison entered the communications room, calling at once at Saul.

"Any luck yet contacting Rover Number Two, Captain?"

"No, sir!"

"Damn! I don't like this at all. We may have to go do a direct visual check of our rover on the surface. What was its last known location?"

"It had parked for the night at the foot of a small cliff in the Margaritifer Sinus region, just east of the Valles Marineris. They wanted to use that cliff to mask part of the radiations bathing the surface. Their precise location was 23 kilometers northwest of the Jones Crater."

"Then, I will have our ground observation telescopes examine our rover from above when we will pass overhead. That should happen in about two hours."

"But, sir," objected Saul, "a lot of things could happen in two hours. Our rover could well be in big trouble right now."

"Hum, you're right, Captain. Damn! Our shuttlecraft is presently down for extensive maintenance and would take over six hours before it could fly down to the surface and check on our rover. Show me the latest situation reports from our other three rovers, Captain."

Taking the printed pages offered by Zukerman, Mathison read them quickly.

"Hmm, technically, Rover Number One would be the closest, being presently at the western extremity of the Valles Marineris. However, like Rover Number Four, which is on the Tharsis Rise plateau, its propellant tanks have not been replenished yet from our Base Alpha and it would empty its tanks by flying to the location of Rover Two, with nothing left once there. On the other hand, Rover Three is nearly as close as our other two rovers but its tanks are full, thanks to the Sabatier plant it carries. It could easily fly to the location of Rover Number Two, check on it, then fly back to the North Pole, where it could refill its tanks again. Open a line for me with Rover Three, Captain!"

"Right away, sir!"

06:55 (Universal Time)

Cockpit of Lander-Rover Number Three

Chasma Boreale region, at the edge of the north polar ice cap

"LILYA, WE HAVE AN URGENT RADIO CALL FROM GENERAL MATHISON!" Hurrying as much as she could and literally jumping up from the lower deck and through the open deck hatch of the upper deck, then propelling herself inside the cockpit, Lilya grabbed the backrest of the pilot's seat to stop her forward motion. She then donned the headset offered by Jennifer Hamilton and spoke in the microphone.

"Colonel Litvyak speaking! Go ahead, LIBERTY!"

"Colonel Litvyak, we have a situation concerning Rover Number Two: it is not answering our radio calls and we need someone to go check on it in situ. I want you to fly your rover to its last known location and to check on Rover Number Two to make sure that it is okay. Its last known position was 23 kilometers northwest of Jones Crater, in the Margaritifer Sinus region, at eighteen degrees, six minutes South and 21 degrees, forty minutes West. When could you start flying to there, over?"

"In less than three minutes, sir!"

"Excellent! Report back as soon as you get a visual on Rover Number Two, over."

“Will do, LIBERTY! Rover Three out!”

Taking the time to sit in her pilot's seat and strapping herself in, Lilya then punched the intercom button, making a rover-wide announcement.

“Attention to all! We just got an urgent call from General Mathison, asking us to go check on Rover Number Two, which is not responding on the radio. Drop everything right now and come take your flight stations, except for Lieutenant Commander Raleigh and Master Sergeant Hamilton, who will don their spacesuits and be ready to make a sortie as soon as we land near Rover Number Two.”

Not even waiting for Donald Slayton, her copilot, to join her, Lilya started doing her preflight checklist. She was half-done with it when Slayton joined her in the cockpit.

“Sorry about the delay: you caught me with my pants down, literally.”

“Don't worry about that, Donald. Plot our course in the navigation computer: Rover Two was last known to be 23 kilometers northwest of Jones Crater, in the Margaritifer Sinus region.”

“Got it! Our course will be 022.”

Barely a minute later, their rover flew off the icy ground under the power of its four rocket engines. Leaving the wheels of the rover deployed, Lilya unfolded her large wings and vectored the thrust of her engines to accelerate forward while taking altitude, planning to do a short sub-orbital bounce in order to get in location as quickly as possible. All the while, she couldn't help feel anxiousness about the crew of Rover Number Two. Julia Miller, who had quickly become a good friend of Lilya, was the copilot of that rover, working under Navy Captain Allan B. Shepard Junior. The crew of Rover Two was an experienced and competent one, so to be silent on the radio like they did could well mean that they were in trouble.

Some 55 minutes later, their rover was coming down its last curved trajectory and approaching the presumed location of Rover Two when Donald Slayton spoke up, excitement in his voice.

“I have a strong surface radar echo ahead! It looks like Rover Two, some forty kilometers ahead. Steer three degrees to starboard, Lilya.”

“Steering three degrees to starboard. Richard, Jennifer, are you suited up and ready to go out?”

“We are, Lilya! We only need to seal our helmet visors before we could go out.”

"Good! The moment we will be on the ground and stopped, you will go out and enter Rover Two to see what's going on with it. Denise, be ready to start driving the moment that we are on the ground."

"Got it, Lilya!"

Four minutes later, Rover Number Three made a rolling landing less than 600 meters away from Rover Two. The latter was immobile and seemed parked at the foot of a small, sixty-meter-high cliff, which nearly hid the rover with its shadow.

"FLOOR IT, DENISE!"

The blonde obeyed at once and started rolling at near maximum speed towards Rover Number Two as Donald Slayton examined closely the other rover while calling it on the radio.

"Rover Two, this is Rover Three, on approach. Please respond! Rover Two, respond, over!"

No answer came on the radio, making Donald swear to himself.

"Shit! We are in direct line of sight, yet can't get any answer. I don't like this at all!"

"Me neither, Donald. Go down and suit up yourself, quickly: three persons will be better than two in this case."

"Right!"

As Donald went down to the lower deck, Lilya contacted the U.S.S. LIBERTY by radio.

"LIBERTY, this is Rover Three! We are now on the ground and approaching Rover Two. It is immobile and is not responding to our calls, even on UHF bands. Once next to it, three of my crewmembers will go out to investigate, over."

"In what state is Rover Two, over?"

"It appears to be intact, but I see no movement in or around it, LIBERTY. I will keep you apprised as soon as my inspection team will be at Rover Two. Out for the moment!"

Lilya, tense as a steel bar, then mumbled to herself.

"Come on, Julia! Show that you are there and alive, dammit!"

Unfortunately, Julia was nowhere to be seen when the three-person investigation team exited the nose airlock and started walking towards the silent rover. Donald decided to first do a circle around Rover Two, in order to inspect visually the outside hull of the big

craft. At first, he saw nothing but, when he started turning around the nose, he saw something that made his heart sink.

"Lilya, I see a hole in the hull, some thirty centimeters above one of the front cockpit windows. The hole has an approximate diameter of about four centimeters and has jagged edges folded towards the inside. It looks like something, possibly a meteorite, struck the rover from above."

"A meteorite strike? You know how infinitesimal the chances of being struck by a meteorite on Mars are?"

"I know! They are even less than the chances of being struck by lightning on Earth. However, you need only one hit to ruin your day. We are now going to enter via the nose airlock."

As they were approaching the foot of the ladder coming down from the nose, Richard Raleigh swore loudly on the radio while pointing at something under the nose section.

"Holy shit! Look at that exit hole in the belly of the nose section! Whatever struck Rover Two went through it like a hot knife through butter."

Donald's throat suddenly felt obstructed by a big ball as he contemplated the jagged hole blown through the hull of the rover: it was much larger than the one on top, clearly making it an exit hole. With its visible size, the whole nose section of the rover, which contained the crew living and working spaces, must have explosively decompressed in seconds.

"I... Let's climb inside, folks."

Already expecting the worst, Donald started climbing the nose ladder, soon stepping on the platform just outside the airlock proper but inside the nose structure of the rover. When he pressed the 'decompress' button of the airlock, everything seemed to work as normal and he was able to quickly enter the airlock with his two companions. Closing and locking the outer hatch first, Donald then examined the pressure gauges of the command panel inside the airlock: they indicated a state of vacuum inside the rover. With tears rolling on his cheeks, he then unlocked and opened the inner hatch of the airlock, effectively finding no air at all inside. What he and his two companions found was the immobile body of Master Sergeant Roger Meredith, the communications specialist of Rover Number Two, sprawled on the lower deck near the spacesuits racks.

“The poor bugger must have tried to get to his spacesuit, but he suffocated before he could get to it. Let’s find the others: they were probably sleeping in their cabins when that damn meteorite struck their rover.”

His prediction proved true, with the nine other crewmembers of the rover found dead inside their cabins, obviously taken by surprise in their sleep and unable to react quickly enough to save themselves. Jennifer Hamilton started sobbing uncontrollably after finding the bodies of Lynda Truscott and Grete Wassermann, who had become good friends of hers during their trip to Mars. As for Donald, he also cried on finding the stiff bodies of both Navy Captain Allan Shepard and of Lieutenant Colonel Julia Miller. Nearly overwhelmed, he still managed to get to the cockpit and use the radio there.

“This is Donald Slayton, speaking from inside the cockpit of Rover Number Two. The whole crew of Rover Two is dead, killed in their sleep by a most unlucky meteorite strike which pierced the upper hull of the nose section and then exited through its belly, resulting in an explosive decompression.”

There was a shocked silence for a moment on the radio before the voice of Brigadier General Mathison came on.

“Dear God! What a tragedy!”

“LIBERTY, what do you want us to do now?”

To his credit, Mathison regained control of himself quickly and gave a few orders on the radio.

“First, I want the bodies of our comrades to be wrapped in blankets and then brought outside the rover, where they will be laid under the belly of their rover, so that the outside cold could preserve their bodies until they can be picked up and brought back to our ship. Second, I want Lieutenant Colonel Slayton, who is a qualified aerospace engineer, to do a full diagnosis of Rover Number Two and list what repairs and spare parts would be needed to return it to full operational status. Once that diagnosis report will be received on the LIBERTY, a repair team will be sent down to the rover’s location, with our shuttlecraft bringing back the bodies of our comrades to the ship. On my part, I will inform Vandenberg of this tragedy and will find a new crew for Rover Two among the rest of us. Our mission will go on!”

“Understood, LIBERTY! We will start the work right away, out to you.” said Donald, who then spoke for the benefit of Lilya Litvyak. “To Rover Three, I will need extra hands here to move the bodies of our comrades, over.”

"We are all going to come out, save for one person manning our communications. We will be with you in ten minutes, out."

His conversation on the radio done, Donald went to join Raleigh and Hamilton, who had been waiting for instructions near the top of the ladder going down to the lower deck.

"The others will soon join us to help us move the bodies. You may start by wrapping Meredith's body in a blanket and then bringing it outside. Lay him down under the belly of the rover, then come back for the other bodies. On my part, I will go start finding out exactly what kind of damage that fucking meteorite caused to the rover."

"We are on it, Donald." replied Raleigh in a sad tone before going down to the lower deck with Jennifer Hamilton.

09:02 (Universal Time) / 04:02 (Washington Time)
326 South Grove Street, Aurora Hills, Arlington
Virginia, U.S.A.

Still half asleep, Ingrid extended one hand to grab the receiver of the telephone resting on a bedside table and spoke in a tired voice.

"Ingrid Dows speaking!"

She then heard the voice of the Space Corps duty officer on night shift at the Pentagon.

"General, this is Captain Hennessy, at the Pentagon. We just got a most tragic news from Mars: the crew of one of our rovers has been killed when their rover was struck by a meteorite strike which explosively decompressed their craft. The ten crewmembers of Rover Number Two are dead."

"Oh my God!" replied instinctively Ingrid, who then remembered that Julia Miller, who had fought three wars at her side, had been part of the crew of Rover Two. Tears came next as she did her best to talk with a steady voice.

"Very well, Captain. Get as much details as possible on that accident: I will be at the Pentagon in less than half an hour."

"Understood, General!"

Hanging up, Ingrid then sat in bed and swung her legs out. She then stayed immobile for a few seconds while going over her pain and sadness caused by that tragic news: this was the first time that members of her Space Corps died during a space mission and the news she just got were bound to become top national news when it will come out.

Managing that news was going to be nearly as important as directing the response of her Space Corps to this.

17:00 (Washington Time)

Pentagon press briefing room

Glancing around the press briefing room as she entered it from a back door near the speaker's lectern, Ingrid saw that the room was nearly full, with no less than four TV camera teams set up in the front row. With the Mars Expedition capturing the imagination of the public, any press briefing called by her Space Corps was certain to attract lots of attention. Unfortunately, today it was not to announce good news. Taking place behind the lectern and getting a nod from the public affairs officer who was in charge of projecting images on the wide screen behind her, Ingrid kept a somber face as she started speaking in the lectern's microphone.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the press, you have been called here to receive a news that will sadden us all. Last night on Mars, the entire crew of our Lander-Rover Number Two was killed when their craft, which had been parked for the night next to a cliff, was struck by a small meteorite. While that meteorite was small, its velocity was high enough to make it pierce through our rover's forward section, which contains the crew quarters and facility. The entry and exit holes produced by that meteorite in turn caused a catastrophic explosive decompression inside the rover. The ten crewmembers of the rover did not have time to react and get to their spacesuits before dying from suffocation, as that decompression emptied the rover of all its air in only seconds. When Rover Number Two did not respond to routine radio calls in the morning, another rover flew to its location to investigate. You are now seeing on the screen behind me a map of Mars indicating the location of our Rover Number Two, plus the path flown by our Rover Number Three, which came from the North Pole region. On arrival, the crew of Rover Number Three found a small entry hole on top of Rover Number Two, plus a larger exit hole under its belly. You can now see pictures taken of those two holes. Our rescue crew then entered Rover Number Two but, unfortunately, found only dead bodies inside. I will now list the crewmembers of Rover Number Two as their pictures will appear on the screen behind me. Commanding Rover Number Two was Navy Captain Allan B. Shepard Junior, a native of Derry, in New Hampshire, and a veteran of the Space Corps and of its preceding Military Space Command. Captain Shepard leaves behind a wife

and three daughters. His copilot was Lieutenant Colonel Julia Miller, a native of Detroit and also a veteran of the Space Corps and of the Military Space Command. Colonel Miller was single, but had two siblings. The driver of the rover was Chief Warrant Officer Marcel Renaud, of the French Army, who was a specialist in all-terrain vehicles. A native of Bordeaux, France, he leaves behind a wife and four children. The nuclear engineer in charge of operating the rover's small nuclear power plant was Navy Lieutenant Thomas Scott, a native from Long Beach, California and an ex-submariner. He leaves behind a wife and a small toddler son. Master Sergeant Roger Meredith was the rover's communications specialist and electronics technician. He was a native of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, was married and had three children. Doctor Grete Wassermann, from the University of Koln in Germany, was an expert bio-chemist. She was married, with two children. Bennie Vinström, from the Stockholm Institute of Geology in Sweden, was a top-flight geologist of worldwide reputation and was married, with three children. Another geologist who was part of the crew of our rover was Lynda Truscott, from Anchorage, Alaska. She was renowned for her work around Alaska and in Antarctica. Miss Truscott was single but had four siblings. Doctor Armando Peralta, of the University of Santiago, Chile, was a geo-physicist of high reputation. He was married, with four children. Finally, our rover's crew counted an expert chemist and mineralogist, Doctor Donald Swigert, from the California Institute of Technology. Doctor Swigert was single. We will distribute at the end of this press briefing biographical notes on our ten deceased astronauts."

Ingrid then did a short pause before continuing, her tone now firm.

"Despite this tragedy, our Mars mission will go on and continue its exploration work on the Red Planet. A technical crew from the U.S.S. LIBERTY has already come down from orbit to our Rover Number Two and has started repairing it. Once our rover will be declared safe and operational again, a replacement crew will man it and will continue the mission of the previous crew. As for the bodies of our ten crewmembers, they have been flown back to the U.S.S. LIBERTY, where they will be kept in a cold room until they are returned to Earth at the end of our Mars mission. I will now take questions from the press pool. Mister Dan Rather, from CBS, you are first!"

"Thank you, General! Can you tell us if the danger from meteorites falling on Mars is a common one?"

"No, it is not, Mister Rather. Actually, the chances of being hit by a meteorite on the surface of Mars is infinitesimal, in the millions to one. You would have more chances

of being struck by lightning here on Earth. Our rover crew was simply the victim of a piece of incredible bad luck. Mister Hartz, from NBC, you're next!"

"General, will the need to find a replacement crew for your rover tax the human resources of your Mars expedition? After all, I suppose that everyone in your expedition had a precise position to fill and a particular job to do."

"You are correct, Mister Hartz: there were no freeloaders or spare crewmembers aboard the U.S.S. LIBERTY when it boosted out of orbit. However, flexibility and adaptation are two qualities that are practiced in my Space Command. Brigadier General James Mathison, the commander of our Mars Expedition and of the U.S.S. LIBERTY, has already found volunteers, both in Base Alpha and on the U.S.S. LIBERTY, to act as replacement crewmembers for our Rover Number Two. I can already tell you that Major Jack Lousma, who was previously part of our team at Base Alpha, will be the new pilot and commander of Rover Number Two."

Ingrid fielded over a dozen more questions after that before declaring the press briefing over. Ignoring the last few questions shouted out by the more persistent reporters, she then left the briefing room, walking back into the Pentagon public affairs office, where she sat down at an empty desk and took some time to control the emotions which had nearly overwhelmed her during the press briefing. She may have looked cool and measured on the outside, but this was the first time that she had lost this many people in a single shot in peacetime. The loss of Julia Miller in particular was greatly affecting her. This was however a reminder to her that space exploration was a risky business indeed and that she could count herself lucky not to have suffered more casualties in space during the past few years.

CHAPTER 17 – SPACE STATION AURORA

09:48 (California Time)

Thursday, June 3, 1976 'C'

Soviet intelligence gathering auxiliary ship (AGI) SSV 480

Sailing in international waters along the coast of California

Thirty kilometers northwest of Vandenberg Space Base

California, U.S.A.

Nikolai Zubov completed yet another visual tour of the horizon with his binoculars, concentrating first in the direction where the Vandenberg Space Base was situated on the coast, then looking at the U.S. Coast Guard seagoing tugboat which had been shadowing his ship from a distance. While the SSV 480, a 78-meter-long ex-salvage tug, was in international waters and simply going up and down the American coast, the Americans were no fools and perfectly knew why it was cruising close to Vandenberg, thus had assigned a Coast Guard ship to watch it from a distance. Not that this would stop the SSV 480 from listening to the electronic signals emanating from Vandenberg, a job for which the ex-salvage tug was well equipped to do. The Soviet second officer picked up his mug of hot coffee, which he had put in an improvised holder along the front windows of the wheel house in which he stood, and raised it to his mouth to take a sip from it. His eyes barely had time to register a big flying object coming at his ship at an incredible speed before it passed overhead, as fast as a lightning bolt.

BOOM

The sonic boom, as loud as a bomb going off, shook the whole ship and shattered nearly all the windows of the wheel house, while Nikolai jerked because of the boom and splashed half of his coffee over himself.

“AMERIKANSKI ZHOPA! POYDI K CHERTU¹⁴!”

¹⁴ 'AMERIKANSKI ZHOPA! POYDI K CHERTU! Russian insult (American asshole! Go to Hell!)

The furious Soviet naval officer was still toweling away the coffee covering his sweater when his captain erupted on the bridge, half-dressed.

“Kakogo chyorta¹⁵! What just happened? I was shaving myself and nearly cut open my throat!”

“An American idiot coming from Vandenberg went supersonic at low altitude right over us, Captain. It was extremely fast and was gone in an instant.”

Captain Rusenski glanced around his bridge, noting the shattered windows and the shaken face of the sailor manning the wheel, then walked quickly to the bridge telephone and called the small compartment where electronic warfare specialists were listening to and recording American radio transmissions and radar and telemetry signals.

“Hello, Piotr? We just got buzzed by an American zadnitza¹⁶. Did you intercept any radio transmission from Vandenberg in the last few minutes?”

“Uh, make it an American bliatz¹⁷, Captain: that pilot was a woman and she in fact just called us to say that she was sorry, but I bet from her tone that she was not sorry one bit.”

“CHYORT VOZ'MI¹⁸! What the hell are we going to do with all our bridge's windows shattered? We don't have spare window panes aboard! We'll get soaked like fish in the next storm! SVOLOCH¹⁹!”

On the U.S. Coast Guard tugboat, the high-speed passage at low altitude had caused about as much consternation to its American crew than to the Soviet crew of SSV 480, but without causing damage. Contrary to the Soviet captain, the American captain had been on his bridge when the unknown aircraft from Vandenberg had passed over the Soviet AGI. Lieutenant Commander George Freemont's first reaction was to call his radar operator, situated two decks down.

“Radar, an aircraft from Vandenberg just overflew that Soviet snoop ship at supersonic speed. Were you able to clock its speed?”

“Uh, you may not believe me, sir, but that thing left Vandenberg while already doing Mach 3 and it is still accelerating.”

¹⁵ Kakogo chyorta: ‘What the Hell?’ in Russian.

¹⁶ Zadnitza: An ass, or a Jerk, in Russian.

¹⁷ Bliatz : ‘Bitch’ in Russian.

¹⁸ Chyort voz'mil: ‘Damn it!’ in Russian.

¹⁹ Svoloch! ‘Bastard’ in Russian.

"It left Vandenberg at Mach 3? But that's impossible!"

"I am sorry, sir, but that is what my radar said. That thing is now out of our radar range but it was doing about Mach 4 as it flew away."

Freemont was left speechless by that and looked in the direction of the coast, where Vandenberg was located.

"What kind of new magic have they developed in Vandenberg to attain Mach 3 just after takeoff?"

09:51 (California Time)

U.S. Space Corps cargo orbiter SHOOTING STAR

Climbing away from Vandenberg Space Base at Mach 4.4

Despite being pushed hard in his copilot's seat by the 1.3 Gs of acceleration of their new orbiter, Major Stuart Roosa laughed briefly and glanced at Ingrid, who was piloting.

"That was a great idea to buzz those Soviet snoops, General. It surely pissed them off but without really hurting them."

"Well," replied Ingrid, a big smile on her face, "those Soviets better move away before Shirley Slade takes off after us in about one hour. Now, let's concentrate on achieving orbit along our planned parameters. I must say that this huge disc we are carrying piggy-back is giving us a tremendous amount of extra aerodynamic lift: we are climbing like a bat out of Hell."

"Still, to fly off your new mass driver ramp at Mach 3, and that before starting to burn our first pound of fuel, that is impressive as Hell, General."

"Well, that was exactly the reason why it was built, Major: to save on both fuel and complexity, so that we could finally lower drastically the cost of bringing cargo and passengers to orbit. With our mass driver ramps and new cargo orbiters, space travel within Earth's orbit will soon become something every American will be able to enjoy."

"And when can we expect the mass driver ramp at Cape Canaveral to be completed, General?"

"In about a month. However, it will be oriented for eastward launches along the Equator, while the Vandenberg ramp was built for northward launches, to put loads in polar orbit. Our orbiters can of course turn to a new heading after launch, but those two ramps will give us the most economical launch profiles for the two main types of orbits

we use. I am still toying with the idea of adding a third ramp, oriented towards the Northeast, in Cape Canaveral. That way, we would also cover launches to highly inclined orbits. If we could get the money approved for that project, I will be as happy as a pig in shit.”

“Maybe you could grease the wheels a bit for our space budgets by inviting a bunch of Congressmen to spend a few days on our space station once it is completed, General.”

Ingrid grinned at Roosa on hearing that.

“Major, you are a genius! Maybe we could add a few Hollywood stars to that lot: they could favorably influence the American public a lot after experiencing a few days in orbit in luxury and comfort. I can already see a list of names forming in my head. Well, enough dreaming: we first have to build our space station, aren’t we?”

“Correct, General. However, the way you designed our space station to be built with modular sections fabricated on Earth and then brought to orbit with our new orbiters and mass driver ramps should make the job a quick one. Thank God that the Congress voted us new funds to compensate for the gift of three billion dollars you gave to the Hawaii relief budget.”

The mention of Hawaii cooled down Ingrid at once, who couldn’t help then think about the unfortunate people of Hawaii. Only the most northerly islands of the archipelago were still livable, but the contamination by radiations of the waters around Hawaii had basically rendered it non-viable in economic terms, with fishing around Hawaii now strictly prohibited. A strict naval and air quarantine also had to be established in order to prevent looters stupid enough to go ashore in Hawaii with the idea of looting objects of value left behind. Unfortunately, past recent months had demonstrated that there were more than a few such bastards willing to try their luck. However, with Hawaii having been placed under permanent martial law, those looters who had been caught had quickly ended up in front of firing squads, something Ingrid had applauded, like most Americans. As for the traumatized surviving citizens from Hawaii, they were now rebuilding their shattered lives as best they could in the continental United States.

Some ten minutes later, their orbiter achieved its planned polar orbit at an altitude of 320 kilometers and an inclination of 86 degrees. By the time that they had completed two orbits and regulated it to turn it into a circular rather than an elliptic one, the second cargo orbiter, piloted by Major General Shirley Slade, had launched from

Vandenberg and was approaching the SHOOTING STAR. Like the SHOOTING STAR, it carried piggy-back a 180-meter-diameter disk, in addition to more modular elements transported inside its big internal payload bay. Ingrid had sparkles in her eyes as she watched the POLAR STAR approach slowly her own cargo orbiter. With the two large disks, each containing a rotating habitat carrousel, and with the other modules carried inside the two orbiters, they were going to be able to quickly assemble and make both operational and livable a sizeable portion of the future AURORA space station.

16:23 (Universal Time)

Friday, October 29, 1976 'C'

Lander-Rover Number Three, Korolev Crater

North Pole region of Mars

"I believe that we just reached the bottom of the crater, Olaf. Stop the drill, so that I can check with the seismic radar."

Olaf Christensen obeyed at once and patiently waited while Gerald Proctor went to check with Yuri Gretchko the display screen of their ground-penetrating radar. After discussing a moment with the Soviet geologist, Gerald looked back at Olaf.

"We're at the bottom, some 2,460 meters down under the surface ice. Let's reverse the drill and bring back our bottom core sample...carefully and cautiously. That ice sediment from the bottom is easily worth its weight in gold in terms of scientific data."

"Damn right it is!" replied in his accented English the big Danish ice geologist, as he put the drilling derrick in slow reverse. "To have been able to come here with the right equipment for this was simply fabulous. This bottom sample should be able to tell us a lot about the geological and meteorological past of Mars."

Aboard their rover, parked a few meters away, Lilya Litvak felt satisfaction on hearing the exchange between the two ice geologists: her team was now about to complete one of its main tasks: to explore the 84-kilometer-wide Korolev Crater and its water ice lake and collect deep ice samples from it. The huge expanse of water ice of the crater had also allowed her rover to fully refill its propellants tanks and its air and potable water reserves, making her rover ready to explore further the surface of Mars during the coming last ten weeks of their surface exploration mission. Still, she had one more thing to do before leaving the crater and its icy lake. Leaving the cockpit on the

upper deck after putting Denise Bateman in charge of monitoring the radio communications, Lilya went first to her cabin, to retrieve a long, flat box there, then went down to the lower deck. There, she went to the support stand of her spacesuit and, opening its rear access hatch, grabbed the overhead handle bar and bent her knees upward before sliding her two legs inside her spacesuit, which rested at the near vertical. Then, before entering completely her spacesuit, she put on her padded skull cap and plugged its integrated headset to the internal connector of her suit. Next, bending a bit her head while inserting her two arms in the spacesuit's sleeves, she fully entered her spacesuit and made sure that she was well positioned inside it before turning around and closing its rear access hatch by leaning against a partition, forcing the hatch to close and lock with an audible 'click'. Using the instruments and controls panel attached to her torso, near eye level, she activated her suit's breathing and temperature control systems. With Richard Raleigh helping her by doing a last external check of her suit and by going to the control panel of their nose airlock, Lilya grabbed the box taken from her cabin and entered the airlock, letting Richard close and lock the door behind her. Soon the noise of the air being pumped out was replaced by near silence, as there was no more air to transmit sounds, just the structure of the spacecraft. Leaving the airlock with her box and closing the exit hatch behind her, she then climbed down the steep ladder to the icy surface of the crater. Her three team members working around the drilling derrick looked at her and her box with curiosity, with Gerald Proctor finally calling her on the radio as she walked away from the rover.

"Hey, Lilya! What are you carrying? What are you doing?"

"I am going to plant a permanent memento on the lake. Youri, could you come with me, please?"

"Right away, Lilya!"

The Soviet geologist quickly joined her in a few large bounds and stopped with her at a point some twenty paces from the rover, well clear from the drilling derrick. There, she opened her box and extracted from it a large, framed portrait with a brass plaque fixed to the top of a 1.2-meter steel pole. The portrait showed a mature civilian man posing for a formal picture while wearing multiple medals and decorations. Youri recognized at once the man in the portrait and came instinctively to attention as Lilya planted deeply the pole in the ice, leaving about a meter of the pole out. Lilya also came to attention and spoke briefly.

"May this be a fitting tribute to our greatest rocket designer and space pioneer: Sergey Korolev."

She and Yuri then saluted the framed picture, after which Lilya took a few more steps and, going around the picture, took a few photographs of it from various angles, including one in which their rover was visible and with Yuri at attention and saluting, his Soviet flag visible on his spacesuit. With that done, Lilya looked soberly at Gretchko.

"Our job is done here, Yuri. I will help you guys to pack away the drilling rig once you have your bottom samples, then we will leave this crater for our next point of interest."

19:03 (Universal Time)

Crew facilities area, lower deck, Lander-Rover Number Three

Korolev Crater, Mars northern polar cap region

Eight of the ten members of the rover's team were finishing to eat their supper when Donald Slayton approached the communal table with a number of envelopes in his hands.

"Time to do your civic duty for the American citizens here, folks! We just got from the U.S.S. LIBERTY the candidates lists for the Presidential and Congress elections of November the second, along with your bulletins to vote by anticipation."

Donald then gave a smile to Lilya and Yuri, who were sitting at the table.

"Sorry if you can't participate in that election."

Lilya giggled a bit at that gentle barb from Donald.

"A Soviet officer voting in an American presidential election... That would be something."

"Hey, maybe we will one day be all able to vote for a worldwide government."

Quipped Olaf Christensen, a grin on his face.

"Yeah, don't hold your breath on that, my friend." replied Donald before distributing envelopes to the Americans sitting around the table. "Please read carefully the electoral list that pertains to your respective federal districts, then go mark your choices in private before returning to me your voting bulletins inside their envelopes. I will then send by encrypted message to the LIBERTY your choices, which will then be compiled with the choices of the other American citizens of this expedition. That compilation will then be sent to Earth as votes by anticipation. The LIBERTY will

rebroadcast to us the results of the elections once it will get them from Earth, hopefully on the same day as the elections.”

Lilya gave a guarded smile to Donald as the four Americans at the table started opening their envelopes.

“May I, as a Soviet officer and good Communist, ask you who is running as candidates for President of the United States, along with their political views about the American relations with the Soviet Union, Donald?”

“I don’t see any problem with that, Lilya: the whole World will be able to follow those elections on radio and television. While you have a one-party political system in the U.S.S.R., we Americans have basically a two-party system, with votes normally split between the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. On rare occasions, a so-called independent candidate may run for president, but I can’t think of any such independent candidate who even got close to winning the presidency. In general terms, Republicans are described as being more conservative in their views and to favor less influence from the federal government over our fifty states, while Democrats are viewed as more liberal and more progressive and favor more social programs to help the less fortunate of our citizens.”

“I already like your Democratic Party better.” said Lilya, making Donald grin with amusement.

“Don’t say that in Washington, Lilya: many Republicans think of Democrats as being quasi-Socialists. Our actual president, Robert Kennedy, is a democrat but, having served two terms, is not eligible for reelection. For this election, the democratic candidate to the presidency is Senator Henry Jackson, while the republican candidate is Ronald Reagan, an ex-actor and ex-governor of California.”

“An ex-actor is running as President of the United States?” exclaimed Youri Gretchko.

“Yup!” answered Donald, smiling, to which Lilya added a question.

“And those two presidential candidates, what are their views and attitudes towards the U.S.S.R.? I understand that your present president was pro-détente, right?”

“President Robert Kennedy was effectively considered a pro-détente president, which is a big part of the reason why you and other Soviet citizens were invited to participate to this Mars Expedition. As for the two main candidates for this incoming election, you may not like them as much, though. While a Democrat, Senator Henry Jackson is known as an anti-communist and is no friend of the Soviet Union...or of

China. As for the republican candidate, Ronald Reagan, he is also known as an anti-communist and is partisan of a hard line towards the Soviet Union.”

Lilya made a grimace on hearing that.

“Chyort²⁰! Should we expect to be spaced out without spacesuits after your elections are over?”

“Naaah! We like you too much to do that to you, Lilya. Besides, the candidate who will be elected on November 2 will not be sworn in and take office before the third week of January. So, you will have nearly three months to work on your escape plan, you and Yuri.”

Seeing the collection of grins around the table, Lilya understood at once that Donald had made a joke, so she smiled and did a joke of her own.

“Hum, three months... that should be enough to work out plans for a good communist revolution aboard this rover. I am the rover’s commander after all.”

“Yes, but beware of a crew mutiny!” said Richard Raleigh, starting a round of laughter around the table.

21:56 (Universal Time)

Tuesday, November 2, 1976 ‘C’

Crew facilities area of Lander-Rover Number Three

Chasma Boreale region, southwest of Mars’ North Pole

“Should we break out our reserves of chips and other munchies for the occasion, guys?” asked Denise Bateman as she was about to sit with the others at the communal table in order to watch the television set of the lower deck. That prompted Donald Slayton into getting up from his seat and go to the locker holding their ready reserve of food items.

“Excellent idea, Denise! Give me a second.”

He was soon back at the table, on which he put the used rations container in which they had accumulated the unused snack items from their daily rations.

“Here you go, guys and girls: time to eat some junk food. What could be more appropriate than that while watching a political event?”

²⁰ Chyort : Hell, in Russian.

The collection of small bags of potato chips, pretzels or nuts and of chocolate and cereal bars was quickly raided by the nine persons around the table. Once they had all served themselves, Donald switched on the flat screen television set facing the table and called up the video recording received only a few minutes before from the U.S.S. LIBERTY. They were then able to watch the last hour of the ABC television show consecrated on reporting the results of the presidential elections of the day. Lilya, who was also watching while munching on her favorite type of chocolate bar, stayed quiet during the show, evaluating mentally the reactions of her American team members to the results being announced district by district and state by state by the ABC panel of political analysts. While the counting of results was quite straightforward for her to understand, she had much more difficulty in figuring out this business called 'Electoral College' votes. Thankfully, a remark and lengthy explanation by an analyst on the significance of some of those votes helped her to better understand the concept.

The five Americans around the table reacted in a mixed fashion when the final results were announced by the ABC show host, who declared Ronald Reagan as the winner of the elections, with Robert Dole as his Vice-President. Three of them applauded, while the two others, Denise Bateman and Jennifer Hamilton, were notably less enthusiastic. Bending sideways, Lilya whispered into Denise's ear.

"I gather from your reaction that Reagan was not your favorite candidate, Denise."

Denise smirked in response and also whispered back to Lilya.

"In truth, none of those two candidates appealed much to me. Senator Jackson, despite being a Democrat, is an old-fashioned guy with rigid beliefs who thinks little of women as equal partners. On the other hand, Ronald Reagan has made a few pro-women equality remarks in the past. It could have been worse for American women, but we may have to wait a few more years to see a president who will embrace women's full equality of status and rights."

"And what do you think that General Dows will think of these results? From what I know of her, she strongly believes in the equality of women with men."

"Oh, that she does! However, the President is our Commander-in-Chief: we will have to follow his orders and directives like the good soldiers we are. I suppose that the same would apply to you, Lilya, if a new Soviet leader would come to power?"

"Indeed, Denise! Indeed!" replied Lilya, not wanting to say more.

10:45 (California Time)

Saturday, December 4, 1976 'C'

Passenger terminal, Vandenberg Space Base

California, U.S.A.

Ingrid, in full dress uniform and with Shirley Slade at her side, came to attention and saluted as Robert Kennedy emerged from the jetway with his wife, four of his younger children and a large mixed group of Secret Service agents, military officers, members of Congress and media reporters and photographers.

"Mister President, welcome to Vandenberg!"

"Thank you, General!" replied formally Kennedy, who was accustomed to call Ingrid by her first name when in private. He then shook Ingrid's and Shirley's hands as the rest of the passengers from Air Force One stepped out of the jetway and inside the passenger terminal of Vandenberg Space Base. Ingrid and Shirley then exchanged salutes with General George Brown, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who was following closely the Kennedy family. Ingrid then concentrated her attention on Robert Kennedy, as protocol requested.

"If you will now follow me with your family, Mister President, I will guide you to the spacesuits fitting room, where you and the members of your delegation will be fitted with passengers' spacesuits. Every person traveling to or from orbit must wear a pressurized suit as a general precaution."

"Uh, how do you plan to fit my four children with spacesuits, General? They are still either preteens or young teens. I was meant to believe that fitting a spacesuit to a specific person was both expensive and costly."

"Normally that's true, Mister President. However, we have developed a new model of spacesuit intended for short term wear by occasional visitors to Space. That new model is less flexible and less performing than our standard astronaut's spacesuit, but it is way cheaper and easier to both produce and fit to a person. You will soon see what it is like, Mister President."

"And I suppose that we will be travelling in that racy-looking space shuttle parked next to Air Force One?"

"You normally would use that MERCURY-Class shuttle, which just entered service and was designed to ferry passengers and fresh supplies to orbit at the most

economical cost possible, using our mass driver launch ramp, but today's group is too large to all fit in it, so we will use a much larger cargo orbiter that was going to bring to orbit a large tank of liquid hydrogen."

Robert Kennedy stopped for a moment to look at the fifty-meter-long shuttle parked outside of the terminal, then looked back at Ingrid, confusion on his face.

"But I came with less than thirty other people from Washington. Your shuttle appears to be big enough to easily fit us all."

Ingrid replied to him with a malicious smile.

"Aaah, but that's because your Washington delegation is not the only one to go up to orbit today, Mister President. You remember that you had authorized our new space station to be a multi-purpose one, with a section of it used to promote the commercial use of space, so that we could recoup some of the construction cost by charging rents? Well, that commercial section will be inaugurated today at the same time as the rest of our orbital station and the commercial manager has invited a large group of V.I.P.s and reporters to visit it, in order to generate some publicity."

"I see! And what kind of commercial establishment have you managed to convince to rent space on our national orbital space station, General?"

"The Sheraton Hotels and Resorts Corporation, Mister President. While on our space station, you will be lodging at the brand-new Sheraton Aurora Hotel."

"You mean that the United States now operates a hotel in Space?" asked Robert Kennedy, his eyes wide.

"Yes, Mister President! It will add to our country's prestige around the World, while proving to all that we are the leaders in space technology."

From the collection of wide grins her remark got from the group following the President, Ingrid knew that she had just marked a major point, especially with the members of Congress who were part of the presidential delegation. Hopefully, this was going to make her fights for bigger space budgets much easier in the future, which was exactly one of the results she had been hoping for when organizing this inauguration trip to orbit. She thus started walking again, leading the President's delegation down a wide hallway, then inside a sort of large anteroom with four doors, where she turned around and addressed the small crowd.

"If you may listen for a moment, ladies and gentlemen, we are about to go in the spacesuit fitting rooms, where women and men will separately get fitted for a suit. There is however a very important point that I want to make right now: there is no smoking

allowed aboard our space station, and that for very good reasons. The air that you will breathe on the space station is constantly being filtered and recycled, so we have to avoid as much as possible all pollutants. Tobacco smoke is such a pollutant and, as you certainly know, its odor clings to everything. The air in a free-smoking space station or spaceship would thus quickly become next to unbreathable. For those of you who can't live without their daily dose of nicotine, our medics will distribute nicotine patches which will help you go over your urge to smoke for the two days you will be in orbit. Please don't cheat and find a hiding place to smoke aboard our station, as the smell will give you away quickly. Those who will be caught smoking will be booted off the station by me personally, and I won't care if you are a general or a senator. Such persons will also be banned for life from using spacecraft and space installations of the Space Corps. I will be very severe on that subject, thus ask for nicotine patches and don't cheat! Now, we will split in two groups, with the men and boys going through that door to my left, while the women and girls will go through the door to my right. My spacesuit technicians are waiting inside to help you fit into a suit for your weekend on our orbital station. If you find that numerous civilians are already inside, being fitted with spacesuits, don't worry: they are a collection of V.I.P. guests whom the manager of the Sheraton Aurora Hotel invited on a weekend promotional stay. On this, let's go suit up!"

Personally guiding the First Lady and her seven-year-old daughter Rory, Ingrid went inside the women's suiting up room, a large space with a collection of benches and lockers on one side and a service counter with racks full of spacesuits on the other side. Ethel and Rory Kennedy of course got first places in one of the lineups at the service counter, where a young black woman of the Space Corps politely nodded to the President's wife.

"Good morning, Lady Ethel! I am Technical Sergeant Nancy Harper and I will be the one fitting you and your daughter."

"You really have spacesuits small enough to fit my Rory, Sergeant?"

"We do, Madam! We can even fit toddlers if need be. As for infants, we give them pressurized bags. Our temporary suits were designed in eight different sizes and two genders, with each size model having adjustable straps and joints in order to quickly fit a wide scope of individuals. From what I can judge, we will easily be able to fit you and your charming daughter. Please pass through this counter wicket and we will go tour our choice of spacesuits available for you."

Ethel Kennedy and her preteen daughter quickly went behind the counter and disappeared with Brown along one of the rows of suspended spacesuits, leaving Ingrid to wait for them at the counter while watching how the process was going. Some sort of commotion at one end of the service counter soon had her walk quickly in that direction, cutting behind two of the lineups of women waiting to be served. What she found was an overweight, mature woman wearing a fashionable dress and who was nearly shouting at a young black woman of the Space Corps standing behind the service counter.

"I want a white woman to get me my spacesuit, not some nigger girl in military uniform! I..."

Ingrid interrupted the woman by tapping hard on her right shoulder. Incensed by that, the woman turned around, only to find herself nearly nose to nose with Ingrid.

"Get out of here, madam, right now! I don't care who you are: you are staying on the ground and are not going up to my space station."

"You can't do that! I am the wife of Senator James Eastland, the President Pro-Tempore of the Senate and..."

"AND I AM GENERAL INGRID DOWS, COMMANDER OF THE UNITED STATES SPACE CORPS AND NATIONAL DIRECTOR OF SPACE PROGRAMS. HERE, YOU ARE EXPECTED TO RESPECT EVERY MEMBER OF MY CORPS BUT, SINCE YOU ARE APPARENTLY TOO BIGOTED TO UNDERSTAND THAT, YOU WILL STAY HERE, ON THE GROUND. AND IF YOUR PRECIOUS HUSBAND CLAMORS TO GET YOU TO FOLLOW HIM TO ORBIT, THEN HE WILL BE FREE TO STAY ON THE GROUND AS WELL. NOW, GET OUT OF HERE!"

Thoroughly intimidated and deflated, the woman didn't dare reply to Ingrid and left the suiting up room, watched by the other women and girls present. One woman who already had a spacesuit on and was busy packing away her civilian winter clothes applauded to show her approval, making Ingrid look and smile at her.

"Thank you, Miss Streisand."

"I am the one who needs to thank you, for standing up for your sergeant against that racist bitch, General." replied the famous singer and actress. Ingrid smiled and nodded her head to that but suddenly saw another woman in a far corner of the room, nearly hidden by a locker.

"Uh, if you will excuse me for a moment, I just saw someone I had been dying to see again after many years."

Watched by the curious Barbra Streisand, Ingrid hurried to the far corner, with the blonde woman there nearly running to her. Both women threw themselves in each other's arms for a warm hug and kisses on the cheeks.

"Marilyn! My God, it has been too long since I last saw you."

"And I was also dying to see you again, Ingrid." replied fifty-years-old Marilyn Monroe, tears rolling on her cheeks. "I must thank you for getting me invited by the Sheraton Corporation for this promotional opening."

"I didn't need to ask that you be invited, Marilyn: those Sheraton executives would have been terminally stupid not to invite a Hollywood celebrity like you. Mind you, I would have kicked their asses and reminded them to invite you if they had not done so. How is your acting career going? Do you have a new role in store for the near future?"

"I do!" replied proudly the still very photogenic blonde, who evidently took good care of her physique and appeared quite fit for her age. Ingrid couldn't then help reflect mentally on the sharp contrast between her present friend and her counterpart from the original timeline, who had died prematurely in a supposed act of suicide which had raised many suspicions of third-party involvement at the time. The Marilyn Monroe of 1976 'C', apart from being still very much alive, was also not afflicted by a dependence on various anti-depressants and was quite stable emotionally, contrary to her neurotic Timeline 'A' counterpart, thanks to a little secret miracle performed on Marilyn in Vietnam by Natai, Ingrid's guardian angel.

"And what do you have lined up as your next role, Marilyn?"

"Believe it or not, but I am going to be the next Bond Girl and I will get to do some action scenes as a sexy but evil woman."

"Good for you! We must discuss your career further once we are up in orbit, Marilyn. However, I must go check on many things before we launch. If you will excuse me."

"No need to excuse yourself, Ingrid: you were always a busy girl."

"And still am!" replied Ingrid. "See you later up there, Marilyn."

Ingrid then regretfully walked away, truly happy to have seen her friend again after all those years.

In the men's spacesuit fitting room, Christopher Kennedy nearly shouted with excitement when he saw the numerous Hollywood celebrities present and being fitted for spacesuits by half a dozen Space Corps members.

“Wow! I can see Sean Connery, Dean Martin, Kirk Douglas and other big names from Hollywood, Dad. They really are going up in Space with us?”

“It seems so, Christopher.” replied Robert Kennedy, smiling to himself. “This space trip is certainly going to make quite a splash in the newspapers and on television. Talking of television, I can see some of the most popular reporters and show hosts, who are present as well. In fact, all three main television stations in the United States appear to be well represented. Jim Hartz from NBC is here, along with Walter Cronkite from CBS and Peter Jennings from ABC. Damn, Ingrid really hit the jackpot in terms of publicity potential. Well, let’s get you, Douglas and Matthew fitted first.”

With the celebrities they passed by pausing for a moment to greet Robert Kennedy or shake his hand, the little group went to one of the store clerks standing behind the service counter, closely followed by four Secret Service agents from the presidential detail. There, nine-years-old Douglas was first to pass the wicket to go find with the clerk a spacesuit of the correct size.

Robert Kennedy and his two remaining sons were still waiting at the counter a minute later when an irate Senator James Eastland came to the President to loudly complain to him.

“Mister President, I need you to put this General Dows back in her place, and quickly! She just told my wife that she was not going to be allowed to go to Space with me.”

Robert’s reaction was to eye Eastland with little sympathy: the democratic senator from Mississippi and President Pro Tempore of the Senate was an avowed racist and segregationist of the kind Robert despised with a passion.

“I suppose that General Dows must have had a specific reason to turn away your wife, no?”

“My wife only wanted to be fitted by a clerk of her choice. That was when Dows pounced on her.”

The words ‘clerk of her choice’ immediately brought understanding to Robert, who looked coldly at Eastland.

“Do you mean to say that your wife refused to be served by a black woman, Senator Eastland?”

Sensing his President’s disapproval, Eastland hesitated a bit but decided to insist.

“Yes, but that’s no reason to refuse to let my wife go to space with me, Mister President.”

That was when Robert Kennedy hardened his voice, raising its volume as well.

“Senator Eastland, you are presently on a base of our Space Corps and our military has been desegregated by presidential executive order decades ago. If your wife treated a black service member in any disrespectful way, then General Dows was fully justified to ground her. You are not in Mississippi here and you know what I think about your ignorant and hateful Jim Crow laws in the South. If you don’t want to leave your wife behind, then you are welcomed to stay here as well.”

Eastland nearly exploded then but barely managed to not shout at Robert, instead pivoting on his heels and grumbling to himself while walking away.

“That Dows bitch will regret this! Wait till she asks for more funding for her damn Space Corps.”

“SENATOR EASTLAND, STOP RIGHT THERE AND COME HERE!”

Eastland did stop and faced Robert Kennedy but stayed a few paces away as Robert angrily blasted him in front of all the other men present in the fitting room.

“IF YOU EVER TRY TO IMPEDE THE OPERATIONS AND PROGRAMS OF OUR SPACE CORPS JUST BECAUSE OF A PERSONAL SPITE, THEN I WILL MAKE SURE THAT YOU GET VOTED OUT OF YOUR POSITION AS PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE OF THE SENATE. I WILL NOT ALLOW YOU TO IMPOSE YOUR RACIST VIEWS TO THE REST OF THE COUNTRY WHILE SABOTAGING THE INCREDIBLE WORK BEING DONE BY GENERAL DOWS ON BEHALF OF OUR COUNTRY. I AM NOW THE ONE TELLING YOU THAT YOU AND YOUR WIFE WILL STAY ON THE GROUND. NOW GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!”

With all the reporters and television correspondents present taking notes of the exchange while eyeing him with either contempt or reprobation, Eastland had no choice but to leave the fitting room, utterly humiliated. As soon as he was gone, a dozen reporters and correspondents converged on the President to throw questions at him. After two seconds of a verbal barrage, Robert Kennedy raised both hands to ask for silence.

“Gentlemen, please! I have only a second-hand account of what happened between General Dows and Senator Eastland’s wife, so I would ask you to go talk to General Dows instead. However, I am sure that General Dows had a good reason to ground Misses Eastland. As for Senator Eastland’s remarks about planning to impede

future budgetary requests from the Space Corps, I had to take him to task over those remarks, as I will not allow bigotry and racism to impede the fantastic work done to date by General Dows and her Space Corps. Just think that less than twenty years ago nobody had sent anything into Space. Yet, today, we are about to rise to orbit in a space shuttle and stay at an American hotel in an American orbital space station. We owe that mostly to one person: General Ingrid Dows. Never forget that! Now, if you please could let me check on how my three sons' spacesuit fittings are going..."

Reluctantly, and with Secret Service agents encouraging them to disperse, the reporters returned to their lockers or back into the lineups, while Robert returned to the side of Matthew and Christopher.

As he was waiting for his son Douglas to come back from a fitting cabin, Robert spotted in one of the lineups the famous magazine owner Hugh Hefner, who was about to get his turn at the service counter. Excusing himself with his two sons, Robert quickly walked to the Playboy Magazine owner, who smiled and greeted him with a strong handshake.

"Mister President, it is a true honor to meet you, especially on such an extraordinary occasion. Did you bring your whole family with you today?"

"Oh no: just my wife and my four youngest children. And you, Mister Hefner, did you bring part of your fabulous harem with you?"

Hefner grinned at Robert's choice of words.

"I brought only one girl with me today for a change. I chose to bring my present partner, Barbie Benton, who is now getting suited up as well. You do know my Barbie Benton, Mister President?"

Robert Kennedy could only nod his head at that, as his mind pictured the extremely beautiful, sexy...and young Playboy model, with her generous chest, green eyes and baby face. For an inveterate skirt-chaser like Robert, Barbie Benton would indeed be a juicy prize to catch...out of view of Ethel, of course.

"I have seen pictures of her, yes. She is one very beautiful young woman."

"She is indeed, Mister President. Maybe I could present her to you later on, when we are up on that fabulous space station."

"I would like that very much, Mister Hefner."

"Please, Mister President, simply call me 'Hugh'. I know that proper protocol requires me to call you 'Mister President' in public, but my own personal protocol is very much informal."

"Starting with the pajamas?"

Hefner smiled at Robert's joke.

"Starting with the pajamas. I hope that General Dows will allow me to wear them around her space station."

"Ingrid Dows, objecting to some innocent fun between adults? She likes too much her fun to object to something as innocuous as pajamas. Hell, did you see the pictures taken of her on French and Vietnamese beaches, wearing her tiny bikini?"

"Oh, I did, Mister President. If she wouldn't be so busy with so many important things, I would have invited her to the Playboy Mansion in a heartbeat. My own models are in fact jealous about the way she is staying physically young despite her age. Do you know how old she is actually, by the way?"

"She's now 51-years-old, Hugh, but I bet that she would cause your magazine to sell out if she ever appeared in it as a centerfold nude model."

It was the turn of Hugh Hefner to have a dreamy look appear on his face.

"To have General Dows naked for a photo shoot... Now, that would be something else! Mind you, I suppose that Washington officials would object to seeing a four-star general appear naked in a magazine."

"Oh, they would...while secretly enjoying the pictures. You know how hypocritical the Washington crowd can be, Hugh."

Hefner rolled his eyes at that.

"Not only Washington, Mister President. Sometimes I envy the moral freedom that the publishers have in the French Riviera. Cannes and Saint-Tropez are such delightful places to visit."

"Indeed! However, my wife may object to us going there. Well, I hope that I will see you again aboard the space station, you and Miss Benton."

"I look forward to that moment, Mister President. Thank you for coming to speak with me."

"It was my pleasure, Hugh."

Robert Kennedy then returned to his own lineup at the counter. To his surprise, his nine-years-old son Douglas was already back at the counter, wearing a spacesuit which

seemed to fit him very well, while Matthew was being guided down the racks of spacesuits by a Space Corps clerk.

"They already fitted you with a spacesuit, Doug? That was fast!"

"It was actually easy, Dad. The clerk chose a suit that proved a nearly perfect fit for me and he only needed to adjust the lengths at various joints and attach to it pairs of gloves and boots to my size. He then had me step inside a vacuum chamber for a minute to check my suit for leaks and for its fit when pressurized."

"Wow! That is quite an efficient process. And your suit looks really impressive."

"I love it, Dad! It's not even really heavy and it is quite comfortable to wear."

"I see only a small pack attached to the chest area, instead of the big backpack we see astronauts wear. Is there a separate backpack that comes with this?"

"No, Dad! I asked the same question to the clerk fitting me and he said that those passenger suits are only meant to have a couple of hours of air reserves, as they are used for emergency situations only rather than for real space work. He did tell me that there are multiple air refilling stations dispersed around the space station. If I ever get short on air, I will just need to plug my suit to one of those stations and my air bottle will refill itself automatically."

"Nice! Really nice!" said Robert while eyeing his son from head to toe. His suit was a semi-rigid type with joints which could be adjusted in length by sets of external rails and screws. The boots and gloves were of the quick-connect type and the suit was crowned by a large rigid shoulder plate which included a helmet with visor. The shoulder plate was actually a bit wider and deeper than Douglas' shoulders and was connected to the rest of the suit by an airtight sealing joint. Robert then understood that this shoulder plate was the location by which a wearer entered or exited the suit, which made it easy to put on and take off.

"Let me take a picture of you in your suit, Son. Just stand next to the service counter."

Taking a few steps back, Robert grabbed and pointed the 35mm still camera he had brought for this trip and snapped a couple of pictures of a proud, smiling Douglas.

Barely twenty minutes later, in a dazzling demonstration of efficiency and organization by the Space Corps personnel, Robert Kennedy, his three sons and all the other men and boys present had been fitted with suits and were ready to go, with their suitcases or travel bags in hand. A Space Corps captain then took charge of the group

of men and boys, leading it out of the fitting room and into an adjacent large room, where they were reunited with the women and girls of the female group. Robert grinned as he eyed his wife's suit, a model visibly made to fit women.

"You look just great in this, Ethel."

"And you look quite handsome in your own suit, Robert. What's next?"

"I guess that we will now board our shuttle."

Robert was actually proved wrong, as they boarded a group of waiting buses instead of entering a shuttle via a jetway. The small convoy of buses then drove out of the terminal building and headed towards the foot of the most gigantic ramp Robert had ever seen. At the foot of the ramp, resting on a kind of huge sled connected to the ramp, was a huge spaceship which was easily the size of a navy destroyer and which made young Douglas exclaim himself.

"Wow! Look at that huge spaceship, Dad!"

"I see it, Doug. That big ramp is also quite impressive: it must be a good fifteen miles-long, but its gradient is quite gentle. That must be the so-called 'mass driver' that General Dows told me about a few times."

The Space Corps captain accompanying their group and who was sitting near Robert, smiled to him.

"That is effectively called a mass driver ramp, Mister President. It uses a system of powerful electro-magnets to both support and propel forward a cradle sled which supports the spacecraft to be launched. The ramp can actually accommodate many different types of spacecraft, with the power to the magnets adjusted according to the mass to be launched. Just before takeoff, the engines of the cargo orbiter you see ahead of us will be lit and put at idle power. Then, the sled will be propelled forward at an acceleration of two Gs and will speed up to a velocity of Mach 3 by the time that the orbiter detach itself from the cradle and flies away. As for the cradle, it then will be brutally slowed down by its magnets, so that it could safely stop and then return to the foot of the ramp. to be prepared for another launch, Mister President."

"And how long can it take between two launches, Captain?"

"About thirty minutes, if the next craft is ready and waiting near the foot of the ramp. Since our shuttles and orbiters are catapulted off the ramp at Mach 3, they don't need to use their rocket engines at first and only fly and accelerate further in flight with the help of their ramjet engines, which are of very simple design and which use

atmospheric oxygen as oxidizer and liquid methane as fuel. Only once at about 90,000 feet of altitude and Mach 5.5 will the rocket engines ignite at full power to insert our craft into orbit. This mass driver system thus saves tons of propellant, limits the actual use of rocket engines to a relatively short span and, since the whole shuttle or orbiter is fully reusable, saves us millions of dollars at every launch. Before, using a classic one-shot use rocket, sending into orbit the payload we will carry to the space station today would cost close to half a billion dollars. Now, using reusable shuttles and mass driver ramps, we have managed to lower launch costs into low Earth orbit to about 800 dollars per metric ton of payload. This new mass driver system thus saves the country a huge amount of money, while giving us a capacity to throw things into orbit that the Soviets can only dream of approaching.”

“That’s great! The American taxpayers would be pleased to hear that. And do you know how expensive it will be for our average citizen to go up to our space station and stay a couple of days there before returning to Earth, Captain?”

“I actually saw the price rates that the Sheraton Corporation and General Dows arrived at together. While the Space Corps will basically recoup its expenses at flying passengers to orbit and back, while the Sheraton Corporation will make a modest profit with each trip, the cost of a two-day stay and return trip to our Aurora Space Station will be 310 dollars for a couple, or 230 dollars for a single person. Of course, one cannot expect to have the same kind of room size or luxury that he or she could find in a typical Sheraton hotel on Earth: it still costs a lot to assemble or build something in orbit. There is also the factor of fire prevention, which is something very critical in a space station or craft. That means that you have to avoid as much as possible the inflammable materials normally used in hotel construction, thus no fancy wood paneling, thick wool carpets, wall tapestry paper or even flammable paints. However, the designers of our space station did their best to use non-flammable and light materials which are also attractive to the eye. As a bonus, and also as a major attraction feature of the Sheraton Aurora Hotel, is of course the fantastic view of Earth you have from the space station, which also has a number of zero gravity facilities meant to entertain its guests.”

“Now, that interests me, Captain. Can you tell me more about those zero gravity facilities?”

“Only a bit, Mister President, as I haven’t seen them with my own eyes yet. I do know that there is a big empty compartment where the visitors can basically fly around in

zero gravity condition. It is supposed to be quite fun. There is also one zero gravity bar-lounge with view to the Earth and a video game arcade for kids.”

Robert’s four children, sitting in the next row of seats, shouted in happy approval on hearing the mention of video games and free flying, in turn making Robert grin at their happiness. Up to now, this promised to be a nice family outing for him, Ethel and the children.

Once the buses arrived next to the huge cargo orbiter, which carried piggy-back style a big cylindrical tank measuring a good ninety meters-long and with a diameter of over twelve meters, the passengers got out and used a mobile escalator staircase unit parked against the orbiter to go up without effort to a side access door. That door led inside to what looked like a large passenger cabin alike those of commercial aircraft, but with much larger seats that could fit people wearing spacesuits. After they had strapped themselves into their seats, the passengers heard a female voice coming from overhead speakers.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome aboard the cargo orbiter SHOOTING STAR. We will soon be catapulted down the launch ramp and fly off. A three second count will be given just before we get catapulted, so that you can firmly push your heads back against your seat in order to prevent whiplash neck injuries from the sudden acceleration forces. On launch, you will experience a steady acceleration of two Gs during thirty seconds, meaning that you will feel twice as heavy as normal for those thirty seconds. Do not twist your heads sideways then, or you may injure yourself. We are now going to light up our engines to idle power.”

A few seconds later, they heard a muffled roar from the rear of the orbiter, while they felt a slight vibration. Then the voice came back on the speakers.

“Three seconds to launch! Brace your heads back! One second! Launch!”

The moment Robert heard the word ‘launch’, he was suddenly pushed very hard into his seat, as if a giant had just pressed his hand over him. That heavy pressure continued on as Robert watched on the small television screen attached to the back of the seat in front of him the picture of the launch ramp, which was now showing that the orbiter was rushing forward at phenomenal speed. Those thirty seconds of acceleration, while not really uncomfortable, were intense in terms of sensations, something that seemed to excite his four children, judging from their happy shouts. Then they were off the launch ramp and the acceleration then disappeared, but only for a second before the muffled

roar from the engines turned into the sound of a hurricane. Robert was again pushed hard against his seat, while the orbiter started to climb at a vertiginous rate that made him feel as if his stomach had been left on the ground. A quick side glance through the thick window to his right showed him that they were now flying over the ocean, with the coast going by at very high speed. This was certainly unlike anything he had experienced on a plane before. Their angle of climb then became steeper, with their ramjet engines still working at full power. That climb went on for maybe a minute before the nose of their orbiter gradually came down to a near horizontal level. By now, Robert saw that the sky was getting dark. Then, the engine roar changed, becoming stronger and also deeper, and they were again pushed into their seats as they climbed yet higher. Rory suddenly shouted excitedly while looking through her window.

“I SEE THE CURVATURE OF THE EARTH!”

Looking as well through the window, Robert saw that her daughter was right: the blue of the atmosphere was now becoming distinctly separate from the black of Space.

“My God! We are in Space!” said softly Ethel, obviously taken in by the beauty of Earth’s blue orb and ocean surface. Robert also admired that view from his seat with his family.

“God! It must be a real dream to be an astronaut and be able to see such a sight often.”

“Dad, I want to become an astronaut when I will grow up.” said his son Matthew, making Robert smile with malice.

“Then, you better work seriously on your mathematics and your physics, Matthew. The Space Corps only takes the top candidates in terms of both education and physical fitness.”

“But I hate mathematics, Dad!”

“That’s your problem, Matthew. I however can help you by hiring a math tutor for you if you want.”

A grin appeared on the boy’s face at those words.

“Hey, could you then hire a girl for that job, Dad?”

Robert gave a sarcastic look at his son, while Ethel rolled her eyes.

“Well, he sure has your hormone levels, Robert.”

The loud roar of the main rocket engines soon stopped, replaced at intervals by short bursts of much weaker noise. Some 25 minutes into the flight, a female voice came again out of the speakers.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if you look at the television screens in front of you, you will see that we are approaching a large white dot visible against the black background of Space. That white dot is the Aurora Space Station. We expect to dock with the station in approximately fifteen minutes."

Robert, like the rest of his family, concentrated on the picture shown in front of him as the white dot started to take a distinctive shape. When they were only a few kilometers from the station, Christopher made a remark, his voice denoting surprise.

"Hey, is that part of the station, at the bottom?"

Robert, curious, examined that part carefully before revelation dawned on him, filling him with pride.

"That's not part of the station, Christopher: that's the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION. We have an interplanetary spaceship docked to our nation's space station. What a sight!"

'Ooohs' and 'aaahs' greeted his announcement around Robert as the other passengers realized that he was right. As they got closer and closer from the station, Robert examined its shape and structure with interest. For one thing, it was huge, being about twice as large as the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION. The station easily measured around 600 meters from top to bottom and its struts, storage tanks, disk habitats and various modules jutted in all directions around its centerline vertical spine. One module that stood out looked like a huge, elongated balloon-like module with a diameter of over a hundred meters and a length of at least 200 meters. However, despite thinking hard about it, Robert could not figure out what it was for. He finally gave up on that and simply watched through his window as the orbiter slowly maneuvered towards one of the four top section docking stations of the space structure. A very slight shake from the nose of the orbiter was followed by yet another announcement via the loudspeakers.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are pleased to announce to you that we now have docked with the Aurora Space Station. You may now undo your seat harnesses and take your luggage from the overhead bins. Please move cautiously and make sure that at least one of your boot soles touches the deck at any time, as we are now in a zero-gravity environment."

As Robert had expected, his own children, along with most of the other children traveling in the orbiter, took that chance to experiment with zero gravity by letting themselves float up to near the ceiling of the passenger compartment. Robert and Ethel had to pull them down by their feet in order to return them to the deck, where the magnetized boot soles of their spacesuits could get a grip on the floor. The presidential family, still escorted by its Secret Service security detail, then filed forward with the other passengers, soon passing through the nose airlock and docking ring of the orbiter and entering the transit compartment of the docking station, which was large enough to let in all of the 118 passengers from the SHOOTING STAR. There, they found Ingrid Dows, still wearing her spacesuit with her helmet visor opened, and a mature man wearing a high-quality business suit and standing behind a sort of electronic lectern. There were as well nine young men and women, all wearing suits, standing a couple of paces behind the man at the lectern. Ingrid was the first of the two to speak to the crowd once they were all in.

“Welcome to the Aurora Space Station, ladies and gentlemen. I hope that you will like your two-day stay aboard. Since you are probably anxious to get out of your spacesuits and change into something more comfortable, I will let Mister John Barrymore, the head manager of the Sheraton Aurora Hotel, give you the keys to your cabins. A word of caution to the female guests: the wearing of skirts or dresses may not be the best choice on this station, as you may find that zero-gravity zones in the station tend to make skirts float up and reveal what’s under them. I know that men would love that, but I counsel that you wear trousers or jumpsuits instead of dresses, ladies. Another thing: while this space station is officially following Universal Greenwich Time, the hotel also caters to guests who follow West Coast Time. You will thus be able soon to eat lunch, even though the rest of the station will be eating supper. I will now let Mister Barrymore take care of you.”

“Thank you, General!” said the man in his fifties before addressing the crowd. “I am John Barrymore, head manager of the Sheraton Aurora, in which you will be lodged, and I welcome you all aboard. I was given in advance by the Space Corps a list of the visitors due to arrive on the SHOOTING STAR, so I was able with my staff to assign cabins in advance of your arrival. Please note that, due to the high cost of building space structures, you will find that your cabins are much smaller than the rooms you would normally expect in an Earth-bound Sheraton hotel. Also, due to strict fire-prevention measures, this station was built strictly with non-flammable or fire-resistant materials, so you won’t find the kind of lacquered wood paneling, carpets and drapes

you would find in a normal hotel. What you will find in exchange is the ability to have a breathtaking view of our planet while sipping on a drink and to have some fun in zero-gravity. You will also enjoy the same level of speedy and courteous service and of good food you would expect from a Sheraton hotel. I was told by General Dows that you were already advised that this whole space station is a non-smoking environment, for reasons of air recycling. That policy also applies to my hotel, so I will urge you to use the nicotine patches given to you in Vandenberg and to refrain from smoking, even when in your cabin. After I will have distributed your cabin keys to you, my staff will be happy to guide you to your cabins, then to our restaurant or to our cafeteria, according to your choice on where you wish to eat. With this said, let's begin the keys distribution. As correct protocol would indicate, I will start with our President and his family. Mister President, if you may step forward with your family and security detail..."

Robert Kennedy did so, accompanied by his wife, four youngest children and twelve Secret Service agents from his presidential security detail. John Barrymore took twelve sets of keys handed to him by a young female assistant and presented six of them to Robert.

"Here are six identical sets of keys for the luxury suite assigned to you and your family, Mister President. That luxury suite includes a master bedroom and three small bedrooms with bunk beds, plus two bathrooms, a bath house with whirlpool, a private study and a family lounge. The six other keys for your group are for cabins situated near your suite which will lodge your security detail. About your security detail, the station's head of security, Major Leonard of the Space Corps, will visit your agents to exchange their handguns for non-lethal weapons which won't risk piercing the walls of the station if fired. As you may well understand, any accidental decompression would constitute a serious threat to this station and its occupants."

"I understand perfectly, Mister Barrymore. My security detail will comply with all the directives from Major Leonard."

"Thank you for your comprehension, Mister President. Mister Reynolds here will now guide you to your suite, which is situated on the median deck of Carrousel 'E'."

Taking and distributing the keys first, Robert then let the said Reynolds guide him, his family and his Secret Service agents out of the transit room and down a 160-meter-long, four-meter-wide corridor equipped with a mechanical rolling carpet on each side. The young hotel staffer smiled to Robert as he directed his group to use the rolling carpet moving towards the centerline spine of the space station.

"It is counselled to use those rolling carpets instead of walking or floating up and down this passageway, Mister President. The rolling carpet incorporates small magnetic plates which help the people's magnetic boot soles to cling safely to it instead of accidentally floating off it. You will find such rolling carpets all around the station, along its main passageways. However, all the working and living facilities of the station are situated inside a total of six huge rotating carrouseles which provide artificial gravity via centrifugal force. In your suite, you will feel like on Earth, Mister President. However, if you or your family wishes to experience zero-gravity, our hotel includes a large zero-gravity entertainment module with direct view of the Earth and Space."

"Decidedly, this trip is getting more exciting by the minute. I and my family will certainly use your facilities to the fullest. Uh, talking of facilities, I saw while our shuttle was approaching this station that it includes a huge, balloon-like structure. Do you know what it could be?"

Reynolds smiled with understanding and promptly answered Robert's question.

"That would be the station's repair and maintenance hangar, Mister President, where visiting shuttles and lunar cargo ships can be worked on in a pressurized and warm environment. It is big enough to accommodate even a cargo orbiter like the SHOOTING STAR."

"Wow! This space station is decidedly turning up to be a true technological marvel."

"And I believe that it represents the future of the United States in Space, Mister President."

At the end of the corridor, the group turned left and used another mechanical carpet that seem to extend forever, so long it was. Again, Reynolds gave out more explanation to the Kennedy family.

"We are now inside the centerline spine tube which connects together all the modules and sections of the station. It measures 1,915 feet, or 580 meters, from end to end and also has magnetized rolling carpets to facilitate circulation. Airtight doors can close in seconds at all the intersections and along the central corridor if a decompression ever occurred. Carrousel 'E' will be the third disc habitat on our way down."

"Down, up, sideways! This place could seriously disorient about anybody, the way gravity shows up or is absent." said the senior agent in charge of the presidential detail.

"Oh, you will get accustomed to it faster than you think, mister." replied their guide while leading the group down one of the rolling carpets. A junior agent couldn't help add something then.

"Hey, you imagine what a hand-to-hand fight would be like in zero gravity?" That made Robert Kennedy stop and turn around, a grin on his face.

"You know what, Agent Smithers? Why don't we try that later on, with you wrestling with another agent in zero gravity? It should make for quite an entertaining show and would also be quite instructive for you guys. We would just need to find a proper place for such a fight."

"If I may, Mister President." politely cut in his hotel guide. "I believe that our free-flying room would be perfect for that. It is basically a sixty-foot diameter cylinder capped by a semi-sphere and with thickly padded walls. We use it to let our customers fly around like birds, using only small fans attached to their forearms so that they could propel themselves into the air."

That explanation made the senior agent and his eleven junior agents break into big grins.

"I love this idea, Mister President! We have to try this!"

"Then, why not turn that into the first ever sport event done in Space?" replied Robert Kennedy, getting fired up. "After all, we have dozens of reporters, cameramen and television show hosts who came with us. I am sure that they would love to be able to record and broadcast that practice fight. Mister Reynolds, are there boxing equipment on this station?"

"Uh, I believe that our Space Corps security contingent does have some martial arts equipment they use for their training. I can inquire with Major Leonard about that, Mister President."

"Please do, mister! Well, we now certainly have something to look for this evening, guys. I already can't wait to see that fight. You better give a good show tonight, Agent Smithers."

"Don't worry, Mister President: I practiced boxing and wrestling during my college years in New York. Maybe we could ask Walter Cronkite to play the sport commentator for that fight? He did come with our group, right?"

“He certainly did, Agent Smithers. Another brilliant idea on your part.”

That brought a proud smile on the junior agent’s face as the group continued to follow the rolling carpet.

Once at the junction between the centerline spine of the station and the 200-meter wide disk containing Carrousel ‘E’, the presidential group turned left in yet another long corridor with rolling carpets. This time, they covered only fifty meters before walking off the rolling carpet and getting into an elevator cabin. However, that meant going through a sort of slow-turning small carrousel to rotate themselves by ninety degrees, in order to be properly aligned with the elevator cabin and point their heads towards the new ‘up’. The trip in that cabin was short, covering only some five meters before it stopped and delivered them to a sort of narrow airlock, where they found themselves still in zero gravity. Their hotel guide then showed them the closed hatch of an airlock.

That airlock gives access to a narrow strip, a sort of fixed subway quay if you like. That fixed quay is next to the rotating habitat carrousel assembly, whose top deck is open on one side, the one of the fixed quay. Once on the quay, you simply need to take one step on the moving deck of the carrousel and you will then feel the artificial gravity created by the carrousel’s rotation. Please make sure to close back the airlock’s hatches after we pass through it.”

Giving the example, Reynolds opened the inner hatch and invited the others to enter the airlock, then entered himself and closed the hatch behind him. He then did the same with the outer hatch and joined the presidential group on a long but narrow platform. Robert Kennedy was already enthralled as he watched the top deck roll past him, like a subway train rolling past commuters waiting on the quay of a subway station. Taking a deep breath, he took one resolute step forward and put his foot on the moving deck, then his other foot. It took him only a fraction of a second to feel his weight as if he was back on Earth. Twisting his head, he smiled at his wife and kids, who were still on the fixed quay and becoming more distant from him.

“Come on! Step on the moving deck, guys!”

The rest of the group and their guide did so and stood motionless for a moment as they gained their bearings back, the sudden transition from zero gravity to normal gravity in one step being quite unsettling at first. Their guide helped them adapt by starting to walk

down the rotating deck, whose ceiling was a full four meters above, while encouraging them verbally.

"We are now on the Promenade Deck of Carrousel 'E'. We will now walk to the nearest bank of elevators in order to go down to the Median Deck, two levels down. You will feel artificial gravity all over this carrousel habitat and in the five other carrousel habitats of this space station. We will have to walk by the restaurant of the hotel before arriving at the elevators."

"I really like the way this place was decorated and painted." said Ethel Kennedy while following their guide down the promenade deck. "I especially like those giant color prints on the walls which show various Earth vistas: they help making you forget that you are in Space."

"And that was the primary reason they were put up, Misses Kennedy. Being in Space may sound like a great, exciting adventure, but the experience the astronauts of the Space Corps gained over the years showed that us Humans cannot be utterly cut off from our natural Earth environment without risking some psychological problems in the long run. So, General Dows ordered that our spaceships and space stations be made to feel like Earth as much as possible. The first expedition to Mars by the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION showed that this was well worth the time and expenditure spent on the ergonomic details. Imagine if you would have to spend two years in Space aboard a cramped spaceship with no artificial gravity and bare metallic walls."

"I'd go nuts within a month or two!" replied Ethel Kennedy, shivering at the mental image of such a situation, while Robert Kennedy nodded his head slowly.

"Decidedly, President Dewey took an excellent decision when he put Ingrid Dows in charge of our space program, some 22 years ago: I know too many federal administrators who wouldn't have paid any attention on what they would consider 'petty, secondary details'."

After walking for some thirty meters, the presidential group started passing through a wide-open area some fifty meters long. That area had dining tables and chairs set in a long row along one side, next to fake windows which were in reality giant flat television screens. Those screens actually showed in a most realistic way what appeared to be a typically colorful street of New Orleans as viewed from a second floor, with pedestrian walking back and forth and with cars, buses and trucks rolling past a row

of shop fronts. Ethel Kennedy stopped for a moment to watch what had to be a video recording taken from a building in New Orleans.

"My God! I feel like I am now in an upper floor dining room in some restaurant in New Orleans. It all looks so authentic! Even the soundtrack, while muffled, sounds real."

"They actually are, Misses Kennedy." replied their guide. "This particular video was actually filmed non-stop in New Orleans on a continuous basis along a full year. This natural scenery display system is extensively used around this space station and in our two interplanetary spaceships, in order to create a relaxing natural environment. Your suite, like all the cabins of this hotel, has such false windows to the outside, which can be switched to a particular setting on Earth, or to a live display of Earth as seen from this space station. General Dows actually made arrangements during the last few years to obtain permission from various local authorities to install fixed cameras which would then film a local scenery for a full year. As a result, our video scenery system holds over sixty-one year-long recordings taken in various locations around Earth."

"Wow!" exclaimed seven-year-old Rory Kennedy. "This looks so real! Does your restaurant serve Cajun cuisine? I love Cajun cuisine!"

"It certainly does, young miss." answered Reynolds, smiling to Rory. "But let's go down to the Median Deck and your suite."

Walking past the restaurant, in which only a handful of people were sitting at tables and eating at the time, the group got to a set of elevator cabins and took a cabin to go down by two levels, exiting the cabin in a sort of small, open lobby. The hotel guide then made the President's group gather around a round table which featured a number of colored floor plans along its periphery and also had a glass cage containing a miniature model of the space station.

"You will find electronic location boards like this one around the space station. They show you where you are and the way to locations that interest you. As you can see on this particular floor plan showing the Median Deck of Carrousel 'E', the presidential suite, EM-01, is the first one to our right. A few more steps and we will be there."

The hotel employee effectively needed to cover only about twenty steps before stopping in front of a sliding door, which he unlocked with his master key and opened before inviting Robert Kennedy in.

"Mister President..."

Before Robert could enter his suite, the senior Secret Service agent politely interposed himself.

"Excuse me, Mister President, but I have to inspect and check the place first."

"Go right ahead, Mack!" replied Robert, who by now was accustomed to the thoroughness of his protective detail. The senior agent and two junior agents entered the suite, to reappear after about two minutes.

"All clear, Mister President: you may go inside with your family."

"Thanks, Mack!"

The first thing that Robert saw after entering the suite was a short hallway with a sort of closet and three doors. His hotel guide then joined him and opened the accordion door of the closet, unmasking four recesses with tube and wire connectors and a few gauges.

"This closet is in fact a support rack for four spacesuits, Mister President. I will help you take off your suit and will show you how to store it away on a rack."

That process was actually much simpler and quicker than what Robert had expected, with his suit ending up connected and hooked to its rack in less than five minutes. Reynolds helped as well Ethel, Rory and Douglas Kennedy to take off and suspend their spacesuits before opening a sliding door next to the closet.

"Here is the master bedroom, Mister President. I will go show to your two older children where their spacesuit lockers are while you look around your bedroom."

Followed by his wife, Robert entered a large, four-meter by three-meter wide bedroom with a big king size bed filling half of the space. Ethel nodded her head in satisfaction after testing the mattress of the bed.

"Nice bed! This bedroom may not have the kind of luxury look typical of top hotel chains' suites, but it is both comfortable and well furnished."

Taking a few steps around the bed, she opened an accordion door and stepped inside a bathroom with a long counter with sink, a toilet stall and a shower stall, plus a small storage bench near the shower meant to allow someone to sit while dressing or undressing. All the walls and partitions were made of aluminum panels in which decorative patterns had been stamped, while beautiful cut-glass mirrors helped further decorate the bathroom, giving it a most futuristic look to it. When she stepped out of the bathroom, Robert showed her a large wall screen made to look like a window and which had a small control box at its base.

"I think that this is one of those scenery display screens that Mister Reynolds told us about."

"You are probably right, Bobby. Let's go check the rest of this suite."

The couple then looked inside the walk-in closet of the bedroom, dropping their bags inside it at the same time, then walked out of the bedroom just as Reynolds emerged from another door in the short hallway.

"Aah, Mister President! Let me show to you the rest of this suite. First, the family lounge."

Reversing his steps, he guided the couple inside a six-meter by three-meter lounge furnished with a number of leather-upholstered sofas, a round table with four chairs, a few low tables and a large flat screen television set. Robert Kennedy then noticed that there were as well two fake windows like the one in the master bedroom and pointed one of them to Reynolds.

"Would you mind showing us how to use these display screens, Mister Reynolds?"

"Right away, Mister President!" said the hotel employee before walking to one of the false windows and open the cover of its control box, revealing a few buttons inside.

"First, the on/off button is this green one, Mister President. After switching it on, you then press the button marked 'menu'. Now, you see on this small display a few options to choose from. To select a particular Earth vista for viewing, you select on the display 'list of vistas', then press the appropriate button with arrow to highlight a specific vista in the list. Once you have selected the vista you prefer, you then press the 'set' button. If you will now please look at the list now visible in this false window and tell me which one you prefer."

"Damn! There are so many to choose from... Ethel, I will let you choose the vista of your choice: I just can't make my mind up."

"Oooh, I also see a few tempting ones. Let's make it the view on Boston Harbor: it will make us feel at home here."

"An excellent choice, Misses Kennedy." said Reynolds while selecting and locking in that view. "You will see later on that the recording automatically sets itself to the present date and time in Boston. The view will gradually shift to the night hours later on. Now, about that second false window on the wall opposite this one, I counsel that you set it to an external camera giving a live view of Space and of Earth's surface. I am sure that you will like that view very much."

"Then, select that outside view, Mister Reynolds, then show us the rest of this suite."

"Yes, Mister President!"

It took only a couple of minutes for Reynolds to show to the Kennedys the three small bedrooms with bunk beds, which were now occupied by their four children, plus a small private study with work desk and a bath house with a big oval whirlpool hot tub. The Kennedy children were particularly enthusiastic on seeing the whirlpool tub, with nine-year-old Douglas expressing his pleasure out loud.

"YES! A hot bubble bath! I love them!"

"Did you bring your bathing suit, Son?" asked Robert, making the boy show confusion.

"Ooops! No!"

"That's okay, Mister President: our souvenir and convenience boutique on the Promenade Deck of this carrousel sells bathing suits, along with toys and various souvenirs."

"That's nice to know. Problem solved for you, Doug. Well, this suite is much nicer than what I expected. I was imagining something like what they show in various science-fiction movies in the States, with rows of triple bunk beds and bare metal walls everywhere."

That made Reynolds smile in amusement.

"Maybe this space station will make Hollywood producers think of better decors for their future science-fiction films, Mister President. They may yet want to film part of their future movies inside this space station."

"Which would allow your Sheraton Corporation to charge them high prices to rent your rooms and various spaces. That would only be fair game: those big cinema moguls make a ton of money anyway. Well, as soon as my Secret Service agents will all be installed and changed, you may guide us to your restaurant, Mister Reynolds."

"With pleasure, Mister President."

The last of the twelve agents, their spacesuits stored away, were coming back from their own cabins when a major and a master sergeant from the Space Corps showed up at the presidential suite to speak to the agents, first saluting Robert.

"Mister President! I am Major Steve Leonard, Security Officer of the Aurora Space Station, and this is Master Sergeant Wanda Russel, my chief-armorers. We came to offer to your Secret Service agents a set of non-lethal weapons that they could use inside the station without fear of blowing holes in it."

"Oh! Show us what you have, Major: I am really curious to see what your weapons look like. They are not some kind of space ray guns, no?"

"Not at all, Mister President." said Leonard, smiling at the tentative joke by Robert. "Master Sergeant Russel, put your weapons carrying case on the table of the lounge, so that everybody could have a good look at the weapons."

"Yes, Major!" replied the mature, solidly-built woman, whose uniform jacket bore multiple rows of medal ribbons, something that prompted Robert Kennedy to whisper into Leonard's ear.

"Your master sergeant looks like a true veteran, Major."

"She effectively is, Mister President. Master Sergeant Russel joined the 99th Composite Air Group of then Major Ingrid Dows in 1942 as a young apprentice armorers. She has thus far fought and served in the Second World War, the Korean War, the Indochina War, the Palestine Conflict, the East Europe War and the Second Korean Conflict. She even fought hand-to-hand with Japanese soldiers while defending Henderson Field in Guadalcanal in 1942."

"Wow, talk about a tough woman!"

"Yes, and she has the Distinguished Service Cross, the Silver Star, three Bronze Stars and one Purple Heart to show up for her valor, Mister President. She is also one of the most knowledgeable and competent armorers I ever met. She truly deserved this posting on this space station as a final posting in her long, meritorious career."

"And I am also happy to see such a woman being properly rewarded for her service, Major. Well, let's see what kind of toys you brought for my Secret Service agents."

"Well, those who may end up experiencing hits by our weapons may not call them 'toys' afterwards, Mister President." replied a smiling Leonard.

The two men then joined the Secret Service agents, Master Sergeant Russel and the Kennedy children around the round table, crowding that part of the family lounge. Russel opened her large, heavy-looking carrying case and extracted from it a big, strange-looking handgun, along with a very large caliber type of round, putting both on

the table, so that all could see them well. The eyes around the table grew wide as the Kennedys and the Secret Service agents examined the big, double-barreled handgun.

"My god! Look at the caliber of this piece! It must be about one inch in caliber." exclaimed Agent Smithers. Master Sergeant Russel took on her to correct him.

"Actually, the caliber of this rocket pistol is 1.2 inch, or 30 millimeters in metric parlance."

"Did you say 'rocket pistol'?"

"Yes, I did! This weapon was designed specifically for the Space Corps, for use in zero gravity environments. It is also a non-lethal weapon when firing a riot baton round. However, it can also fire a range of other munitions, either lethal or non-lethal, and can be used on Earth without problems. You will see a total of six large openings around the handgrip: two on each side, just forward of the trigger guard, plus one on the top rear and one at the bottom of the handgrip. Those openings are exhaust gas vents, which allow the gases from the initial propelling charge of the round being fired to escape at angles that cancel any felt recoil from the firing. Then, once out of the barrel that was fired, a second rocket propellant charge is initiated and accelerates further the 30mm projectile. This weapon is thus completely recoilless and can even be fired in space by an astronaut in free flight without sending that astronaut tumbling around. The velocity at five yards from the muzzle, when the second propellant charge is fully burned up, is about 600 feet per second, while the maximum effective range against a point target is about 200 feet, or sixty meters. Now, for its non-lethal ammunition. What you see on the table is a 30mm riot baton round. It is quite heavy, even for its caliber, but that is intentional. The base of the projectile is actually a thick steel plate with holes drilled into it, while the nose section is made of flexible rubber. On firing, the second propellant charge burns in a fraction of a second, with the hot gas first going forward and making a tiny gas turbine rotate before the gases are redirected towards the rear and are ejected via the holes in the baseplate."

"Uh, why put a gas turbine in a pistol round?" asked the sole female Secret Service agent of the group.

"Because that gas turbine rotation charges up nearly instantly a battery inside the projectile. On impact against a bad guy, the rubber nose flattens to twice its original diameter, in order to distribute on a wider area the kinetic energy of this 30mm projectile, which is considerable. Added to that knockout punch, a 50,000-volt electrical jolt will be delivered from the projectile's battery via two short nose pins embedded inside the

rubber head. If you look closely, you will see a pair of tiny holes visible in the nose of this round. The needles are designed to pierce the clothing of a target without causing real damage to it. Just the kinetic energy of this riot baton round is enough to knock out about the biggest men around but, if someone still manages to stay on his feet, that someone will receive as a bonus a high-voltage discharge that will paralyze him for many seconds. This pistol could basically stop a charge by a gorilla and it will knock back the biggest men alive. We tried those riot baton rounds on volunteers and I can tell you that none of those volunteers asked for a second dose of it. Lastly, while it is only a two-shot weapon, you do have holders on the rear sides for two spare rounds.”

“And what kind of other rounds are available for this pistol, Master Sergeant.” asked the senior agent. “It works like a top-break two-barreled shotgun, it thus should be easy to design about any kind of round for it.”

“That is correct, sir. Apart from the riot baton round, we presently have a high-explosive fragmentation grenade round, a colored flare round, an illuminating round, a smoke grenade round, a riot gas round and an armored-piercing hollow charge round able to pierce up to two inches of steel.”

“Wow! That’s quite a versatile beast! And what about that small flashlight attached under the lower barrel?”

“That is a highly-focused, shock-resistant and watertight flashlight used to help point the pistol at short range and in dark conditions.”

“Damn, I like this!” said the senior agent. “However, it is way too bulky to be carried in conceal mode.”

“That is true, sir, but we brought for you custom-made belly holsters that can be strapped either way to accommodate both left and right-handed shooters. Those rigs also incorporate ammunition pouches for up to ten spare rounds. I will now distribute twelve pistols and twelve holsters, plus ten riot baton rounds per pistol. I do hope that you won’t need more ammo than that during your two-day stay.”

The senior agent grinned at the barb thrown at his agents by Russel.

“Don’t worry, Master Sergeant: we are not the happy trigger types. Okay, people, arm yourselves!”

The one thing that the agents noticed at once on grabbing their pistols was how light they were for their size.

“Hey, are these made of aluminum?” asked Agent Smithers, making Russel nod her head.

"Yes, along with some composite fiber parts. Since they don't have to absorb the kind of internal pressures typical of normal firearms, they didn't need to be made of steel. Only the trigger mechanism is made of steel. Despite their bulk, these pistols weight only a bit over one and a half pound."

"Gee, I could see hostage rescue teams and riot squads use these pistols. You said that only the Space Corps has those rocket pistols?"

"Correct!"

Robert Kennedy thought for a moment while eyeing the rocket pistols as the Secret Service agents fitted the pistols' holster rigs around their torso.

"Hmm, maybe I should ask General Dows about those pistols, to see if the Army or the Marines could use them as well."

"Then, Mister President, you should know that we have a carbine variant of these pistols that can fire longer and more powerful rounds to much longer ranges. I could show such a carbine to your senior agent sometimes during your stay, Mister President."

"Please do that, Master Sergeant Russel. Well, how about we go have lunch, all of us? I am getting positively famished!"

13:06 (California Time) / 21:06 (Universal Time)

'The Marco Polo Restaurant', Promenade Deck, Carrousel 'E' Aurora Space Station, low polar orbit around Earth

Robert Kennedy put down his fork with some regret, having really liked that honey and almond pastry dessert. He would have been tempted to order a second dessert but he had to recognize that his stomach was utterly full.

"This restaurant is truly worthy of a Sheraton hotel. The food was great and the wine selection comprehensive."

"It also is the first restaurant I see that has so many various ethnic specialties on its menu, Bobby." added his wife. "How do they manage to serve such great dishes from Italian, French, Indian, Chinese, Mexican and American cuisine?"

"Maybe they have cooks from all those countries, Mom." suggested their son Matthew, making Robert smile and point an index at him.

"Bingo! Max, you can think with the best. Well, what shall we do next?"

"What about going to that zero-gravity entertainment module we have heard about, Dad?" proposed Christopher, a malicious smile on his face. Robert was about to

acquiesce to that when Jim Hartz, the NBC television news show co-host who was dining with his wife, three children and the daughter of Barbara Walters at the nearest table, politely spoke up to Robert.

"Please excuse me for my intrusion in your conversation, Mister President, but I would strongly counsel against trying any kind of zero gravity activity just after eating. In my job as a correspondent, I have flown many times in military planes and have learned the hard way that it is better to do aerobatic flying on an empty stomach. I suspect that zero gravity could be as bad to the stomach as hard negative or positive Gs. I think that the best thing to do would be to search for the counsel of a veteran astronaut. And we happen to have one in our group: Senator John Glenn, who I see with his wife two tables away."

"This sounds like a judicious counsel, Mister Hartz. I think that I will go speak with Senator Glenn. By the way, what do you think of this space station up to now?"

"That it is positively incredible, Mister President. It represents a masterpiece of American engineering and science and I will make sure that NBC viewers see it as such. The short documentary report our combined television crew is producing right now from this station should blow viewers ratings away."

"So, what were you and your nice family planning to do next, Mister Hartz?"

"I had the idea to go visit next the souvenirs boutique of the hotel, which is situated on this deck, to see if they have something that could interest us. I am hoping particularly to find a scale model kit of this space station that I could then assemble once back home."

"Hum, sounds like a good idea. Do you mind if my family accompanies your family on that visit to this souvenirs shop?"

"I would be delighted actually, Mister President."

"Then, give me a minute, time to go speak quickly with Senator Glenn, then we will be able to go together."

Two minutes later, Robert was back at his table and spoke to both his family and to the Hartz family.

"Senator Glenn is counseling that we take some time to digest before attempting any vigorous activity in zero gravity conditions. However, he says that simply sipping on coffees or drinks should be reasonably safe, at least for the people who don't have a sensitive stomach. So, I propose that we now go visit that famous souvenirs boutique."

"Sold!" replied Jim Hartz, who then called the waiter and paid his family's bill. Robert Kennedy did the same, paying as well for the meals of his Secret Service agents. Next, the two families and the troupe of agents left the restaurant and walked down the Promenade Deck. They passed by a hair salon and a barber shop before arriving at the souvenirs boutique, with its six-meter-wide front made of large display windows. The eight children of the group pushed in unison screams of delight on seeing the items on display in the windows, then rushed inside as one. Jim Hartz himself nearly ran inside, having seen as part of the displayed items a plastic scaled model kit of the Aurora Space Station. On his part, Robert grinned as he eyed the various scale model kits and toys reproducing about every type of spacecraft in use by the Space Corps, plus a good dozen American aircraft types.

"Damn, I need to get that big plastic scale model kit of the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION." said Robert before looking at his Secret Service agents. "If you guys want to take this chance to buy space souvenirs for your own kids, you are welcome to it. We will go back to our cabins afterwards to drop our purchases before continuing our tour."

"Thank you, Mister President!" replied the senior agent before signaling to his junior agents to go in first while he stayed with his President. Robert smiled to his wife while entering the store with her, with Mack watching their backs.

"With the kind of stuff I saw on display in the front windows, this place is going to make a killing with visitors to this station. They better have extra stocks in storage."

"And you better have lots of cash on you, Bobby: the kids are positively going wild in here."

"Hey, you know that us Kennedys are not exactly poor, which makes me think..." Turning to face his senior bodyguard, Robert took out a big bundle of dollar bills of various denominations and counted twelve twenty-dollar bills before giving them to him.

"Here, Mack: please give twenty dollars to each of your agents, to help them buy things for their kids. They can consider that as an advance Christmas gift from their President."

"Mister President, you are truly a marvelous boss to work for. Thank you on behalf of all of us."

As a happy Mack went around his agents to distribute the money, young Matthew came to his parents, grinning while showing them a big plastic scale model kit of a cargo orbiter similar to the one they had flown in.

"Look, Dad! That kit even comes with various external loads, plus internal loads carried by our orbiter. I also found a kit model of a lunar cargo. You should see their choice of T-shirts and baseball caps on sale."

"Well, the President of the United States doesn't often wear T-shirts, Max, but I may just go look at the baseball caps. Which way were they?"

"To your left, near the cash register. Some of them are really groovy."

Matthew then left them to continue his buying spree around the boutique. As Robert and Ethel were making their way in the direction of the cash register to go see the display of baseball caps, the content of a particular shelf made Robert stop abruptly to examine it.

"A complete toy set of Mars rovers and craft! I must buy that for my nephew Patrick. This boutique is decidedly a real treasure trove of space-related toys."

On second thought, Robert grabbed two of the boxes before continuing towards the caps and T-shirt displays, while Ethel grabbed an astronaut Barbie Doll kit for her daughter Rory. Robert ended up buying as well a few souvenir caps for himself and for his brothers John and Edward. When the time came to pay for the mountain of toys and souvenirs collected by his four children, Robert couldn't help exclaim himself out loud.

"Two hundred and thirty-three dollars?! Gee! We better get out of here before you guys decide to buy more stuff. When I think that there are all these big millionaire Hollywood stars presently visiting the station. You are going to make some very good business this weekend, miss."

"We are prepared for them, Mister President." Replied with a big grin the store clerk, a young and pretty woman worth more than a passing look. "We have extra stocks in storage on the station."

"Tell me, miss: I never saw such toys and souvenirs before in stores in the United States. Are they new products?"

"Yes, Mister President! The Sheraton Corporation, in partnership with the U.S. Space Corps, which provided pictures and very basic blueprints of its spacecraft and equipment, commissioned the Mattel and Aurora toy companies to produce this line of products for the inauguration of this station and of the Sheraton Aurora Hotel. Those same products are due to hit the stores in the United States on Monday."

"So, we are among the first to buy these. Excellent! Thank you for your help, miss."

"It was a pleasure, Mister President."

Robert then turned around to face his children, who now carried at least two shopping bags each.

“Okay, guys: let’s go back to our suite to drop off all this before continuing our tour.”

The Kennedy family, escorted by their Secret Service agents, four of whom were carrying the shopping bags of their group, then exited the boutique and headed towards the nearby bank of elevators. Once at the presidential suite, the senior agent sent half of his junior agents to their cabins, so that they could rest in advance of taking the night shift. With six agents still escorting them, the Kennedys left again their suite to continue their tour of the station.

16:26 (California Time) / 00:26 (Universal Time)

Saturday, December 4 / Sunday, December 5, 1976 ‘C’

‘The Space Bird Cage’, zero-gravity entertainment module

Sheraton Aurora Hotel

Seven-year-old Rory Kennedy was all grins when she landed back on the stepping platform of the ‘Space Bird Cage’, a twenty-meter-diameter, eighteen-meter-long cylindrical compartment capped by a demi-sphere and with thickly padded walls and outside view portholes around its end cap.

“That was fun, Dad! Can I go again?”

“Yes, but you will have to return to the tail of the line and wait your turn again.”

“Yes, Dad!” replied Rory before walking cautiously to join the line of adults and children waiting their turn to do some free-flying in the Space Bird Cage. Right now, nine other children and two adults were floating around the vast open compartment, propelling themselves with the help of a pair of small fans attached to their forearms and which acted like small wings for them. One of the adults presently flying around and enjoying himself was in fact Agent Smithers, from the presidential detail. Robert and Ethel Kennedy had already flown around for their allotted three minutes, having been the first to fly off among their group. Now it was the turn of their children and of the other children and guests to try out this new activity. Robert watched his sons Christopher and Matthew fly off next, then smiled to his wife.

“What about having a romantic drink together while admiring Earth from Space, Ethel?”

"I would say that it is an excellent idea, Bobby. Mack and his agents will be here anyway to check on our kids while we go relax together at the Zero-G Bar-Lounge."

Holding hands together, the presidential couple and four agents cautiously walked out of the flying-out platform, careful to let their magnetized slippers keep a grip on the thin steel sheet covering the deck. Going up one level, they ended up on the level occupied by the Zero-G Bar-Lounge, a circular, donought-shaped facility in which customers of the hotel and other occupants of the space station could sip on various drinks, thanks to specially-designed containers with straws, while admiring the Earth from large, semi-spherical windows. The Kennedys found an empty table giving a nearly vertical view towards the blue and brown surface of the Earth and sat down at the two fixed, swiveling chairs flanking the table. Following the indications written on a small plaque fixed to the table, the couple buckled up safety belts around their waists, in order to avoid floating off the deck while drinking, then ordered via a waiter two cocktail drinks. As they were waiting for their drinks, they both took the time to admire the blue orb of Earth.

"What a beautiful sight!" said Ethel softly, nearly mesmerized. "It is also so relaxing. I love this place!"

"It certainly makes miracles in making me forget about the stress of my job." added Robert, thoughtful, before putting his hand over Ethel's hand and smiling to her.

"Maybe we could relax together...tonight."

"Maybe!" replied Ethel, in jest. The waiter returned with their drinks two minutes later and the couple started sipping their cocktails through the straws and caps closing off their glasses, while they continued to admire Earth and the surrounding dark Space.

Their glasses were nearly empty when Ingrid Dows, wearing her Space Corps uniform, approached their table. Robert didn't like the closed, serious expression visible on her face.

"Oh oh! Here comes General Dows, and it is not to give me some good news."

"Damn! And we were just starting to truly relax."

"That's the curse of being a president: to have to deal with bad news."

Ingrid stopped at attention next to their table and saluted Robert before speaking to him, keeping the volume of her voice low.

"I am sorry to disturb you like this at such a time, Mister President, but I have a call from the Pentagon waiting for you at the station's communications room: there is a situation developing in the Middle East."

Robert sighed in discouragement on hearing those last words.

"The Middle East...again! Alright, I'm coming with you. Please excuse me for this, Ethel."

"You don't need to, Bobby: you are just doing your duty as the President. I will keep an eye on the kids while you take care of our national business."

CHAPTER 18 – TROUBLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST



Egyptian tanks on the move

17:43 (California Time) / 20:43 (Washington Time) / 01:43 (Universal Time)

Saturday, December 4 / Sunday, December 5 (Universal Date), 1976 ‘C’

Communications center of the Aurora Space Station

Low Earth polar orbit

“This way, Mister President: we have an encrypted video link with the Pentagon, where General Brown is ready to brief you on the current situation in the Middle East.”

“Thank you!”

Following the communications officer of the space station to a video station inside a small, enclosed cubicle, Robert Kennedy took the chair offered to him while Ingrid Dows stayed up behind and to the side of him. Robert then looked straight at the television screen, in which the face and torso of General George Brown was visible. With a small video camera and microphone facing him and transmitting his image and words to Washington, Robert nodded his head once at Brown.

“I am listening, General. What is happening in the Middle East?”

“Mister President, in the last few hours, our strategic reconnaissance assets have uncovered evidence of advanced preparations by Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and possibly a few more Arab states for a coordinated attack against

Israel. Everything indicates that these preparations are for a full-scale war and not simply for large scale field exercises.”

Robert felt blood rush to his head as he understood at once the seriousness of the situation.

“But why? Why would the Arabs want to attack Israel now? I concede that they were never on friendly terms with the Israelis and tried to destroy Israel when it declared its independence in 1953, but what is motivating them to want war now?”

Robert was able to detect a slight hesitation by Brown before the latter answered him.

“The State Department experts see a few possible reasons for this, Mister President. The first one is that, since you are now technically a lame-duck president until January, when President-elect Reagan will be sworn into office, the Arabs may think that we won't have the political resolve to react strongly to a military move by them. They also think that you won't risk attracting an Arab oil embargo against the United States if we militarily support Israel in a conflict against Arab countries, as such an oil embargo could prove disastrous to our economy. Another factor at play here, again according to our State Department, is popular agitation by religious clerics pushing for a 'holy' war against Israel.”

“And what makes the Arabs think that they could win such a war? They were soundly defeated in 1953, even with the British supporting them at the time.”

That was when Ingrid judged that she needed to interject herself in the exchange.

“Mister President, General Brown, I was the one that caused the Arab defeat in 1953, thanks to the intervention of our Palestine Task Force. However, even if we are to stay away now from such a war because of the threat of an Arab oil embargo, I believe that the Israelis could still win the war, even against a coalition of the whole Arab world. The Israeli Air Force and Army are simply too superior in terms of training and quality of equipment. There must be one or more other factors at play here and we must find out quickly which ones.”

“I concur with General Dows on this, General Brown. However, I won't be able to understand fully the equation of this situation from Space. General Dows, I need to get back to Washington as quickly as possible.”

“Then, you are in luck, Mister President: a SP-100 space interceptor is presently docked to this station for the purpose of refueling. I will order it at once to be prepared to bring us down to Washington within the hour.”

“Us?” asked Robert Kennedy, a bit surprised, making Ingrid nod her head.

"Yes, us, Mister President. Without bragging, I am probably the person most able to understand this crisis and the mentality of its various players, notwithstanding what the State Department or the cabinet appointees of President-elect Reagan may think about that."

It was then the turn of Robert Kennedy to nod his head slowly.

"Reagan... You are right about having to involve him in this: throwing our country into a war without consulting him would be completely inappropriate and he would be justifiably pissed if I kept him out of the loop on this. Very well, General Dows: get that space interceptor ready to carry us down to Washington. General Brown, tell Vice-President Mondale to call an emergency situation meeting of the National Security Council members and of President-elect Reagan and his principal appointees, to be held at the White House tomorrow morning at nine, Washington time. In the meantime, I want the Pentagon and the State Department to gather as much information as possible on this situation, so that I can study that information on arrival. I should be down in Washington in a few hours at the most, with General Dows."

"It will be done, Mister President." replied Brown. Robert Kennedy then cut the link and looked at Ingrid.

"Get that SP-100 ready for a quick departure, Ingrid. I will go pack quickly a small bag in the meantime. My family will stay here in the meantime, to continue to enjoy their time on the station while I go deal with this situation."

"I'm on it, Mister President!" replied Ingrid, who then went to the nearest telephone to pass orders around.

22:58 (Washington Time)

Washington International Airport

U.S.A.

The landing of the space interceptor at the Washington International Airport, a purely civilian airport, understandably created a sensation among the travelers in the passenger terminal, but Robert Kennedy was too preoccupied by the international situation facing him to care much about the reactions to his arrival. He and Ingrid only took the time to quickly take off their spacesuits before taking place in the presidential limousine waiting on the tarmac next to the parked SP-100. Their spacesuits and their luggage were quickly stuffed inside the huge trunk of the limousine, which then started to

roll, escorted by four Secret Service cars. However, seeing the mass of the Pentagon not far from the airport, Robert Kennedy changed his mind about going to the White House and gave a curt order to his driver.

"James, go to the Pentagon instead of the White House. Once there, wait for us at the entrance."

Robert then looked at Ingrid, sitting next to him on the rear bench seat.

"I believe that we would be better off by going first to the NMCC at the Pentagon to see firsthand what the situation is really like, rather than wait for some Pentagon briefer to come to the White House with a pre-digested package. I want you to check the raw data for me and look for anything that may have escaped the attention of other Pentagon experts."

"A good idea, Mister President. About tomorrow's morning briefing at the White House, in which official capacity do you wish me to attend? I am not an official member of your National Security Council."

That made Robert think for a moment before he answered Ingrid.

"Actually, maybe you should be, Ingrid. Technically you are a subaltern of General Brown, who is after all the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, while you are only a service chief. However, your competence and experience about the Middle East is far superior to his own knowledge of the region and I would say that you probably are better than even the State Department's Middle East specialists, who often have already entrenched opinions or prejudices. You can think outside of the box, Ingrid, and that is what I need right now. You will attend tomorrow's briefing as my special presidential advisor, a title that you never lost, if I remember well."

"Indeed, Mister President. Thank you for your confidence in me."

Robert gave her a sober look that bordered on veneration.

"Ingrid, you were touched by what I believe to be God, even though you call him 'The One', and you lived multiple past lives in the Middle East, some of them very significant ones historically. I gather that you speak the main languages of the region, right?"

"Mister President, I can speak, read and write ALL the languages of the Middle East, past and present."

"Then, I may very well designate you also as my potential presidential plenipotentiary envoy to the Middle East for this crisis and damn the objections that the State Department could have against that."

"I will help and assist you to the best of all my abilities, Mister President." replied Ingrid, meaning it.

08:53 (Washington Time)

Sunday, December 5, 1976 'C'

Situation Room, the White House

Washington, D.C.

As soon as Ronald Reagan entered the White House Situation Room, Robert Kennedy got up from his chair to go shake his hand.

"Thank you for coming on such short notice, Mister President. Unfortunately, we are here to deal with a sudden and potentially grave international matter."

"And may I ask what is happening and where, Mister President?" asked the 65-year-old president-elect, making Robert nod once.

"It is the Middle East: our strategic reconnaissance assets have uncovered what looks like extensive military preparations by Arab countries to attack Israel."

"My goodness! And when could that attack happen?"

"Within days, or even hours. But a detailed briefing on what we know at this time is about to be given. If you would please take your seat, along with your staff."

"Of course! Thank you for calling me on this, by the way."

"You can thank General Dows for that, Mister President: she was the one who suggested to me that your presence would be needed as president-elect for this meeting."

Ronald Reagan glanced quickly at Ingrid, who was standing near a big wall projection screen at one end of the Situation Room, then looked back at Robert.

"She will be briefing us on this?"

"Oh, much more than that: she is here as my special presidential advisor, a title and role she has been fulfilling since 1948. She has been serving in that capacity every American president since then, be they democrats or republicans. I would strongly urge you to keep her services as well."

"I will have to think about that." said Reagan, non-committal, before taking the seat offered to him by a White House aide. His eight future cabinet and staff members also took their seats, opposite the members of Robert Kennedy's National Security team, to which had been added the four service chiefs under General Brown. On a nod

from Robert Kennedy, Ingrid made a map of the countries of the Middle East surrounding Israel appear on the viewing screen.

“Misters Presidents, ladies and gentlemen, what you are going to see is the latest strategic intelligence we collected during yesterday around Israel. What our reconnaissance assets have found has been annotated on this map and it depicts a truly alarming picture. Basically, the armed forces of four, possibly five or six Arab countries, have been discretely massed around the borders of Israel for what can only be a planned concerted attack on Israel. On this map, you will see that the bulk of the Egyptian Army has concentrated in the Sinai Peninsula and are now in tactical hides less than ten miles from the border with Israel. In addition, the Syrian Army has concentrated its armored and mechanized units on the Golan Heights, where the Syrians have also concentrated a tremendous number of heavy artillery and bombardment rocket units. Since the Golan Heights form a plateau dominating the northern portion of Israel, those Syrian units will enjoy a marked tactical superiority in terms of positioning over defending Israeli border units. More Syrian units, reinforced by pro-Syrian militias, have also positioned themselves along the Lebanese southern border. Furthermore, Iraqi Army mechanized units, which travelled through Saudi Arabia, are now in tactical hides near the junction of the Saudi and Jordanian borders with the Gulf of Aqaba. From there, they would only need to drive for about twenty miles before reaching the Israeli border and attacking the Israeli city of Eilat. From there, the Iraqi units would then be able to join with the Egyptian units coming from the Sinai and then push northward towards Beersheba and Jerusalem. In addition, the air forces of Egypt, Syria and Iraq, with the latter operating from Saudi airfields, are apparently on high alert and ready to strike at Israel. Finally, suspicious movements by a number of Libyan Navy units have been noted in the Eastern Mediterranean, with some of those warships seen at quay in Alexandria, in Egypt. Most ominous is the fact that the Arab planes based around Israel have started late yesterday to be loaded up with bombs and rockets. I emphasize this point because an aviation commander normally doesn't have his combat aircraft loaded with ordnance before at most two days from a planned offensive. We thus assess that this Arab attack may happen within 24 to 36 hours from now.”

“My God!” said Reagan, shaken. “What are the Israeli's chances of defeating such a mass attack?”

"Slim, Mister President!" replied Ingrid soberly. "Yes, the Israeli military is a well-trained and well-equipped force but, in this case, it will be in a situation of severe disadvantage in both numbers and tactical setting."

"Wait!" said Alexander Haig, a retired general who was now Reagan's designated Secretary of State. "Why do you say that the Israelis suffer from a tactical setting, General Dows? I accept that the Arabs have an overwhelming advantage in number here, but Israel's tactical setting is no worse than when they faced and defeated the Arab armies during their War of Independence."

"General Haig, one major factor has changed compared with the situation in 1953: you don't have an American combat air wing present in Israel and ready to support the Israeli forces. I was in charge of such an air wing and of a few ground units in 1953 and, without bragging, the Jewish forces of the time would not have been able to push back the Arab attacks without the help of our aircraft, which decimated the Arab air forces and ground mechanized units. Yes, the Israeli forces are now much better equipped and trained than in 1953, but so are the Arab armies. Another important factor is the proportion of non-Jewish citizens living inside Israel. While the vast majority of those non-Jewish citizens, which I will call 'Palestinians', will not betray their present country, some pro-Arab extremist groups inside Israel could attempt acts of sabotage or internal resistance in order to impede the movements of Israeli units. The Israelis know and realize that, so have committed a significant number of their security and combat units into providing security to Israeli military and vital public installations, including to their so-called nuclear research center in Dimona."

"Why do you call Dimona a 'so-called nuclear research center', General Dows?" asked in a nearly aggressive tone Jeane Kirkpatrick, Reagan's designated Ambassador to the United Nations. Ingrid gave Kirkpatrick a cold look, already feeling a dislike to the small woman with curly brown hair.

"What I am going to say is classified 'Top Secret', so please treat this information as such. While the Israelis insist that Dimona is strictly engaged in research on civilian applications of atomic power, our intelligence suggest that it has in reality been used for a secret atomic bomb program. We can't say yet how advanced this program is, or whether the Israelis have succeeded in producing an atomic bomb, but the fact that Dimona is heavily protected by Israeli Army units tends to show that it is more than what it claims to be."

“So what if they have an atomic bomb?” replied Kirkpatrick. “It would be strictly their business.”

With her dislike intensified by that reply, Ingrid stared hard at the woman while answering her.

“When atomic weapons are involved, then it becomes everybody’s business, Miss Kirkpatrick. Any use of atomic weapons in the Middle East would result into bloody chaos and would only make matters much worse for everyone. What happened to Hawaii should have told everybody how bad for Humanity those weapons are.”

“I share your dislike of nuclear weapons, General Dows.” cut in Ronald Reagan, who thus shut off Kirkpatrick’s arguments, to Ingrid’s satisfaction. “Now, I have noticed that, in your briefing, you have not mentioned once the Jordanians. What about them?”

“Mister President, according to our latest intelligence, Jordanian forces are still at peace level readiness and none of their units have been moved towards the Israeli-Jordanian border. In fact, it appears that King Hussein of Jordan has been kept ignorant about Arab attack plans, possibly due to his policy of peaceful coexistence with Israel. One point that reinforces that assessment is that no Arab unit has attempted yet to cross Jordanian territory in order to get closer to Israel, something that would have given them some vital extra tactical advantage.”

“I see! And what about the Israelis themselves? Do they know that the Arabs are about to attack them?”

“From their apparent lack of reaction to Arab unit concentrations, I would say that the Arabs still would enjoy the element of surprise, Mister President.”

“Then, we should warn them at once!” replied Reagan while looking at Robert Kennedy, who nodded his head.

“We are going to do just that, but I wanted first to wait until this meeting, so that we could make a mutual decision on how to react to these Arab war preparations. While I still have the power to put our forces in war readiness, I didn’t want to possibly implicate our country in a new conflict without at least informing you about this crisis. After all, you would be the one stuck dealing with the long-term implications of such a conflict, Mister President.”

“And I am grateful about your consideration, President Kennedy. What do you propose that we do about this planned Arab assault on Israel?”

"First, I will call Prime Minister Rabin to warn him about the Arab military preparations. Second, I will attempt to hammer some sense into the main Arab leaders, with the hope that they will then abandon their war plans."

"Talking of hammering some sense into Arab leaders, do we know why they suddenly decided to prepare for war against Israel?" asked Alexander Haig. "Not much happened lately around the Middle East, to my knowledge."

"General Dows suggested to me that the fact that I am now a lame-duck president may have convinced the Arabs that now was a good time to attack, when Israel couldn't count on our automatic military support. There is also the fact that we were negotiating with the Israelis the sale of a first batch of sixty F-83 fighter-bombers, a type of plane which we never exported to non-NATO countries before. The Arabs know that, once those F-83s are delivered, the Israeli Air Force would basically become unbeatable. They still remember the beating they received from General Dows' F-83s in 1953, when those F-83s were still only of the first variant produced: the F-83A. Our present F-83E, while basically the same plane, has vastly improved electronic systems and missiles and is still the best fighter-bomber in service around the World. So, in a convoluted way, we may have contributed in convincing the Arabs to attack Israel now."

"Hum, this makes sense." said Reagan. "However, I would certainly not abandon our Israeli friends in such a dire moment. In your place, I would threaten war on those Arab idiots if they launched their assault on Israel. They may retaliate to that by slapping an oil embargo on us, but we can live with that, while I can't live with leaving the Israelis high and dry. I believe that the American people would understand and agree with that."

"And I believe so too, President Reagan. If you concur with me, I will first warn Prime Minister Rabin about this, then will put our forces around the Middle East at DEFCON 2. Next, I will send an envoy who will talk directly to these Arab leaders to try to put some common sense into them. With some luck, we may yet prevent this war from starting."

"All good measures that I heartily agree with, President Kennedy. Who will you send as envoy to speak with those Arab leaders?"

"General Ingrid Dows, Mister President. In my opinion, she is the best qualified and most experienced person for such a situation."

"Why her? Why not Secretary Muskie?" cut in Jeane Kirkpatrick. "She is no diplomat!"

In response, Robert looked at Ingrid, sending her a silent message. Ingrid thus replied in a firm voice to Kirkpatrick's objection.

"Actually, I already exercised diplomacy in many past crisis and conflicts, with military forces to back me up if needed. First, I acted as the plenipotentiary envoy of then President Martin in 1948 and reopened a link with Japan. Then, I convinced in 1953 the Vietminh and Ho Chi Minh to make peace and participate in a new coalition for Vietnam's independence. Next, I put an end in 1953 to the Palestine crisis and convinced then Prime Minister Ben Gurion to stop evicting the Arab residents of Palestine out of the territory intended to become Israel. That in turn cooled considerably the hostility of the surrounding Arab countries towards Israel, something that helped avoid more Arab-Israeli fighting until now. In Europe, after helping to defeat the Soviet invasion of Poland and of the Baltic States, I was part of the negotiating team which forced the Soviets to sign an armistice with us. Since then, I have convinced the Soviets to collaborate with us in the peaceful exploration and use of Space. Believe me, Miss Kirkpatrick, I have more experience of hands-on diplomacy than you ever will, plus I can speak fluently all the languages presently used in the Middle East."

A flash of anger showed in Kirkpatrick's eyes at being rebuffed like this, but a firm gesture from Ronald Reagan prevented her from replying to Ingrid.

"I believe that General Dows is well qualified to be President Kennedy's envoy in this occasion. I sincerely wish you good luck in your trip to the Middle East, General."

"Thank you, Mister President."

Robert Kennedy used that occasion to speak up and conclude the meeting.

"Well, since time is of the essence right now, I propose that we adjourn this meeting, so that I could call at once Prime Minister Rabin to warn him."

"I concur! I will just ask that you keep me informed about any major development on this matter, Mister President."

"And I promise you that you will be kept in the loop, Mister President. I thus call this meeting adjourned."

The participants to the meeting then got up from their chairs and filed out of the Situation Room. However, before leaving, Jeane Kirkpatrick threw a last hostile look at Ingrid, who in turn stared at her in a way that made her leave while averting Ingrid's eyes.

22:18 (Egypt Time)

Cairo International Airport (15 kilometers from downtown Cairo)

The Egyptian presidential guards waiting on the tarmac in front of the passenger terminal of Cairo International Airport firmed their grips on their AK-47 assault rifles as the sleek McDonnell C-20 NOMAD supersonic liaison aircraft emerged from the night, rolling slowly towards the terminal as an Egyptian airport employee guided it to a parking spot with the help of lit signal sticks. The officer in charge of the guards noticed that the jet aircraft was painted in the same pattern as that used for the American President's personal plane: this was an American V.I.P. flight alright.

"BE VIGILANT, BUT ALSO BE RESPECTFUL, MEN! THIS IS A HIGH-LEVEL DIPLOMATIC MISSION AND PRESIDENT EL-SADAT IS WAITING FOR THIS AMERICAN ENVOY."

The officer then watched in silence as the liaison jet stopped in its designated parking spot and shut down its engines. A door soon opened on the left side, pivoting down and becoming a staircase that extended to the tarmac. Repositioning quickly his guards so they could act as a guard of honor, the officer came to attention as a silhouette showed up at the door. He was not a little surprised when he saw that a woman in military uniform was now climbing down the stairs. His surprise only got bigger when he was able to see that the woman was both young and very beautiful, with blue eyes and reddish-brown hair falling to her neck. Her dark blue and black uniform was also quite futuristic and was nothing like what he had seen before. He nonetheless saluted her as she stepped on the tarmac, some four paces from him, and spoke up in his best English.

"Welcome to Egypt, miss. I am Captain Siddik el-Nassir and I was sent by President El-Sadat to greet you at the airport and drive you to his palace, where he is waiting for you."

"And I am General Ingrid Dows, Commandant of the United States Space Corps and Plenipotentiary Envoy of President Kennedy," replied the woman while returning his salute. Her name brought more surprise to Siddik, who could see that she appeared to be no more than 25, maybe.

"Uh, are you by chance the daughter of the General Dows who fought us in 1953, General?"

"No! I am the General Dows your country faced in 1953, Captain. In case you wonder about my apparent youth, I am actually 51-years-old. Let's say that I enjoy some divine favors."

His mind now boiling, Siddik managed to keep control of his expression and pointed at a military staff car waiting in front of the terminal's gate.

"This vehicle will carry us to the palace, General. Do you have some luggage with you that needs to be carried out of your plane?"

In response, Ingrid showed him the small suitcase and leather briefcase she had carried down the stairs.

"All I need is here, Captain, and I will carry them myself. Be advised that this plane has a crew of three and that they will stay in their plane until I return aboard."

"Then, this way please, General."

Getting in the back of the staff car with Captain El-Nassir, Ingrid kept a neutral expression as their vehicle started rolling, followed by two escort vehicles. The drive was actually fairly short, the Egyptian presidential palace being situated in the same Cairo suburb as that of the airport. On arrival at the palace, a servant hurried up to take Ingrid's suitcase and carry it for her, while she kept her briefcase with her. Walking up the stairs of the palace with Captain El-Nassir, Ingrid was led down a long ceremonial corridor, to be finally introduced into a large, luxuriously furnished lounge where a man with a thin moustache and receding curly black hair was waiting for her, dressed in a military uniform covered with medals. Ingrid stopped and came to attention, saluting the man and speaking to him in perfect Arabic.

"General Ingrid Dows, Plenipotentiary Envoy of President Kennedy, Mister President!"

Surprised by the identity of the American envoy he had been told by telephone to expect tonight, Anwar El-Sadat returned Ingrid's salute, then pointed a sofa to her.

"Welcome to Egypt, General Dows. Please, sit down, so we could talk. Would you like some coffee, or tea?"

"Tea will be fine, Mister President." replied Ingrid before sitting down in the designated sofa. Sadat passed her order for tea to a waiting servant, then sat in a sofa opposite Ingrid's sofa. He examined her in silence for a moment before opening his mouth again.

"So, you are the famous General Ingrid Dows so many people around the World are talking about. I must say that you are very well preserved for a woman who fought us in 1953. Are the rumors about you being touched by God true, General?"

"They are, Mister President. However, I must correct you a bit on that. I call the entity that rejuvenated me in 1953 'The One' and not 'God'. Mind you, the difference may appear academic to many, in view of the vast powers held by The One. But let's talk instead about us mortals, Mister President. You received earlier a call from President Kennedy warning you that he knows about your plans to attack Israel and enjoining you to cancel those plans, on pain of seeing the United States declare war on Egypt and on the other Arab countries of your coalition. I am here to discuss ways to preserve peace...for everyone, and to avoid what could only be a useless and senseless war. With Israel now warned by us, you lost the element of surprise, something that could only greatly increase the chances for heavy casualties on your side if that war starts. Believe it or not but Arab casualties would be as painful to me as Israeli casualties."

Ingrid saw Sadat's jaw tighten when she told him that the Israelis had been warned. However, the Egyptian leader regained his aplomb quickly and fired back at her.

"That would be hard to believe indeed, General Dows. You did not hesitate to kill many of our aviators in combat in 1953."

"There is a huge difference between air combat between a few dozen pilots and a war between two or more armies clashing on the ground, Mister President. I was myself an Egyptian or an Arab many times during my past incarnations. I was first Agar, the Egyptian slave girl bought by the great patriarch Abraham some 26 centuries ago, the same Agar who is considered by ancient texts to be the matriarch of the Arab people. I was then in succession through the centuries the wife of an Egyptian scribe in Amara; the wife of a peasant living near Memphis and Aisha, the third wife of the prophet Muhammad. I was also a Jew in many past lives as well, but in truth I care about every people on this planet. Right now, I am telling you that a war with Israel would cause only untold deaths and grief to your nation and to the other nations of the region, including Israel. I am here to do my best to prevent that, Mister President."

"I must commend your sense of humanity, General. From all that I heard about you, you do seem to truly care about the others around you. With that said, I must correct you on one point: we are not about to start a war. What we were about to do was to continue a war that never ended officially, as it was only suspended in 1953. For my country and for the other Arab countries allied with Egypt, the Jewish state is as illegitimate as before and is still persecuting our Arab brothers living within its borders."

"Please, Mister President, spare me the propaganda line on that subject. I was the one who pushed Prime Minister Ben Gurion to treat on an equal basis both the Jews and the non-Jews living within the borders of Israel as mandated by the United Nations at the time. It was my soldiers who stopped the Jewish forces from continuing their campaign of ethnic cleansing against the non-Jews inside Israel. I know perfectly well that there are extremists and hate-mongers on both sides of this conflict, but I know for a fact that the Muslim citizens of Israel are not being persecuted by the Israeli government. Whether you like it or not, Egypt and the other Arab states of this region will have to accept both the existence and the legitimacy of the state of Israel and to respect its right to live in peace within its own borders."

"And if we don't?" asked defiantly Sadat. Ingrid stared hard at him while answering in a cold tone of voice.

"Then, if you persist in your plans to attack Israel without provocation, you will find yourself at war with the United States. Know that President-elect Reagan agreed to this with President Kennedy. Simply delaying your attack until the end of January won't change the consequences you would suffer then. If you or other Arab states try to dissuade us from supporting Israel by threatening an oil embargo against the United States, then you will also find yourself at war with us...both economically and militarily. The bank accounts, properties and assets which so many Arab leaders have accumulated overseas via graft and corruption will be frozen or seized by us, both in the United States and around Europe. As for our military actions against the Arab states who will persist in wanting war with Israel, we will apply what is known in the United States as the 'Dows Doctrine': basically, we will strike at the head of the serpent instead of at its tail. Remember how the whole Communist Chinese leadership was bombed out of existence in Beijing in 1952, compliment of my combat aircraft? Or when I flattened and burned to the ground the Kremlin in Moscow with a squadron of my fighter-bombers in 1953? Those two actions helped put a quick end to two separate wars, so our Pentagon staff saw the value of that doctrine and adopted it."

Ingrid didn't have to say more then, as Sadat's expression told her at once that the Egyptian leader had perfectly understood her not-so-veiled threat against his personal rule and those of the other Arab rulers.

"I find your threats against me and other Arab leaders quite offensive, General."

"And I find the threat you and other Arab leaders are posing to peace equally offensive, Mister President. You are gambling with the lives of tens of thousands of

people on both sides, on top of threatening the existence of an ally of the United States. Oh, by the way, don't expect the support of the Soviet Union on this: I can assure you that you won't get it. Now, will it be peace or will it be war? It's your choice, Mister President. You may take a day or two before taking an official decision, but any Arab attack against Israel will trigger an immediate American military response. Just make sure that President El-Assad of Syria and Vice-President Saddam Hussein of Iraq also get the message and don't launch an attack on their own."

"Vice-President Hussein of Iraq?" said Sadat, confused. "Why did you name him instead of President Al-Bakr?"

Ingrid painted a sarcastic smile on her face as she got up from her sofa.

"Why talk to the puppet when you can talk to the puppeteer, Mister President? If you don't mind, I will now leave for Israel, to make sure that nobody in Tel-Aviv overreacts to our warning about your war preparations. Once you will have taken a decision about peace or war, just call President Kennedy in Washington: he will be expecting your call."

Sadat finally exploded, exasperated by her assurance and aplomb.

"General Dows, I find your attitude quite arrogant for someone I greeted in my own palace."

Ingrid, who was about to walk out, stopped and looked coldly at the Egyptian dictator.

"And The One equally dislikes warmongers, Mister President."

As Sadat was about to reply to that, he suddenly felt himself levitate off the floor. He looked down in confusion and fear for an instant, then looked back at Ingrid, nearly panicking.

"WHAT IS HAPPENING? WHAT IS THIS SORCERY?"

"That, Mister President, is The One expressing his disapproval...in a mild way."

She then turned around and walked out, with Sadat falling back on his feet as she left the lounge. The Egyptian leader, shaking nervously and feeling his legs weak, could only sit down in his sofa, cold sweat on his forehead.

23:41 (Egypt Time)

Cairo International Airport

"You are already back, General?" said the surprised Air Force stewardess when Ingrid climbed back inside her C-20 NOMAD. "That was a short conversation with President Sadat."

Ingrid smiled at the pretty blonde while putting her suitcase and briefcase back in the baggage rack near the cockpit of the supersonic liaison aircraft.

"I like it short and sweet. Well, not really sweet. I told President Sadat to choose between war and peace and left him hanging on that."

"So, where are we going next, General?"

"Tel-Aviv! I have to go talk urgently with Prime Minister Rabin. Hopefully, we won't encounter on the way a trigger-happy Israeli surface-to-air missile operator."

01:12 (Tel-Aviv Time)

Prime Minister's office, Tel-Aviv

"General Dows, the hour is quite late and you have been traveling for many hours. Are you sure that you don't want to talk in the morning, after you have rested a bit?"

Ingrid smiled to Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin: the 54-years-old politician looked himself quite tired, something she could well understand in view of the tenseness of the situation in and around Israel. On her way from the airport, she had been able to see that security had been considerably reinforced around Tel-Aviv and she had even encountered a long column of armored vehicles moving out of their barracks and heading south. The Israelis had thus taken President Kennedy's warning very seriously, as they should have. However, things could still escalate quickly. She then spoke back in Hebrew to Rabin, who had addressed her in English.

"Mister Prime Minister, sleep can wait. Peace can't! I saw that you put your military on alert and ordered them to deploy."

"I did, but this planned Arab assault is leaving us no choice but to prepare to defend ourselves, General."

"That was the sensible thing to do, Mister Prime Minister. However, after warning President El-Sadat not to launch his offensive, I came here to make sure that your own generals would not overreact by launching preemptive strikes against the Arab forces massed around your country. You cannot afford to give the Arabs a pretext to ignore the warning I just gave them."

"But that could leave us in a most unfavorable tactical position if the Arabs decide to ignore your warning, General."

"Yes, it could," recognized Ingrid, "but it is a gamble that must be taken."

Rabin gave Ingrid a somber look then.

"If that gamble fails, it will be Israel who will pay the price for it, General."

"Not only Israel, Mister Prime Minister." replied Ingrid, equally somber. "Right now, all American combat aircraft based in Europe and Turkey, along with the planes aboard our Mediterranean Fleet carriers, are loaded up with bombs and on trigger-alert, ready to strike at the Arab units closest to your borders and at Arab command centers. I have warned President El-Sadat that, if Israel is attacked, then the United States will declare war on the Arab states who will attack Israel. The United States is thus putting the lives of its soldiers, sailors and airmen in the balance in order to defend your country, Mister Prime Minister."

Rabin nodded once his head slowly, while his facial expression noticeably softened.

"And my country will be eternally grateful for that, General."

"Don't thank me yet, Mister Prime Minister: our support comes with a price."

"Oh? What do you mean?"

"That, in exchange for offering its protection to Israel, the United States will expect your government to terminate its secret atomic weapons program."

Rabin hesitated slightly then as his expression closed up, something that Ingrid didn't miss.

"General, I don't know what you are talking about. We have no such program."

"Please, Mister Prime Minister, let's be frank between friends and allies. We know about the true activities at your so-called atomic research center in Dimona. We also strongly suspect that your country has already produced a number of operational atomic warheads. We want that program terminated for good and your existing nuclear weapons dismantled, in exchange for our help."

"And what would it take for me to convince you and the American government that we have no such program, General?"

"Easy, Mister Prime Minister: give us complete and unfettered access to your Dimona nuclear center and to your airbases, where you keep your operational weapons."

Rabin nearly recoiled physically at that demand and a flash of anger appeared in his eyes.

“And what if we refuse to accede to your unreasonable demands, General?”

“Then, we will stop all contract negotiations for the sale of F-83 fighter-bombers to Israel, Mister Prime Minister. Please understand the following points I am about to say. First, we recently suffered a devastating nuclear attack on our state of Hawaii and the American public presently eye nuclear weapons in a very negative way. Second, President-elect Reagan himself abhors nuclear weapons and view them as good for nothing except for the mass killing of civilians. Third, if the Arabs ever learn that you have operational nuclear weapons, it will only motivate them into doing everything to get their own weapons by all means possible, including by buying them from Pakistan. Finally, if Israel refuses to dismantle its nuclear weapons program and nuclear stockpile even after being sanctioned by the United States, then it will be The One who will do it and you won't be able to do a thing to prevent that. The choice is yours, Mister Prime Minister: American support and F-83 fighter-bombers in exchange for dismantling your nuclear arsenal; or no American support, no F-83 fighter-bombers and all your nuclear weapons vaporized by The One. It should be a simple choice, really. Believe me when I say that the United States is a true friend of Israel, Mister Prime Minister. However, the less nuclear weapons this sad world contains, the better it will be for all of us. Now, I realize that such a decision is a heavy one for you and that you will have to consult with your cabinet and with your military leaders, so I will go grab a few hours of sleep, along with the crew of my liaison aircraft. If you need me, I will be at the King David Hotel. Thank you for receiving me, Mister Prime Minister, and good night!”

Ingrid saluted Rabin, then turned around and walked out of the Prime Minister's office, leaving the latter alone with his boiling mind. Waiting for Ingrid to be gone, Rabin then hurried to his telephone and composed a number, then waited for an answer. Someone picked up at the other end after two rings.

“Colonel Levinson, IDF²¹ Operations Center!”

“Colonel, this is the Prime Minister. I need to speak urgently with General Gur.”

“Uh, one moment, Mister Prime Minister.”

To Rabin's growing impatience, it took nearly a minute before the IDF Chief of Staff came on the line, his voice tainted by fatigue.

“Yes, Mister Prime Minister?”

²¹ IDF: Israeli Defense Forces.

"General Gur, I just got a visit from General Ingrid Dows, the commander of the United States Space Corps, who came to the Middle East as the plenipotentiary envoy of President Kennedy. She told me that she had just paid a visit to President Sadat in Cairo and that she told him that the United States would declare war on Egypt and on any other Arab country that would attack us. She in turn is asking us not to launch any preventive attack on Arab forces, in order not to compromise the threat she made to Sadat."

"But that's great news, Mister Prime Minister! With the United States firmly on our side, the Arab leaders will think twice before attacking us."

"Well, don't jump up with joy yet, General, because Dows had conditions attached to American help to Israel."

"Such as?"

"Such as dismantling our nuclear weapons program and getting rid of our operational nuclear warheads."

"WHAT? IS SHE CRAZY? I do hope that you denied the existence of our nuclear weapons program, Mister Prime Minister."

"I certainly did, for the good it did to me. Dows clearly didn't believe me and threatened to put a stop to the sale of F-83 fighter-bombers to our country if we didn't give her complete and unfettered access to our nuclear installations in Dimona and to our operational weapons storage bunkers. Furthermore, she threatened action from her so-called 'One' if we refused to comply."

There was a moment of silence on the line before Gur spoke again, sounding shaken.

"Mister Prime Minister, I was a member of our Northern Brigade during our 1953 War of Independence. One night, as my battalion was about to attack an Arab village in order to evict its occupants, we were stopped cold by a single young woman dressed in an Arabic robe, who proved impervious to our bullets and who then vaporized half of our battalion, sending me and the rest fleeing in utter panic. I later was told that this young woman had in reality been an angel sent by "The One", the spiritual entity who was also said to have miraculously healed and rejuvenated General Dows, on top of resurrecting her dead driver, killed by a group of Lehi extremists. If Dows just threatened an action by her 'One', then we should take that warning very seriously, Mister Prime Minister."

"I see!" said Rabin, still having problems believing that. "So, what do you counsel that we do, General Gur?"

"As much as I hate to say this: heed her warning, Mister Prime Minister. I'd rather have those F-83s than our nuclear weapons. We can use F-83 fighter-bombers in all types of war scenarios, while our nuclear weapons can be used only for either deterrence or retaliation. Since we kept their existence secret, we can't even use them for deterrence, as a matter of fact."

"Damn, you are right about that! Okay, I will assemble the cabinet tomorrow morning to take a decision about this. In the meantime, make sure that none of our units launch a preemptive attack of its own. I will see you at the cabinet meeting."

"I will be there, Mister Prime Minister."

Rabin then put down his receiver and stayed still for a moment while his brain worked at top speed, trying to find the best solution possible to the dilemma now facing him. Finally, unable to take a decision by himself on this matter, he decided to wait and see what his ministers and generals would say.

09:39 (Tel-Aviv Time)

Monday, December 6, 1976 'C'

Cabinet meeting room, government offices

Tel-Aviv, Israel

Yitzhak Rabin had to sit down and rest his head on his hands, nearly unable to go on. The cabinet meeting had now gone on for over one hour and, even for an Israeli cabinet meeting, it had been deeply divided and rancorous, with a number of ministers yelling at each other and trading barbs and insults. For one, the members from ultra-orthodox religious parties had squarely refused to give any credence to Ingrid Dows' warnings about a possible reaction by 'The One', since they didn't believe in the existence of Dows' spiritual entity. His defense minister, Shimon Peres, had understandably balked at the idea of dismantling Israel's nuclear weapons program, as he had been the one who had started it and had built it up. Other ministers, coming from the various small political parties which helped form Rabin's coalition government, basically couldn't agree on nearly anything with others, while quite a few ministers were too proud to accept being manipulated by the Americans. It was definitely one of those days when Rabin wished he could quit Israeli politics in order to go live a quieter life.

The sound of slow hand clapping coming from a corner of the meeting room suddenly brought silence around the room, while all heads turned towards the said corner. Rabin then saw a young and beautiful petite woman dressed in a roughly made robe and who was clapping hands while eyeing with mocking eyes the Israelis. General Mordechai Gur then said something in a strangled voice that made Rabin's blood surge to his brain.

"The Galilean angel... She's back!"

The petite woman stopped clapping her hands and looked soberly at Gur. While her lips didn't move, everybody then heard a strong female voice resonating inside their heads.

"Hello again, Mordechai Gur! I see that you have climbed the ranks quite a lot since 1953."

She then looked collectively at the group of politicians and generals, with her voice again resonating around.

"Some of you are refusing to believe in the existence of The One and to listen to the warnings from its Chosen. You also seem incapable of agreeing collectively to a course of action, thus let me help you in this. Right now, your precious nuclear weapons and your Dimona nuclear complex are in the process of gradually disintegrating into nothingness. In the case of Dimona, the process will be slow enough to allow the personnel inside it to evacuate the complex before it is too late for them. Your nuclear weapons will thus stop being a threat to millions of innocent people. The One has been very patient up to now, but these cursed nuclear weapons are threatening the very survival of Humanity. In the case of Israel, the pressure to use them will only grow as future crisis and challenges will pile up. In fact, some of you this morning advocated for the use of them before they could be destroyed. The One simply cannot allow that and has thus decided to act. Feel free afterwards to deny ever having possessed those weapons, or even to deny that anything uncommon has happened today: The One won't care about such lies. What he cares about is to prevent another nuclear abomination to happen."

That was when an ultra-orthodox minister shouted at the woman in an angry voice.

"What about the Arab armies massed at our borders?"

In response, the woman calmly but coldly looked at the bearded minister.

"Do not worry about them anymore: they have already started to turn around and return to their barracks. The one Arab leader who has refused to accept reason has

been dealt with by me. The Humanity is now better off without that monster. I will now go, but I will first enjoin you to treat everybody with respect and humanity, irrespective of their ethnic origins or beliefs, and to abandon your old hatreds. I, Natai, have spoken.”

The young woman then gradually faded away, soon leaving nothing but an empty room corner. Everyone in the room was frozen into silence for a moment before Shimon Peres started reacting first, grabbing a telephone and composing a number. After a few clipped sentences on the phone, he put down the receiver and looked at Rabin with an ashen expression.

“Our Dimona complex: it is in the process of slowly dissolving itself into thin air. It will be all gone in about five minutes.”

“God!” could only say Rabin in response, overwhelmed.

CHAPTER 19 – GOING HOME

14:40 (Universal Time)

Thursday, January 13, 1977 'C'

Mars Base Alpha cavern complex

Melas Chasma region of Valles Marineris

Mars

"How are you doing in your packing and storing away, Julie?"

Julie Lecomte stopped for a moment her packing of small plant specimens she had grown on Mars and smiled to Neil Armstrong, the commander of Base Alpha.

"I'm nearly finished here, Colonel. Keiko and Régine helped me quite a lot here."

"Excellent! So, you will be ready for our departure from the surface in four hours?"

"I will be." replied the French agronomist, her voice showing some sadness. "I must say that the year spent on Mars was one of the most fruitful years of my professional life. I wish that I could have continued my experiments on plant growth in Martian soil for another year. I will also be sad to leave behind my poor little Kiki VIII."

Neil Armstrong nodded his head in comprehension at those last words from the agronomist. Julie had brought with her from Earth a tiny Siberian hamster that was her favorite pet and which had quickly gained the affection and attention of the rest of the Base Alpha crew as their only resident pet. Unfortunately, with Siberian hamsters having a very short life expectancy from two to three years only, Kiki VIII had died some three months ago, leaving Julie Lecomte nearly inconsolable for days. The base crew had then helped Julie go over her pain by organizing a funeral and burial in a corner of the huge cavern sheltering Base Alpha, with a small engraved plaque done by Samantha Wilde, the base's spacesuit repair technician. Some would have laughed at the notion of having an official burial for a pet hamster but, in truth, Julie Lecomte had won the affection of everybody in the base with her sweetness, sensitivity and cheerful view of life. Neil gently patted Julie's back before continuing his inspection round, as he had still a lot to do before the base crew left the cavern and flew back to the U.S.S.

LIBERTY aboard the ship's shuttlecraft. All four of the expedition's big lander-rovers were now parked inside the cavern, their systems put in dormant mode, so that they could be reused by a third expedition to Mars. The same thing would be done with the four cargo landers, which now formed an intrinsic part of the infrastructure of Base Alpha, along with the ten interconnected prefabricated modules brought from orbit. As for when such a third expedition would come to Mars, it was still anybody's guess. However, Neil was certain that it would come one day, not too far in the future. There was still so much to explore and study on Mars and the planet had proved to be of immense scientific value, with solid proofs that life and water had once been abundant on the Red Planet, although life had never evolved past primitive marine lifeforms and plants. The biggest plus for Neil had been the fact that, if sufficient efforts and means were put in it, a Human colony could one day be established on Mars. Neil couldn't help form a picture of such a future colony in his head as he continued his inspection tour.

19:08 (Universal Time)

Shuttlecraft ARES, valley floor outside of Base Alpha's cavern

Melas Chasma region

"Do we have a full count? I sure wouldn't want to take off now while leaving someone behind."

"The count is good, Alexis." replied Pierre Vadeboncoeur, his tone serious. He knew that the pilot of their shuttlecraft had asked that question seriously, as joking on that subject would be of very bad taste indeed: they now had 73 passengers aboard their shuttlecraft, with their lives effectively in the hands of Alexis Leonov and Pierre Vadeboncoeur. Unfortunately, they were now leaving Mars with eleven less live people than when they had arrived a year earlier.

"Then, let's start the pre-flight check." said the Soviet cosmonaut, who had proved to all to be an excellent pilot and also a gifted artist. In fact, some of his paintings were now decorating the crew cafeteria of the U.S.S. LIBERTY.

In the large cargo cabin, which had been reconfigured into a passenger cabin for this flight, Julie Lecomte, wearing like the others her spacesuit, pressed the hand of Edward Stokes, who was sitting in the adjacent seat. She had first met the big American prospector and geologist some thirteen years ago, when they had traveled together to

the Moon as part of Moon Mission 11 and had worked at Moon Base Alpha for a full year. Stokes was 53-years-old, nine years more than Julie, but he was still a physically fit, healthy and solidly-built man whom Julie also found quite handsome.

"I always thought before coming here that my year on the Moon had been the most extraordinary one in my life, but I must say that I will miss Mars."

"Me too, Julie. Mars has to be the most fascinating planet for a geologist and prospector like me, with vistas and terrain features without equal on Earth."

Julie nearly asked Edward if he was anxious to see again his family but remembered in time that Edward had told him in the past months that his wife had died one year before his departure to Mars and that his children were now all grown up and had left the family home. So, she asked another question as the noise of the shuttlecraft's engines coming to life at idle power filled the cabin.

"What are you going to do after this, Ed? I suppose that prospecting in Alaska will feel lame for you after Mars."

"In a way, it will be, but I do love the wild life, forests and mountains of Alaska. It is a truly magnificent place for nature lovers. I am certain that you would love Alaska as well, Julie."

In reply, the French woman looked gently into the American's eyes.

"I would like very much to see Alaska with you, Ed. Would you be my guide there?"

Edward read the silent message Julie was sending him and smiled to her. Unfortunately, a kiss right now was impossible, due to their spacesuits' helmets.

"I would really love showing Alaska to you, Julie."

The roar of the rocket engines spooling up to full power then made conversations nearly impossible. Looking at the small television screens fixed to the back of the seats ahead of their seats, the couple saw and felt the shuttlecraft do a clean vertical takeoff, to then take up forward speed while climbing towards space. Tellingly, there were no cheers from the passengers then: they had contributed the best of themselves to their mission on Mars and would keep fond souvenirs of their mission for the years to come. A minute later, as they could see the curvature of Mars' orb, they heard the voice of their copilot.

"Your attention, ladies and gentlemen. The U.S.S. LIBERTY has advised us that, in prevision of our return on board after a year spent in Martian gravity, the habitat carrousel of the ship will slow down their rotation, so that the felt gravity in them will go from 0.9 G down to 0.4 G. The rotation will then be gradually increased back to normal

Earth gravity over the next four months while we travel back to Earth. We will thus have time for our bodies to regain their normal stamina and bone and muscle structure by the time we arrive back in Earth orbit. In another piece of news, the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION has left Earth orbit today, on its way to Venus and Mercury for a year-long mission to map and study both planets from orbit. Due to the infernal temperatures on the surface of both planets, only unmanned probes will be sent down. That is all for the moment. Thank you for flying with the Ares Space Lines.”

There were a few giggles at that last sentence. On their part, Julie and Edward kept their hands pressed together during the whole trip to orbit.

11:05 (Washington Time)

Tuesday, January 25, 1977 ‘C’

The Oval Office, the White House

Washington, D.C.

Ingrid, wearing her Space Corps going-out uniform, came to attention and saluted after entering the Oval Office, where President Ronald Reagan was sitting behind the big presidential work desk. She noticed at once and with some surprise that there was no one else present in the office.

“You asked to see me, Mister President?”

“I sure did, General Dows. But please, sit down! Let’s use those sofas.”

“Thank you, Mister President!”

Ingrid walked to a corner of the room furnished with a number of sofas and easy chairs surrounding a low coffee table, sitting in one of the sofas. Ronald Reagan sat opposite from her on another sofa and eyed her for a couple of seconds before speaking.

“I suppose that you must be wondering why you were called to the White House, General.”

“I am, but I am mostly wondering why nobody else is present, Mister President. I was somehow expecting to see General Brown or Secretary of Defense Weinberger here, at the least.”

“Well, I wanted to talk with you in private about a few things, General Dows. Before leaving office, President Kennedy swore me in on a few secrets concerning you, secrets which were quite astounding, I must say. I already knew about your ability to remember your past incarnations and the fact that you were either healed or even

resurrected two times already by the being you call 'The One' and which furiously sounds like God to me. Robert Kennedy has told me that you are what you call a 'Chosen' and that you hold a number of superpowers."

"That is correct, Mister President. I actually confessed in succession and in private to Presidents Dewey, John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy of having those superpowers. Basically, apart from seeing my aging slow down dramatically, my powers of Chosen of The One include telepathy, telekinesis, levitation, touch healing, superhuman strength and endurance and the ability to throw balls of pure energy."

Even though he had been forewarned by Robert Kennedy, Reagan still stiffened on hearing her.

"You could read my mind, General?"

"I could, but I won't, Mister President. I do not read other people's minds, unless I suspect them to be planning something hostile against me. *I however can communicate mentally with someone if need be.*"

Her last sentence was said telepathically, without her lips moving. In response, Reagan looked at her somberly in silence for a moment before nodding his head once.

"I would probably have taken those powers of yours in a very negative way, General...if not for your extraordinary and unimpeachable service record and decades of loyal service to the United States. You are certainly someone completely out of the ordinary but you are also someone I can have full confidence in. While we may not share similar political views, you have proved yourself to be above politics and served loyally both democrat and republican presidents. You also proved repeatedly, including recently, that your advice on military and geo-political matters is both judicious and trustworthy. For these reasons, I will keep you as a special presidential advisor, like Presidents Martin, Dewey, John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy did."

"Thank you for your confidence in me, Mister President." replied Ingrid, feeling part of her prior anxiety evaporate.

"I am the one who needs to thank you for your decades of loyal and competent service, General. About your service, don't worry about being forced into retirement because of your age. I have already agreed with General Brown that the standard military retirement age is simply irrelevant in your case, which has no precedent, really."

"Thank you again, Mister President. I am sure that all the headhunters from the various major aerospace companies in the United States will swear in frustration on

hearing that. Lockheed in particular is ready to build a golden bridge for me the moment I will leave the service.”

“I bet they are!” said Reagan, smiling in amusement before becoming serious again. “On the subject of aerospace matters, I have also taken a decision concerning you. Nobody but a liar or a fool would dare to deny all that you have accomplished while directing our space program. In fact, our space program is what you made it to be what it is now: the envy of the World and a shining example of American technological and scientific prowess. I am thus also keeping you in your post of Director of National Space Programs.”

“Again, thank you, Mister President.”

“Don’t thank me too quickly, General: I do have objections about a part of your space program.”

“Let me guess, Mister President: you don’t like the fact that I have been inviting Soviet cosmonauts and scientists to participate in our various space missions, including our missions to the Moon and to Mars.”

“Bingo! Before I take a final decision on that matter, I would like you to explain to me your reasons to be cozying up like this with the Soviets in space. Don’t be afraid to speak frankly, General.”

“Very well, Mister President. First, I must insist that my motives in this are not political one bit. If someone ever insinuates to you that I invited Soviets on our space missions because I have some supposed sympathy towards communism, then feel free to laugh in their face. My reasons are actually quite simple and straightforward, Mister President: by pushing for international participation in our space program, I am simply hoping to encourage peaceful cooperation in a domain that benefits the whole of Humanity and, at the same time, promote peaceful relations and goodwill between our two countries. God knows that I have bashed both the Soviets and the Communist Chinese hard in the past and personally shot down dozens of their planes, but I do not hate Soviets or Chinese on an individual basis. Yes, their political system can be said to be evil, but can we say the same about all or even a majority of their citizens? Take for example Colonel Lilya Litvyak, a Soviet cosmonaut and fighter pilot who is presently part of our second Mars expedition, which just left Mars orbit to return to Earth. We actually first crossed path during the war in Indochina, when she was shot down by us and captured. Later on, I went into orbit to go rescue her and her partner when their Soviet spacecraft malfunctioned. I was then shot down by British missiles over Australia while

bringing her and her comrade back to Earth, an event that actually made the United States and the Soviet Union cooperate militarily to force the British to back off.”

“I remember that: it made quite a splash in the news at the time and the British ended up with pie all over their faces. I now see the point that you are trying to make, General, and I accept your reasons for doing so. You thus can continue your program of peaceful space cooperation with the Soviets, as long as you don’t let them steal the glory from us and don’t compromise American national or military secrets in the process.”

“I promise you to do so, Mister President.”

“Now,” said Reagan while visibly relaxing and smiling to Ingrid, “tell me what you have in store for us in your space program. I can’t wait to hear what is your next proposed goal in space, especially after sending a spaceship to Venus and Mercury.”

“Well, it will mostly depend on how my next budgetary requests for our space program will fare in Congress, Mister President. However, if my budgets are accepted, then our next goal in space turns around one word: Jupiter!”

Ronald Reagan was left frozen in stupor and speechless on hearing that last word.

“Jupiter? But such a mission may cost many billions of dollars. It will be a hard pill indeed to swallow for Congress.”

“I agree that it won’t be cheap, Mister President, but it also won’t be as expensive as many would think. We already have the technologies and the building facilities for a Jupiter mission ship, which I intend to name the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS. We also have a permanent orbital space station which will greatly simplify refueling it after it will be launched into orbit. The U.S.S. CONSTITUTION, which is now on its way to Venus, was completely refitted during the last two years and one of the modifications made to it was the addition of a new type of propulsion system, what I call a magneto-plasma rocket engine, which is ten times more efficient in terms of fuel consumption than even our nuclear rocket engines. Such magneto-plasma engines will greatly cut the travel time to distant planets like Jupiter and Saturn and our future PROMETHEUS will be equipped with them. From the preliminary reports from the CONSTITUTION, those magneto-plasma engines are working perfectly and we are now working on building full scale models for our future spaceship.”

Ronald Reagan slowly shook his head in disbelief at her words.

“Where do you get all these ideas and concepts, General? Do you still use the data from those old ATHENA files brought from the future by your dead adoptive mother?”

“To some extent, Mister President, but we are now, in 1977, at a point of our space program where we are starting to attain or even surpass the level of knowledge about our Solar System that was known in the 2012 of Nancy Laplante’s timeline. For example, in her time, no human had yet walked on Mars, yet we now have sent two full expeditions to its surface. As for our project to go to Jupiter, I am using the basic astronomical data and photos taken by unmanned probe in or prior to 2012 to select our mission objectives in the Jupiter and Saturn Systems. However, I can assure you that most of the space concepts we presently use for spaceships and space shuttles come from my mind. In Nancy’s time, American space programs were afflicted by two major hurdles: designs and decisions by committee and political interference. As you may well know already, decisions by committee, while giving the illusion of democracy in problem-solving, too often result in tremendous time wasting, timidity in design and compromises. A unique mind directing a project may sound like a dictatorship, but if that single mind is a visionary one and also a technologically competent one, it will move the project it directs much faster and much more efficiently than a committee in which members constantly push their individual ideas and concepts.”

“I will buy that, General. The same could be said of a good film script: too many cooks tend to spoil the sauce. What about that political interference you mentioned?”

“Well, in Nancy’s time, NASA, the national body that administered the American space program, had grown to become a bureaucratic monster where development and production contracts had been dispersed among thousands of companies, not for efficiency but in order to satisfy the wishes of congressmen and senators who wanted industries and think tanks in their districts or states to feed at the trough. Also, the policy of ‘lowest bidder gets the contract’ is a perfect recipe for future disaster in space. As a result, a lot of money and time was being wasted for little results at the end. I know that reining in Congress sounds impossible, but I want to continue to direct personally our space program and be able to choose which company can provide the best product at an affordable cost. For this, I will need your support, Mister President.”

“And you will have it, General Dows. Nobody in Washington is foolish enough to claim that he or she could do better than what you did already and I doubt that you will

find a single person doubting your competences as Director of National Space Program. Anything else?"

"There is one last thing, Mister President. You must have heard that I have the reputation of being a woman who likes her fun, correct?"

That made Reagan grin in amusement.

"General, I was until recently Governor of California and was also a Hollywood actor, so I heard plenty about you and the parties you participated to. If that can reassure you, I still consider your moral values and conduct better than those of many actors and actresses I frequented in Hollywood, while I won't even talk about the dirty secrets concerning too many of our politicians. So, what are you driving at?"

"You may be surprised but I have a moral dilemma about our future, long-term space missions, Mister President. Please understand that, even with our newest engines, a return mission to Jupiter and Saturn will take easily four to five years before our ship will be back in Earth orbit. That is a very long time in Space, even for trained astronauts, and especially for the married ones, who will not see their families for at least four years. You know what such a long separation can do to a marriage, or how lonely someone can feel if not offered at least an opportunity to enter in a relationship for four years or more. Our astronauts are mostly young, highly fit and also highly intelligent. They are also human, with all the natural needs of a human being. I know that you are by reputation rather conservative when it comes to views about sexuality, Mister President, but what I want to say is that running a spaceship crew like a monastery during four years while being isolated in Space, far from Earth, is a recipe for a host of psychological troubles. What I want from you is the permission to give more freedom of personal conduct to the crewmembers of my spaceships on long missions. I have no intentions to turn my ships into space bordellos, but my crewmembers must have a way to blow steam from time to time."

By then, Reagan's expression had turned very serious indeed and he stayed silent for long seconds after Ingrid finished speaking.

"General, you were right about my 'conservative views' on sex and morality, but I have seen enough in my life to believe in the importance of the problem you are exposing to me. If we only take for example our Navy crews who spend months at sea, away from their families, seeing their deportment while visiting foreign ports is enough to educate about the most rigid religious zealot. So, what specific measures do you have in mind to counter that problem, General?"

Ingrid took a deep breath before answering the President: at least he had not dismissed outright her concerns on this difficult subject.

"First, I would like to relax the no-fraternization rule aboard our spaceships, at least concerning unmarried crewmembers, so they would have permission to date other crewmembers as they wish, as long as they conduct their affairs in private, in their cabins."

"That sounds reasonable enough to me, as long as no reporters start exploiting such relationships to create false scandals in the medias."

"Oh, I have no intentions to invite reporters on such deep space missions, Mister President."

"Good! What else?"

"Second, I would like to try as much as possible to permit the spouses of astronauts or scientists without kids or whose kids are already adults to accompany their spouses in Space, ideally by using them as non-technical crewmembers, like stewards in the ship's cafeteria or bar-lounge, or as cooks or cleaning staff. Such a measure would understandably have to be managed very tightly but I will make it my personal responsibility to choose which spouses would go into Space."

"That is indeed a delicate matter, General. Do you mind if I ask the counsel of my wife first before answering that?"

"Not at all, Mister President. Finally, there is one last concern I have: possible pregnancies during a deep space mission. I know that your favored way to prevent unwanted pregnancies is sexual abstinence, but I suspect that someone is bound to break such a policy eventually. As you must know from experience and as the popular saying goes: shit happens. I thus am planning to incorporate some limited, basic facilities aboard our deep space ships, to accommodate possible pregnancies and births during the mission. In case you didn't know, a boy was born in space aboard the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION during its trip to Mars four years ago. That pregnancy and birth had not been a planned one and was the accidental result of a husband and wife night together just before departure into Space."

Reagan opened his eyes wide on hearing that.

"A baby was born in Space? I didn't know about that, General. And how is that boy doing these days?"

"He is a perfectly healthy toddler boy who is developing normally, apart from having a highly-developed sense of equilibrium, a result of playing around the ship's

zero-gravity areas for months. Mind you, compared to what the Soviets have on their MIR space station, our crew accommodations are downright luxurious and our ship's medical facilities are quite extensive, so taking care of a handful of pregnancies and births will not tax them. If I may play the Devil's advocate, a few babies and toddlers aboard our spaceship would actually do miracles to bring some sense of normalcy to ship's life, Mister President."

"Hum, you may be right, although I certainly am not hoping to see such space pregnancies."

"What about pregnancies from non-American couples, Mister President?" said Ingrid, mostly in jest. That made Reagan grin as he imagined that.

"Well, I certainly can see French or Italian couples ending up having babies during a four-year mission in Space on our ship: they are notorious for their sexual promiscuity, at least in reputation."

"Yes! Imagine the likes of Gina Lollobrigida and Marcelo Mastroianni spending four years on our ship, far away from Earth."

"Now, THAT would make an epic front-page article in the newspapers! Jokes aside, I can see the possibility of such space pregnancies happening so, while not encouraging them, I have no objections to you equipping your future spaceship with adequate facilities to care for babies."

"Thank you for your comprehension, Mister President. All these things will greatly improve the living conditions of our crewmembers heading for Jupiter."

"Anything else that I should know about, General?"

"No, Mister President! That's it for the surprises for the moment."

"Then, I wish you a good day, General."

"And a good day to you too, Mister President."

After saluting Reagan one last time, Ingrid then walked out of the Oval Office, a new spring in her gait and satisfaction painted on her face.

17:11 (Universal Time)

Wednesday, June 15, 1977 'C'

Zero-G bar-lounge, entertainment module

Hotel Sheraton Aurora, Aurora Space Station

Low Earth orbit

"Your attention, ladies and gentlemen! The U.S.S. LIBERTY, arriving from Mars, is about to dock with our station. Hotel customers who wish to watch its arrival can do so safely from the lower promenade of the station or from the hotel's Zero-G bar-lounge."

John F. Kennedy, who was having a drink with his wife Jacqueline at a table of the Zero-G bar-lounge snapped his head around on hearing that announcement and looked through the large viewing port next to their table which gave them a good view of Earth and of Space. A big smile formed at once on his face when he saw in the distance the white silhouette of the interplanetary spaceship, approaching slowly the space station.

"My God! This is truly a spectacle that any American would be proud of, isn't it, Jackie?"

"It is indeed, John." replied his wife as the other customers of the bar-lounge, most of them rich people or celebrities, rushed to the viewing ports to look at the approaching U.S.S. LIBERTY. Seeing that the spaceship was heading towards the lowest docking station of the space station, John gently patted his wife's hand.

"Let's go down and meet those heroes, Jacky."

Leaving first their unfinished zero-G glasses with the barmaid standing behind the counter of the bar, the ex-presidential couple walked out of the lounge, careful to let their magnetized slippers stick lightly to the deck, and took one of the elevators which linked the entertainment module with the centerline spine of the station. Going out of that elevator once inside the spine, a 600-meter-long, twenty-meter-wide cylinder to which the various modules of the station were attached, the Kennedys transferred to another elevator which ran up and down the centerline spine and headed down to the lowest docking port module, situated at the bottom of the space station and designed to receive large spaceships of the CONSTITUTION class. When they exited that elevator, they were politely confronted by a Space Corps Security Branch soldier standing near the elevators bank. However, the soldier came to attention and saluted as soon as he recognized John Kennedy.

"Mister President! I am sorry, but the South Docking Port Section is presently closed to the public."

"I understand, Senior Airman, but I wished to greet in person our heroes from Mars. Could I ask you to pass my request to your superiors?"

"Of course, Mister President! One moment, please."

The young soldier then activated his helmet's integrated radio headset and spoke with someone briefly before smiling to John.

"You are welcome to proceed to the South Docking Port airlock's reception compartment, Mister President. I will lead you to there."

"Thank you, Senior Airman."

Following the young soldier, the couple soon arrived in the large reception area of the South Docking Port, with its walls covered with spacesuits storage alcoves and its airlock control station. A number of people were already in that compartment, including the commandant of the space station, who came at once to John and saluted him.

"Mister President! I believed that our astronauts from the U.S.S. LIBERTY will be most honored by your presence here and now. I must warn you however that the first ones to leave the spaceship and enter this station will be our eleven people who died on Mars."

John instantly became sober at those words and he nodded his head in acknowledgement.

"Then, I will pay my respects to them as they will be carried out."

"In that case, I will ask you and your wife to stand with me to the right side of the airlock's hatch, Mister President."

Moving to one side of the large steel hatch of the airlock, John and Jackie waited patiently for about a minute before a technician opened wide the hatch, a large, 2.3-meter-diameter hemispherical cap. John was then able to see a group of men and women in dark blue interior coveralls coming from inside the docked spaceship in two parallel files. Each four of them in turn held the corners of a black plastic body bag they were carrying. John came to rigid attention and put his right hand over his heart as the first body bag passed in front of him. He then spoke softly a few words.

"Heroes, all of them!"

CHAPTER 20 – U.S.S. PROMETHEUS

09:28 (Washington Time)

Thursday, March 24, 1978 'C'

Office of the Director of the Office of Management and Budgets

The White House, Washington, D.C.

U.S.A.

"FOUR POINT THREE BILLION DOLLARS FOR A SPACESHIP? IS GENERAL DOWS NUTS?" exclaimed David Stockman, the young congressman from Michigan who had been given by President Ronald Reagan the position of Director of the Office of Management and Budgets, or OMB in short. Looking up from the file Secretary of Treasury Donald Regan had handed him, he eyed Regan critically.

"And you are ready to accommodate this supplementary budgetary item request in your federal budget, Donald? You must have had owls of protests from the other military service chiefs about Dows grabbing such a big piece of the military budget, no?"

"Yes, but their arguments are actually irrelevant in this case: this demand is made by Dows in her quality of Director of National Space Programs and is not part of the Defense budget. That future spaceship, to be called the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS, while it will be manned mainly by Space Corps personnel, will be a civilian exploration ship, and not an armed ship. Its main purpose will be the exploration of the outer planets of our Solar System, meaning Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto. It will thus leave our two present interplanetary spaceships, the CONSTITUTION and the LIBERTY, free to continue the exploration of Mars, Venus and Mercury, along with the objects in the Main Asteroid Belt. This demand may look excessive at first glance, but I and the President discussed at length this project with General Dows and her arguments are quite compelling and convincing. For one thing, the PROMETHEUS will incorporate new, highly advanced space engines which will allow it to do the trip to Jupiter in less than two years. It will also be able to land on small planets and moons in order to refuel itself by collecting water ice from their surfaces and turn that water into fuel. In terms of pure scientific interest, this ship's potential is huge, while in terms of national prestige a successful space mission to Jupiter and Saturn will boost worldwide the reputation of the

United States as the most advanced nation on Earth. The Soviets will in turn end up looking like badly trained monkeys. That alone was enough to convince the President to support this project.”

“I see! Still, I can already hear the howls of outrage from the Congress about this supplementary budget request.”

“Maybe, maybe not, David. Don’t forget that, while General Dows is apolitical, she has a very positive reputation with Democratic Party members. As for the Republican Party members of Congress, some may hate her for her anti-segregationist views but her past service record has gained her a lot of admiration with many members.”

“And which states will end up profiting the most from this ship construction project? Congressmen and lobbyists will throw themselves at this project like a pack of wolves on a deer carcass.”

“Many sub-systems will be produced by various aerospace firms around the country, but the ship construction itself will take place at the Space Corps Spaceship Assembly Hall in Muroc Air Force Base, in California. The ship will also be launched from there, using the vast, flat expanses of the Muroc Dry Lake.”

David Stockman didn’t reply to that, instead looking again at the document in his hands and reading it quickly. While many of the details of the proposal were quite technical in nature, he could see that there were no obvious instances of ‘gold plating’ or political favoritism, something that was unfortunately too common with military budget requests and large civilian infrastructure projects.

“Very well! If the President really wants this project to be done, then I will do my best to convince the House of Representatives to accept it.”

“Thanks! I know that you will be convincing, David.” replied Regan before walking out of Stockman’s office, leaving the OMB director to read in detail the budget request.

09:12 (California Time)

Monday, April 02, 1979 ‘C’

Base theater, Vandenberg Space Base

California

Walking on the theater stage and taking position behind the lectern which had been set in the center of the stage, Ingrid visually scanned the large crowd of hundreds of Space Corps servicemembers, civilian employees and family members, including young children, before speaking in the lectern's microphone.

"Good morning to all, ladies and gentlemen of the Space Corps. I have asked you to come here with your families today so that I could present to you the main outlines of our future mission to Jupiter and Saturn. After you will have listened to my presentation, you will then be asked to take a personal decision concerning that future mission. When I say 'you', I mean to include your spouses and children in that decision."

There were some whispers around the vast hall as the service persons and civilian employees exchanged surprised looks with their families. Ingrid waited for near silence to return before continuing.

"Yes, I did say 'to include your spouses and children'. Before most of you joined the Space Corps, or its predecessor, the Military Space Command, your families had to deal as best it could with the way the American military typically treats the families of its personnel: mostly as an afterthought. Yes, the Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps all claim loudly that they have your welfare in mind while moving you around or shipping you away from your family for months on end. Part of that was due to simple practical considerations, but too often your family was taken for granted by those services. Sometimes, and I personally saw that too many times, some service people passed their career advancement above their marital and family wellbeing, a state of affair that often resulted in divorces and broken families. Well, I don't want to see that in my Space Corps. I want my people to be happy, both at work and at home, and to see that their families are also happy and prosper. Avoiding long marital separations is one important way to keep everybody happy. This is especially critical now for us in the Space Corps, as we have started to engage in deep space missions where a ship's crew can be months and years away from Earth. In the case of our future mission to the outer planets, that problem will become even more critical, as our U.S.S. PROMETHEUS, which is presently being built, may well be away from Earth for a full five years or even more. Now, to any married service person here that would tell me that he or she could live with such a long separation from his or her family, I would reply 'BULLSHIT!'. You may feel like it would be an acceptable price to pay to further your military career and live a great adventure, but the odds are that you would return home only to find a divorce

or separation notice nailed to your door. And I wouldn't blame one second the spouse who would put up such a notice."

Ingrid paused again for a moment to let her words sink in, as the atmosphere in the theater suddenly became a lot somber.

"When the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION made its first trip to Mars, I did my best to alleviate this problem of family separation, notably by offering working positions aboard our spaceship to service spouses who had some needed skills and who were willing to go to space in order to accompany their loved ones. Unfortunately, we did not have proper facilities aboard the CONSTITUTION to lodge children as well, so only childless couples could profit from that arrangement then, even though some of these couples did not stay childless for very long. Despite what many busybodies may have said since, that policy proved to be a great success, with the morale of our crew benefiting greatly from it and with life aboard our ship appearing a lot more normal with the presence of these young married couples. Of course, the fact that the personnel facilities and living accommodations on the CONSTITUTION and on the LIBERTY are vastly superior to the triple bunk bed arrangement which is standard for enlisted personnel aboard Navy ships may have helped as well. Name me a U.S. Navy ship where a simple sailor has his own cabin!"

Laughter greeted her last sentence, as many members of the Space Corps were ex-Navy members.

"Well, I had a few years since then to think about that problem and I can say that our future U.S.S. PROMETHEUS has benefited from that thinking, ladies and gentlemen."

Ingrid then pushed a button on the remote-control unit of the theater's slide projector, making a schematic drawing of the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS appear on the big projection screen situated behind her.

"This is the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS as it will be once completed in about a year's time. While it is hard to appreciate how huge it truly is, suffice to say that it will be twice as long as our biggest aircraft carrier and three times as wide. One main reason for its size is that it was built to accommodate two large contra-rotating habitat carrousel which will provide a normal, constant gravity living and working environment to its crew and passengers. That crew will also be large, over 400, in order to incorporate the armies of astronomers, astrophysicists and other scientists who have been assaulting the door of my office, clamoring to get one of the planned guest scientist positions

aboard the PROMETHEUS when it will depart for Jupiter. Since that mission will go on for around five years, the accommodations and personnel facilities on the PROMETHEUS will be particularly refined, not to say deliciously decadent, as a Soviet guest scientist told me recently about the facilities he experienced aboard the U.S.S. LIBERTY during its mission to Mars. However, I have given the order to temporarily put a pause to the final interior touches of the PROMETHEUS, and this until I could come up with a finalized list of the crew and passengers planned for our mission to Jupiter. That finalized list will in turn depend a lot on what you and your families will decide between yourselves after listening to me today. Basically, my question to you and your spouses this morning is this: do you wish to travel as a family to Jupiter and live that adventure together, even though that mission will not be without risks? To the spouses who would like to answer 'yes' to my question, I would further ask them if they would be both capable and ready to fill the following support staff positions aboard the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS."

Ingrid then pressed again the button on the remote-control unit, making a list appear on the giant screen. The wives present in the theater bent forward as one to better read the list, with more than a few letting their jaws drop wide open as they saw such positions as 'janitors', 'teachers', 'secretaries', 'barmaids', 'store clerks', 'daycare workers', 'cooks', 'gardeners' and 'farm hands' on the projected list. Ingrid then gave the spectators a good minute to view the list and discuss it with their spouses. From the excited tone of those discussions, she could already see that many of the spouses present would indeed be ready and willing to go. She however had more arguments to present.

"If this could help you to take a decision, ladies and gentlemen, know that there will be proper educational and child care facilities aboard the PROMETHEUS. However, keep in mind the fact that, as big as it is, space aboard will be finite, while the number of ship's personnel positions is limited. Thus, only the persons with the best qualifications and respecting certain parameters will be able to go aboard...if you do want to go to Jupiter. Those who will be selected and who have children who are not adults yet and who could not be left behind by themselves will then be allowed to bring their children aboard with them, within reasonable limits. For those of you who may face special difficulties in this matter, don't be afraid to come and see me, so that we could discuss this together and find a solution to your problem. My door will always be open for you, so don't be afraid to ask. I already told my staff not to block access to my office to you and also delegated down most of my day-to-day business, so that I could be free to

receive you in the coming days. I will now show you a number of slides with pictures and drawings of the various accommodations and facilities which will be found aboard the PROMETHEUS, while you will be able to pick up on your way out explanation pamphlets about the policies and rules which will govern our staffing requirements for the PROMETHEUS.”

Ingrid then spent a good hour showing slides, explaining them and then taking questions at the end from the spectators. She was glad to see that many of the questions came from wives of servicemen, who expressed themselves rather than meekly letting their husbands do all the talking and decision-making. She felt good as the crowd filed out of the theater, sensing a most positive general mood in the air following her presentation.

21:11 (New Orleans Time)

Tuesday, October 23, 1979 ‘C’

The CREOLE JAZZ CLUB, Bourbon Street

New Orleans, Louisiana

“There’s the place, General. I think that you will like both the club and the musicians in it.”

Ingrid, who was wearing a very sexy civilian outfit of short skirt, knee-high boots and tank top covered by a light leather coat, gave a side look at Ronald McNair, one of her scientist astronauts who also happened to be a good musician and saxophonist and who was wearing informal civilian clothes, like her.

“Please, Ronald, cut the ‘General’ thing and simply call me ‘Ingrid’ in public. I would like to attract as little attention as possible on this visit to New Orleans.”

“Well...Ingrid, your outfit is not very discrete, if I might say so. Every man we passed by stared at your body.”

Ingrid, rather than being displeased by that, smiled instead.

“Good! Then they didn’t pay much attention to my face.”

She then looked at the front of the CREOLE JAZZ CLUB, with its bright neon sign.

“It certainly looks and sounds like a lively place. Let’s go in!”

Ingrid, closely followed by Ronald, walked to the entrance door of the club, only to be stopped by the raised hand of the doorman, a big black man wearing a number of gold necklaces.

“Excuse me, missy, but I would need to see some identity card with picture.”

Having experienced many times in the past being ‘carded’ like this due to her youthful appearance, Ingrid took that in stride and took out of her fanny pack her wallet, then extracted her driver’s license and showed it to the doorman. However, instead of assuaging him, that license only earned Ingrid a suspicious look.

“You were supposedly born in 1925? Is this a joke?”

“No, it is not. Here is my military identity card from the U.S. Space Corps instead: it mentions my present rank as a general officer.”

The skeptical look of the doorman quickly changed to awe and deference when he finally understood who he was facing.

“General Dows? Our first astronaut? Come in! We will be greatly honored by your visit.”

“Thank you, my good man!” replied Ingrid before entering the club with Ronald. The club, while noisy, proved to be rather small, with only two dozen tables and a small stage supplemented by a bar counter. However, the room was nearly packed, mostly with black or Hispanic persons in their thirties and forties. Only a handful of the customers were white persons. Right away, many of the men in the room stared lustily at Ingrid, making her smirk.

“It’s nice to see that I can still attract men’s eyes at the age of 54.”

“Are you kidding, Ingrid? You barely look to be twenty.”

“Pah! Detail! Let’s find a table.”

That actually proved a bit of a challenge, as the club was close to full. They finally had to ask to share a table with a lonely black man with graying hair who accepted to let them sit with him. That man waited until Ronald had ordered two beers to a waiter before smiling to Ingrid.

“Have you been interested in Jazz for long, miss? We don’t see near teenagers too often here.”

“Oh, I like all kinds of music, mister. By the way, I am Ingrid and this is my friend Ronald.”

“And I am Joshua, Joshua Purdue.”

"Pleased to know you, Joshua. Say, this young female singer on the stage sounds quite good. Is she a well-known artist in New Orleans?"

"Germaine Lapierre? Not really. She is a fairly new face around here. I heard that she had a few rough years lately, which is too bad: she really is a talented singer and guitarist."

Looking closely at the young black woman singing on the stage, accompanied by three black Jazz musicians, she noticed that the said Germaine Lapierre looked quite skinny, as if she had been on a near-starvation diet. Hoping that her skinny look didn't mean that Germaine was either sick or a drug-addict, Ingrid listened to her singing and nodded her head in approval when her song was finished.

"She is indeed very good, Joshua. With proper professional and managerial support, she could go quite high in the music industry."

"Well, all the musicians and singers who have been performing in this club in the past and present are talented people, miss. Unfortunately for them, music can be a cutthroat business and few of them become rich and famous."

"What about those three Jazz musicians accompanying her? Are they regular performers here?"

"Tom, Richard and Francis do perform often here, but they are not the only ones hired on a part-time basis by this club. Why do you ask? You nearly sound like a music impresario searching for new talent."

"Maybe I am!" replied Ingrid, giving Joshua a warm smile. "If you will excuse me for a moment, I will go intercept Germaine before she disappears from sight."

Getting up from her chair and walking quickly to the small stage, she lightly touched the singer's forearm to attract her attention as she was about to leave the stage via a back door.

"Excuse me, Miss Lapierre. Could we talk for a minute or so at my table?"
The young singer eyed her with some surprise mixed with a bit of suspicion.

"What for, miss? I have to return to my baby son, who is being watched by a babysitter right now."

"I promise you that it won't be long and that you will be interested by what I have to say, Miss Lapierre."

"Alright, but I really can't stay too long."

The singer then followed Ingrid to her table, where she was offered the last empty chair, facing Ingrid. While Germaine sat down, Ingrid discreetly looked at her arms for possible multiple needle pricks that would indicate chronic drug use. Fortunately, there were none to be seen. Taking out again her military identity card, she slipped it on the table to Germaine, so that she could look at it, while speaking in a low voice.

“Let me present myself properly to you, Germaine. I am General Ingrid Dows, Commander of the United States Space Corps, and I am 54 years old. My youthful appearance is due to a past miracle I benefitted from.”

While Germaine looked with shock at her card, then at her, Joshua Purdue opened his mouth wide from the surprise.

“You are ‘God’s General’? Holy...!”

“Yes, I am, Joshua.” replied Ingrid before returning her attention to the singer.

“Germaine, I am looking for a number of musicians and singers who could help entertain the crews of my spaceships. I find your voice to be really nice and you also proved quite good with a guitar. I am thus interested in hiring you as an entertainer.”

“Me, singing for your astronauts? Would it be on a temporary basis, for a couple of gigs, General?”

“It would be for a good five years or more at first, Germaine. Furthermore, I am offering you a basic yearly salary of 21,000 dollars, plus meals, lodging and full medical coverage, and this for both you and your baby. Since you use a babysitter this late in the day, may I infer that you are not married?”

Germaine lowered her head in embarrassment at that last question.

“I am not! In fact, I am a single mother. The man who fathered my son disappeared the moment I told him that I was pregnant. I have since taken care of my son by myself, which was hard at times: club managers don’t like to hire young single mothers and I had to live on a meager income in the last few months.”

“Well, if you accept my offer, those hard times will be over for you, Germaine. I however have to tell you that, if you take the job, you will be traveling in space for five years, non-stop: you will be traveling aboard the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS, which is presently being built, while on a five-year mission to the Jupiter and Saturn Systems. Before you would refuse because you think that you would be traveling aboard a cramped sardine can, let me reassure you about that. The PROMETHEUS will be a huge ship, with very comfortable and comprehensive living facilities for its crew and passengers.”

"Passengers? You want to have passengers present on a five-year space mission?"

"Yes, Germaine! Those passengers will actually be the spouses and children of our astronauts, plus a large number of foreign scientists who were invited to participate in the mission. Your little Thomas will not be the only child present aboard the ship, Germaine."

"And you would provide me with lodging and food, on top of that salary of 21,000 dollars a year? Will you deduce the cost of that lodging and food from my salary?"

"No! You will be fed and lodged for free, plus you will be allowed to collect tips on top of your salary. Right now, I am expecting to have over 500 people of all ages, including at least 400 adults, aboard the PROMETHEUS during this future mission. There will be comprehensive medical and educational facilities aboard for children and babies."

By now, tears of joy were coming out of Germaine's eyes.

"Then, I accept your offer. You will however have to make a deal first with the owner of this club, who hired me on a part-time basis for a year."

"Don't worry about that, Germaine: I will talk to him. What about the three Jazz musicians who were accompanying you on the stage? Do you think that they would also be interested in my offer?"

"Most probably, General. While Duke Winston, the owner of this club, is not a bad man, the music business is very competitive in New Orleans and he can't really afford to give out high salaries to his performers. The mother of Francis Marshal, one of the three Jazz musicians, is in fact the babysitter I use for my son Thomas."

"Then, I will definitely have to speak with those three guys. Can anyone of them play the piano?"

"Oh, certainly! Thomas, the older one, is an excellent piano player, on top of being very good with clarinets, saxophones and trumpets."

It was the turn for Ingrid to smile, quite pleased by Germaine's answer.

"Excellent! I believe that you will all be fine additions to the crew of the PROMETHEUS, along with your families."

10:13 (California Time)

Tuesday, May 6, 1980 'C'

United States Space Corps' Spaceship Assembly Hall

North Base, Muroc Air Force Base

California

The American First Lady couldn't help open her eyes and mouth wide when she had her first glimpse at the gigantic spaceship filling the vast assembly hall she had just entered with her husband.

"My God! I have never seen anything this big! It is even bigger than an aircraft carrier."

Ingrid, who was escorting President Ronald Reagan and his wife on this visit to the newly completed U.S.S. PROMETHEUS, smiled at her wonderment, which was most understandable. On his part, Ronald Reagan looked questioningly at Ingrid after eyeing the spaceship from end to end.

"Was it really necessary to build this large a spaceship, General Dows?"

"Yes, Mister President, and for three main reasons. First, we needed to incorporate into its design a set of contra-rotating habitat carrousel, so that a large-enough crew for the mission to Jupiter could travel for up to five years in space without having to suffer through the effects of prolonged zero gravity on the human body, effects that would be quite debilitating and even dangerous after such a long trip. Such habitat carrousel need to be of a certain minimum radius in order to provide a sufficient level of artificial gravity, and this without using rotation speeds that would be too high and would make people sick as they move around the ship. Second, this spaceship will mostly use cryogenic liquid hydrogen as fuel during its trip to Jupiter, and lots of it. Because of the very low density of liquid hydrogen, which is over twelve times less dense than water, that amount of fuel takes up a huge internal volume. In fact, as big as this ship is, Mister President, it is at this time mostly an empty flying fuel tank, with an empty mass much less than what its sheer size would suggest. Finally, the nearly 2,000 feet length of this ship was dictated by basic aerodynamic laws. Since this ship is designed to take off like a normal aircraft and is going to fly at supersonic speed through the Earth's atmosphere during its climb to orbit, it needed to have both enough aerodynamic lift to make it fly and be of the appropriate shape in order to minimize aerodynamic drag at supersonic and hypersonic speeds. Thus, I went for our now standard design solution of shaping the

ship like a big supersonic flying wing body, which is the best solution to both minimize drag and optimize lift. The huge length of the ship is the result of applying a satisfactory average thickness-to-chord ratio of 5.5 percent to the profile of our flying wing body while keeping it thick enough to house our habitat carrousel, whose pressurized housings have a height of 95 feet. I am sorry to serve you such techno-babble, Mister President, but there is no simpler way to accurately explain the size of our spaceship design.”

“That’s alright, General: your explanation was actually to the point and easy to understand. So, how big a crew will travel in this to Jupiter?”

“We are still refining that number, Mister President, but this ship was built with a total of a bit over 400 cabins, all of which could accommodate at least one or two persons each.”

“One or two persons?” said Reagan, frowning in surprise.

“Yes, Mister President. You remember our conversation over three years ago in the Oval Office? I then talked about the need to consider the social requirements of a crew confined to space for up to five years. One of those prime requirements was the need for a person for companionship. Just imagine what would be the effects on your psyche if you had to separate yourself from your wife for five years, Mister President.”

On hearing that, Nancy Reagan glued herself to her husband’s side, while Ronald Reagan passed a protective arm around her, with his expression becoming much sober.

“It would probably kill me, General. I fully understand and share your concerns about this point.”

Ingrid nodded once at that, relieved to see that the President understood her point of view.

“Thank you, Mister President. In truth, I could not in all conscience send off to Jupiter a crew of over 400 persons while knowingly condemning them to debilitating loneliness and depression. Those crewmembers are human beings after all, not machines, something too many generals, politicians and aerospace designers tend to forget or ignore. What we are doing right now is selecting spouses who are in good health, fit and willing to accompany their partners on the Jupiter mission while being able to fill a useful, non-technical job aboard our spaceship. I am talking about jobs like cook, janitor, store clerk, stewardess or administrative secretary.”

“Janitor?” asked Nancy Reagan, obviously surprised. Ingrid nodded once and explained in a calm voice.

“Yes, madam! While most of the volume of this ship consists in fuel tankage, the volume inside our habitat carrousel is still substantial and it will be essential for basic sanitary reasons to keep the inside of those carrousel clean. Now, a science-fiction writer would imagine an army of robots to act as janitors, a solution I would gladly adopt if I could. Unfortunately, our level of robotics technology is still far behind such a dreamy concept, so we will need persons to do this cleaning. I certainly don’t want to force a highly-trained astronaut or a PhD in astrophysics to spend some of his time mopping floors, as they will have more important things to do during their mission, so I decided to use dedicated janitors for the job. In that case, if those jobs could be filled by spouses of our crewmembers, then why not combine those two requirements of cleaning the ship and providing companionship to our crewmembers?”

Ingrid’s explanation made Nancy Reagan smile in both amusement and comprehension.

“Your logic is impeccable, General. Still, I could imagine the add in the employment sections of our national newspapers: space janitors needed!”

That made the President laugh briefly before he smiled to Ingrid.

“General, I approve of your idea. What about foreign passengers? How many Soviet scientists will be on that Jupiter mission?”

“Frankly, I still don’t know for sure, Mister President. The Soviets are being quite slow in responding to my request for a list of appropriate and qualified candidates. I suspect that competition in the Soviet Union for the available positions on the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS is quite fierce, like in the other countries which have been invited to submit a list of candidates. However, I will take only candidates with the right scientific and sociological profile, irrespective of their political clout at home. I am not going to accommodate some Communist Party hack or other politically-connected toady just to please some foreign government.”

“Well said, General! Now, were you planning to give us a tour of this impressive beast?”

“Of course, Mister President!” replied Ingrid, grinning. “If you will follow me.”

Getting out of the electric golf cart which had carried her and the presidential couple next to the foot of a long ramp jutting down from the spaceship, Ingrid led Ronald and Nancy Reagan, surrounded by their usual protective team of Secret Service agents, up the ramp and into what looked like a sort of garage. That garage was however empty, except for a team of five technicians busy putting finishing touches to the interior.

"This garage will house a number of planetary surface exploration vehicles and rovers, Mister President. One of the main requirements of this ship's design was the ability to land on minor planets and moons and directly deliver to the surface both vehicles and equipment. Landing on icy moons will also give our ship the capability to refill its propellant tanks by melting and pumping in some of the surface water ice to produce drinkable water, oxygen and hydrogen. That capability will in turn allow our spaceship to have nearly unlimited range within the Jupiter and Saturn systems."

"What about food, General?" asked Nancy Reagan. "I hope that our astronauts will not have to survive for five years on pasted food in tubes."

"Far from it, Madam Reagan." Replied Ingrid, amused. "Some of the Soviet astronauts who went on our Mars expedition had a hard time leaving our ship because they loved the food served aboard. In fact, the quality and level of the food served on our spaceships and on our orbital space station are as high as in many popular restaurants in Washington, Los Angeles and New York. The fact that our spaceships have habitat carrousel facilitates a lot the feeding of our astronauts, as cooking and eating aboard is done in normal Earth gravity conditions. However, in smaller spacecraft without carrousel, the choice of menus is a lot more limited."

"So, I gather that Soviet space food must be quite bad, General?" asked the President, a smirk on his face, making Ingrid nod at once.

"The Soviet astronauts who travelled to Mars with me actually confided to me in private that the rations served on their MIR space station were simply awful, Mister President."

"Aaah, another domain where we crush the Soviets: I like that!"

"Well, let's go to one of the two carrousel built aboard this ship, Mister President. While the internal finishing work is still going on, the visit will give you a good idea of the volume which will be available for our crew to live in. This way, please."

The tour, concentrated mostly on visiting one of the two carousel habitats, took nearly two hours, at the end of which the presidential couple was tired but impressed.

"General, your ship impressed the hell out of me, truly. It will bring great national pride when it will rise into the air to reach space. You spent your space budget well, despite what some congressmen would pretend."

"Thank you, Mister President! Before we go have lunch at the officers' mess, I would have a favor to ask you."

"Oh? What is it, General?"

"That you would permit me to fly out on our future mission to Jupiter, Mister President. I have already been serving my country for 39 years and our mission to Jupiter and Saturn will be for me a truly crowning achievement. If our mission takes off in the planned time period and goes on for five years before our ship returns to Earth orbit, I will then have been serving in uniform for 45 years. On my return I would like to retire with that ultimate goal achieved, so that I could consecrate myself to more personal goals and see more often my adopted daughter. There are already quite a few highly talented and competent officers whom I helped form and who would make excellent successors to me as Commandant of the Space Corps."

Ronald Reagan was silent for a moment while eyeing Ingrid, then gently patted her shoulder.

"General, nobody else deserves more than you to participate in our mission to Jupiter. The nation owes you an immense debt of gratitude for your decades of illustrious service, both in war and in peace. I say: go and live your ultimate adventure."

"Thank you, Mister President! Thank you very much!" replied Ingrid, her voice nearly choking up with emotion.

08:06 (California Time)

Wednesday, June 18, 1980 'C'

Top observation gallery, Spaceship Assembly Hall

United States Space Corps Sector, North Base

Muroc Air Force Base, California

"And here we are for the inaugural flight of the third interplanetary spaceship built by the United States, ladies and gentlemen. We are now looking at the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS as it aligns itself at the start of the longest and widest runway of the Muroc Dry Lake. In a few minutes, it will take off by itself and climb to a low Earth polar orbit. It will then rendezvous with our Aurora Space Station, where its propellant tanks will be filled up before its departure for Jupiter and where its full crew will come aboard the spaceship. The U.S.S. PROMETHEUS represents the height of today's American space technology and has some truly impressive statistics to boast about: it has an overall length of 2,046 feet, a span of 858 feet and an overall height of 363 feet. It will depart for Jupiter with a crew of over 400 men and women and its mission is planned to

take nearly five years, with its outgoing trip to Jupiter taking sixteen months. Contrary to its two predecessors, the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION and the U.S.S. LIBERTY, the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS will be able to land and then take off from the various moons of the Jupiter and Saturn Systems, where it will be able to refuel itself by using the water ice to be found at the surface of those moons and separating it by catalysis into oxygen and hydrogen. If I mentioned Saturn, it is because we were recently told by General Ingrid Dows, the Commandant of the Space Corps, that the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS will also explore the Saturn System on this trip, after the Jupiter System will have been explored. General Dows, who is at the commands of the PROMETHEUS for its first flight, will also be the mission commander for this long but epic trip... I am now told that the PROMETHEUS is about to start its engines. I will thus temporarily switch our sound channel to the Muroc launch controller while our cameras continue filming the spaceship.”

Walter Cronkite then stopped talking and checked that his CBS cameramen were filming the PROMETHEUS while he also listened to the radio exchange between the Muroc launch controller and General Dows.

“Muroc to PROMETHEUS, the surrounding airspace has been certified empty and safe for your departure.”

“Acknowledged, Muroc. Am starting my rocket engines at idle now.”

Even through the thick, solid plexiglass windows of the observation gallery, situated at the top of the gigantic ‘A’-frame building housing the Spaceship Assembly Hall, the lighting up at idle power of the 36 main chemical rocket engines of the PROMETHEUS was enough to create a loud roar, while the whole building started vibrating.

“Muroc, all my engines are at idle power and looking good. I am now applying full power for takeoff.”

The loud roar then turned into a deafening sound blast as big blue flames came out of the rear of the two huge engines pods of the spaceship, each of the pods being mounted on short, stubby wings jutting out of its left and right sides. The rocket blasts also kicked up a huge cloud of dust and particles behind the spaceship, with the cloud rolling all the way to the highway passing by the base to the North. However, that cloud and rocket wash was then deflected upwards by a big blast deflector ramp, preventing damage to the highway, where the few passing vehicles had been temporarily stopped well short of the deflector ramp area by MPs and state police troopers. The PROMETHEUS, whose shape was basically that of a section of supersonic wing profile, immediately started

accelerating forward, filmed by the CBS, ABC and NBC camera crews who had been invited by Ingrid to report on the launch. The sheer size of the spaceship made its acceleration look sluggish to the spectators watching it but, in reality, it was accelerating at a rate a fighter pilot would envy. Even Walter Cronkite, who had been briefed in advance about the launch, was stunned when the PROMETHEUS started to lift from the surface of the dry lake after a ground run representing only three times its own length, then climbed up gingerly, showing a nimbleness that was hard to believe, this all thanks to the fact that the spaceship was essentially a mostly empty flying wing with powerful engines.

“The PROMETHEUS just took off after an unbelievably short ground run, ladies and gentlemen, and is climbing up in the California sky in a thunderous roar which is making this whole base vibrate. Seeing this huge spaceship fly away is a truly awe-inspiring vision! It is now starting a wide turn to the right, in order to avoid passing directly over the Los Angeles area and to cross the Pacific coastline before going supersonic.”

Aboard the PROMETHEUS, in the cockpit section situated under the nose of the spaceship, Ingrid was feeling like a million dollars as she steered it into a slow and smooth turn towards the West while gaining both altitude and speed. She was barely under the speed of sound and was already at an altitude of 3,000 meters when she skirted the northern limits of the Los Angeles area while pointing due West. Hundreds of thousands of residents rushed to their windows or balconies to watch in awe the flying behemoth speed across the sky, the roar of its engines making everything vibrate. Ingrid’s copilot, Navy Commander Robert Crippen, who was already smiling with contentment, broke into a grin when he spotted a large ship sailing past Los Angeles.

“Hey, it’s the U.S.S. INDEPENDENCE, my old carrier! The guys will be thrilled to see us overfly their ship.”

“Or they will choke to death from envy.” replied Ingrid with a mischievous grin.

On the aircraft carrier U.S.S. INDEPENDENCE, all deck activities came to a sudden halt as everybody on the open flight deck and inside the ship’s navigation bridge and aviation bridge cranked their necks up to look at the gigantic spaceship as it overflew the carrier, dwarfing it by a wide margin. One naval aviator who had been

walking to his parked aircraft spoke out loud while following with his eyes the speeding PROMETHEUS.

“How the hell could something this big even fly?”

CHAPTER 21 – ON THE WAY TO JUPITER



09:59 (Universal Time)

Thursday, August 7, 1980 'C'

Command bridge of the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS

Low Earth orbit near the AURORA space station

"Warning! One minute to engines ignition. All crewmembers and passengers must be in their seats, with safety belts buckled... Thirty seconds to engines ignition. This is the last warning... Ten seconds to engines ignition... Five, four, three, two, one, chemical rocket engines ignition, full power!"

The pilot of the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS, Lieutenant Commander Robert Gibson, then pressed a large red button on his control panel. A powerful roar transmitted through the

structure of the ship then filled the command bridge section, while vibrations made everything and everybody shake.

"We are rising from orbit!" announced after a few seconds the ship's navigator and head mathematician, Katherine Johnson, seated to the left of Gibson. "We are on the calculated heading!"

"Jupiter, here we come!" said to herself Ingrid, who was seated in her command chair, situated just behind the front row of control stations inside the command bridge section. That section of the ship, which was normally in zero-gravity condition, now experienced an acceleration of 0.6 G as the chemical rocket engines of the heavily loaded and fully fueled up U.S.S. PROMETHEUS pushed it out of orbit and accelerated it on a path to Jupiter. The chemical rocket engines, burning a mix of liquid hydrogen and liquid oxygen, roared for about four minutes before being cut off by the ship's navigation computer's program, to be then replaced by the weaker rumble from the nuclear rocket engines, which heated up liquid hydrogen by pumping it through a nuclear reactor core. While the felt acceleration decreased sharply, the burn went on for much longer than for the chemical rocket engines.

Buckled in her cabin's easy chair, which doubled as an acceleration seat, Germaine Lapierre held with both arms her nineteen-months-old son Thomas, who was also held by her seat belt and harness. The last ten months had been for her like a fairy tale as she prepared for this space trip at Vandenberg, learning how to use a spacesuit and behave in space and also getting familiarized with the various ground mockups of spaceship sections used to train the crew and passengers of the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS. She had also practiced daily with the other musicians and entertainers hired by Ingrid Dows for this mission, including her three New Orleans comrades from the CREOLE JAZZ NIGHT CLUB, while earning a much bigger salary than ever before in her young career as a single mother musician. The social services and family support facilities she had found in Vandenberg, along with a refreshing lack of racial discrimination, had also done a lot to make her happier than she had been for years. With those same kinds of social services and family support facilities also to be found aboard the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS, Germaine was quite certain that she had taken the right decision when she had accepted Ingrid Dow's job offer. The only thing she may miss in the coming months and years was the possibility to go shop around for things like new clothes, books, decorative objects and musical instruments. On the other hand, how many New

Orleans residents would be able to brag about looking from up close at the mighty planet Jupiter?

13:01 (Moscow Time) / 10:01 (Universal Time)

Kremlin, Moscow

Soviet Union

The balding, fifty-year-old man sitting behind a big work desk watched the televised departure from orbit of the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS with a mix of awe and bitterness. Awe for the gigantic size of the American spaceship and the technological feat its construction and launch represented, bitterness for the realization that the Soviet Union would be incapable of replicating such a feat without bankrupting itself. Despite all that the Soviet propaganda machine would claim, the hard truth was that the U.S.S.R. was now hopelessly outdone in most domains by the United States, except maybe the military domain. Its economy was stagnant, its government machinery inefficient and riddled with corruption and its population's average standard of living clearly inferior to that of the United States, especially if you excluded the tiny portion represented by Communist Party high echelon members, which benefitted nearly exclusively from the present system. Only in the domains of general education, universal health care services and pure sciences could the Soviet Union pretend to be equal or superior to the United States.

At the end of the televised report, made by an American television crew filming from aboard the space station AURORA, Mikhail Gorbachev switched off the television set that had been set up in his office by an aide and sat back in his chair, deep in thoughts. The decades after the end of The Great Patriotic War, also known in the West as World War 2, had not been very kind to the Soviet Union, if you excepted the benediction constituted by the early passing of Stalin and the demise of the KGB as an all-powerful organ of repression. First, the threat by the British to use atomic weapons in 1945 if the Soviet Union invaded Eastern Europe had boxed in the Soviet Union inside its own territory and had blocked its attempts at creating a protective buffer zone along its western borders. Joint efforts with Communist China to turn Indochina into a communist state in the late 1940s and early 1950s had failed, thanks to an American intervention masterfully led by a young female general, intervention which had also cost

dearly in terms of Soviet modern combat aircraft. The disastrous attempt by Stalin to invade Poland and the Baltic States in 1953 had ended in a humiliating defeat and the death of Stalin himself, on top of eviscerating the Red Army and Red Air Force, again thanks mostly to the same young American female general. Then, the United States had started its vertiginous ascent to space, reaching orbit before the USSR and then building up an insurmountable technological and space capability lead. The only true success achieved by the Soviet Union and its ally, China, the invasion and taking of South Korea, followed by the unification of all Korea into a single, communist state, had been undone recently by the foolish use of atomic weapons by both China and Korea, which had attracted in return a measured but decisive American response. Now, an American spaceship of titanic proportions had just left for a five-year mission towards Jupiter and Saturn, led by the same female general who had caused so much grief to Soviet strategic plans in the past. However, Gorbachev found himself incapable of hating or even simply resenting that female general: while a formidable adversary in war, Ingrid Dows had proved as well to be a most tolerant, humane and liberal-minded person, on top of also showing herself to be a true technical genius in the aerospace domain. Today, in Gorbachev's opinion, the Soviet Union's best course of action was through détente and peaceful cooperation with the United States, not through continued military confrontation and ruinous military expenditures. The main problem for him now was going to be to try to convince his colleagues in the Politburo²² to abandon for good any ideas of future Soviet worldwide dominance.

11:48 (Universal Time)

Command bridge of the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS

On its way to Jupiter

“Transition Point Bravo now attained, General.”

“Thank you, Katherine! Colonel Barry, shut down our nuclear rocket engines and switch our nuclear cores to power production mode. Major Onizuka, be ready to light up our V.A.S.I.M.R. plasma engines.”

“Plasma engines on stand-by!” replied the ship's flight engineer, followed a few seconds later by the nuclear engineering officer, John Barry, an ex-submariner who had

²² Politburo: USSR's main political decision organ before its breakup.

participated with Ingrid in the first manned Mars expedition aboard the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION.

“Nuclear cores switched to power-production mode! Power levels ramping up... Power levels now stable at ninety percent capacity. You now have juice for your plasma engines, Major Onizuka.”

“Thank you! Powering up our plasma engines! All V.A.S.I.M.R. engines now functioning at cruising power level.”

Ingrid couldn't help try to feel the new acceleration imparted to her ship by the plasma engines, even though she knew not to expect to feel any. The V.A.S.I.M.R. engines of the PROMETHEUS were of the magneto-hydrodynamic type and had an efficiency ten times better than the nuclear rocket engines of the ship, but they also produced only minuscule amounts of thrust. However, that minuscule thrust could be sustained for months, eventually adding a very significant acceleration factor over a long trip like this one, cutting to sixteen months a trip that would otherwise have taken over three years.

“Gee! We won't be winning any drag race with our plasma engines, guys.”
There were chuckles and giggles around the command bridge, with Katherine Johnson replying to Ingrid's remark.

“Yes, but we are presently running a marathon, General.”

“True! Well, now that we are on our merry way towards Jupiter, I believe that we can go to space cruise routine.”

Ingrid then switched her microphone to ship-wide mode and spoke calmly in it.

“Attention to all! This is your commander speaking. We are now in cruising mode and on our way to Jupiter. You can now leave your acceleration seats, remove your spacesuits and switch to space routine activities.”

With that done, she looked around at her bridge crew.

“Alright, start removing and storing away your spacesuits: I will stay at the helm and monitor things while you do that. Then, we will go have lunch once the afternoon shift shows up.”

12:06 (Universal Time)

Ship's central kitchen

Main Deck, Quadrant 01, Carrousel 'A'

“Joan, start heating up a tub of chicken and noodle soup. Once it will be ready, you will go fill the self-serve pot in the food court.”

“On it, Nick!” replied Joan Brewster, the wife of a young Space Corps technician who was part of the crew of the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS. She was one of the 132 military spouses who were accompanying their life partners on this mission and who had taken one of the support positions offered by Ingrid Dows. In her case, she was one of the ten wives who were now employed as assistant cooks in either the central kitchen or in the fast food court, situated in the other habitat carousel of the ship. Since she had worked previously in a restaurant as both a maid and as an assistant cook before getting married a mere two years ago, she had quickly found her pace during the pre-mission training. It also helped that the chief cook of the ship, Senior Master Sergeant Nicholas Buscemi, had proved to be very competent and also polite and friendly with his kitchen hands, in sharp contrast to some other NCOs Joan had met in the past.

Walking out of the kitchen and crossing the central hallway going through the quadrant's main deck and linking together the sixteen sections, or quadrants, of Carousel 'A', Joan entered the large compartment which served as the ready pantry for the central kitchen. There, she grabbed the handle of one of the shopping carts stored in a corner of the pantry and pushed it down one of the alleys of the pantry, passing by twin rows of storage tablets full of either canned or bagged foodstuff items, all of them secured on their storage tablets by elastic nets. Stopping in front of the tablets supporting big tins of soup of the kind used in restaurants and dinners in the United States, she lifted with some effort a one gallon can of chicken and noodle soup and put it in her cart, then lifted in succession two more similar cans, also putting them in her cart. Once that was done, she turned her cart around and left the pantry, returning to the central kitchen. There, she opened her big cans of soup and poured their content in a large pot already secured atop an electric stove, then started heating the soup. While she waited for the soup to heat up, she saw Cecilia Clark, another military wife, enter the kitchen at a near run, to then present herself with a contrite expression to the chief cook.

“Sorry for being a bit late, Nick, but I had to drop my little Cheryl first at the ship's daycare center.”

“That's quite alright, Cecilia.” replied Buscemi in a jovial tone. “We all had to scramble to come here after the General gave the go to leave our acceleration seats.

Just make sure to wash your hands thoroughly before jumping into the preparations for lunch. I expect a wave of hungry customers to hit us soon.”

Buscemi was proven right quickly, with the start of a growing crowd of patrons arriving after another fifteen minutes. With a total of 521 persons of all ages to feed on the ship, the kitchen crew found itself quite busy, warming up and serving large quantities of pre-cooked recipes of meat, vegetables or pastas, along with a mountain of fresh salad. To ensure a long shelf life for the foodstuff brought on this five-year space mission, most of those pre-cooked recipes came in freeze-dried airtight packages and were thawed only hours before being served. Today, due to their departure time, a quantity of those freeze-dried packages had been taken out of the ready freezer of the central kitchen in advance, so that they could start thawing while the ship departed Earth orbit and accelerated to cruising speed. All this had been made in normal gravity conditions, thanks to the twin contra-rotating habitat carrousel of the ship, which contained all the living and working facilities used by the crew and passengers. Joan, like all the other occupants of the ship, had been able to experience zero-gravity-like conditions during her training, either aboard an aircraft flying in ellipses and justifiably nickname ‘The Vomit Comet’, or aboard the AURORA Space Station, and could easily imagine the nightmare that cooking for over 500 persons would represent if done in zero gravity. She thus thanked mentally Ingrid Dows as she went on with her tasks in the kitchen, for having insisted on incorporating habitat carrousel in the PROMETHEUS’ design.

17:52 (Universal Time)

Ship’s central kitchen

“Well, ladies, now that the people of the evening shift has shown up, you are free to return to your spouses and families. Thank you again for your good work.”

“You’re welcome, Nick!” replied Joan, imitated by the other wives employed as assistant cooks, who then left the kitchen as a group, mixing up in the central hallway with the first crewmembers and guest scientists to show up for supper. On her part, Joan went to the next section of the carrousel, Quadrant 02, and used one of the two staircases there to go down to the median deck, one level down, where the cabin she shared with her husband Jack was situated. Once on the median deck, Joan walked

across the nineteen-meter-long and five-meter-wide lobby/lounge of the deck to get to her cabin, saying hello in passing to a couple sitting in one of the sofas furnishing the lobby. Entering her cabin, which measured six meters by five meters and was split in three main rooms, the lounge, the bedroom and the bathroom, she checked first to see if her husband had returned yet from his own shift as a life support systems maintenance technician. Not finding Jack, Joan then decided to take a shower and change while waiting for him. Entering the bedroom, with its queen-size bed, she undressed quickly and went into the small adjacent bathroom, where she stepped inside the shower stall, closing its curtain before starting to make the water come out of the shower head. That system was actually a copy of the 'miserly shower' type found on U.S. Navy ships, where you have to repeatedly press a button to keep the water flowing. She had soaked her body and had rubbed soap on it when she heard someone enter the cabin as she was rinsing away the soap. Next, she heard a familiar male voice.

"Joan, are you in?"

"YES, JACK! I'M IN THE SHOWER."

Her husband walked at once into the bedroom and then into the small bathroom, where he pulled the shower's curtain slightly open to smile at her.

"Do you mind if I join you in the shower?"

"Of course not, Jack! I will help soap and scrub you."

Smiling with anticipation, Jack, a tall and fit young man with red hair, quickly undressed on the spot, then stepped inside the shower stall, squeezing Joan's naked body between his body and the wall. Joan immediately felt his reaction to her nudity and gave him a devilish look.

"Hmm, hungry for something apart from supper?"

"Damn right I am, Joan! Let me remove the sweat and grime covering me first, then we will jump into some fun interaction."

Interaction...that's your latest way to describe sex?"

"Why not? It does imply some interaction, after all."

"You're right. Soak yourself first, then I will help you soap up."

As Jack started turning around in the shower stall in order to wet his whole body, Joan started to rub his body, continuing to do so as he applied soap on himself. Scrubbing his back and bum first, Joan then concentrated on his front, with her hands staying a good minute over his groin area. Seeing him react with pleasure to her attention, Joan kept her hands active until he attained orgasm with a grunt of pleasure. Jack then returned

her favor by kneeling in front of her and using his two hands and his tongue on her. Joan also attained orgasm after a couple minutes of that treatment, with the couple then kissing tenderly before rinsing their bodies one last time. Jack stepped out of the shower stall first and, grabbing a towel, dried up Joan's body with gusto, arousing her again. By the time she was finished drying him in return, Jack was again fully aroused as well, prompting his wife to gently push him towards their bed.

"I believe that we have unfinished business here, Jack. Why don't you lay down a bit?"

"Uh, shouldn't I go put on a condom first?"

That stopped Joan, who thought for a moment before answering him with a question of her own.

"Jack, we agreed before marrying that we wanted to have at least one child, preferably two. Do we want to wait another five years before trying for the first? They have everything here aboard this ship to care for infants and young kids."

Jack only had to think for a second before he smiled down to his wife.

"You're right, my love. Let's try for the first one right now!"

On hearing that, Joan pushed Jack, making him fall on his back atop the bed. She went on her four and crawled over him, then impaled herself on him before presenting her hanging breasts to his waiting hands.

"Show me how good you are, tiger!"

Forty minutes later the couple, having showered again and changed into informal civilian clothes, left their cabin in order to go have supper.

"So, where should we go eat, Joan? At the main cafeteria or at the fast food court?"

"I saw the supper's menu before leaving the central kitchen: there is Chicken à la King on it, one of your favorite dishes."

"Sold!" replied at once Jack, who then took Joan's hand and started walking with her towards the staircase leading up.

The Chicken à la King, one of the recipes in the long and varied list of pre-cooked dishes stored aboard in large freeze-dried airtight packages, met with Jack's approval, who devoured his food while Joan ate a portion of Veal Marsala. Both of them left the cafeteria sated after dropping their dirty plates and utensils at the dishwashing

counter of the food court. Jack then looked down at his wife as they were walking out of the food court.

“So, what would you like to do next this evening, Joan?”

“How about we go to the lower observation lounge first, to go admire Earth as we speed away from it? We could then go visit the BOURBON STREET Jazz night club: they are giving their first show tonight.”

“Sounds good! I will lead you to the observation lounge.”

“Thanks! I am not sure that I can find my way alone in this ship: it is so huge!”

“Yes, it is, but it is so for a good reason: to make long space missions bearable by including as many crew facilities as possible in its design. Thankfully, General Dows understood how important the human factor is on such long missions. The same can't be said of the Navy, where sailors have to spend months at sea while living out of three or four-tiered bunk beds arrangements.”

Jack didn't say more then, although he could have said a lot more. As tempting as this mission to Jupiter had been, he would never have accepted or asked for a spot on its crew list if that would have meant leaving Joan behind for five years. On the other hand, he was very conscious that, would he have volunteered to leave alone for Jupiter, the chances were that Joan would probably have divorced or left him by the time he returned to Earth.

Following the circular central hallway at main deck level, the couple then took place in one of the four elevator cabins running up and down the port communications hub tube of Carrousel 'A', rising to the level of the rotating central hub of the carrousel. As they went up, they felt the gravity diminish quickly, ending in near-zero gravity condition by the time they stepped out of the elevator. Their magnetized boot soles then helped them stay on the deck as they switched to another elevator cabin which circulated along an axis at right angle to the one they had just used. That cabin finally dropped them at the level of one of the two lower observation lounges of the ship, which gave a direct view of space below the PROMETHEUS. When they arrived in the observation lounge proper, a doughnut-shaped hallway with armored plexiglass windows around its sides and deck, they found that many other occupants of the ship had the same idea than they had. Using the handrails running along both sides of the hallway, Jack and Joan walked to an unoccupied spot in front of one of the observation windows,

where they could see the Earth, still visible as a big blue and white ball in the black background of Space. Joan snuggled against Jack's side while she admired Earth.

"What a fantastic, beautiful sight! I guess that few other Humans were able to contemplate that kind of sight before."

"You're right, Joan. Only the crews who went to either Mars or the Moon were able to look at Earth the way we are doing now. With luck, our first child will also be able to admire this sight in five years' time."

"I wish so too!" replied Joan while snuggling even closer to her husband.

14:17 (Universal Time)

Saturday, October 25, 1980 'C'

Ship Commander's office, Main Deck, Quadrant 09

Carrousel 'A', U.S.S. PROMETHEUS

When Ingrid answered her telephone, it was to hear the voice of the ship's chief medical officer, Colonel Jennifer Biddle.

"General, this is Colonel Biddle."

"Hello, Doc! Are you calling to announce to me bad news or good news?"

"It is definitely good news for you, General, although it would be considered as a bad news by most ship commanders in the U.S. Navy: we now have our third confirmed pregnancy aboard since our departure from Earth orbit."

Ingrid immediately broke into a wide grin on hearing that.

"But that's fantastic! Was it a wanted pregnancy?"

"Yes, it was, General. Both of the parents are ecstatic at the news. At this rate, we will have children running everywhere around the ship by the time we return into Earth orbit."

"And I would approve of it, Doc: Space is the future of Humanity...and the future of our children. Thank you for informing me of this."

"It was my pleasure, General." said Biddle before hanging up, leaving Ingrid thinking. She had never given birth herself and the urge to have a baby of her own had only become stronger in the last few years. Yes, she was single at this time and would be categorized as a single mother if she gave birth during this mission, something still regarded mostly negatively in the United States, but that wouldn't bother her one second. More important to her was the fact that a pregnancy would drastically reduce

for at least a few months her ability to properly command this ship, and this during a mission where all her crew would be counting on her to safely lead them along. As much as she would like to have a child soon, it was probably going to have to wait until she was back on Earth, in five years or so.

09:55 (Universal Time)

Friday, March 06, 1981 'C'

Office of the Chief Agronomist

Main Deck, Quadrant 15, Carrousel 'B'

U.S.S. PROMETHEUS, halfway to Jupiter

Julie Lecomte's job description as Chief Agronomist of the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS would have sounded like a relatively minor one for most people in the United States. However, such an opinion would have been a big mistake. A veteran of one year-long tour on the Moon and of two expeditions to Mars, the 49-year-old French scientist probably knew more about plant growth in Space than anybody else on Earth and knew everything about hydroponic techniques, where plants were grown indoor in stacked up basins full of liquid nutrient solutions. Those techniques in turn allowed a very efficient year-long production of fresh vegetables and fruits in the least floor surface possible, something that Ingrid Dows had embraced early on in the design of her spaceships. As the Chief Agronomist of the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS, Julie was in charge of the good functioning of a total hydroponic cultivation surface of 40,180 square meters, or the equivalent of 9.93 acres. That cultivation surface in turn made the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS and its 521 occupants self-sufficient in the production of eighteen types of vegetables, ten types of fruits and four types of herbs and spices. While helped by an assistant who specialized in farm animal care and exploitation, Julie was also in charge of an egg-producing hen farm, a chicken farm, a turkey farm, a rabbit farm, a dairy cow farm, a beef cattle farm and a pig farm, all of which made the ship self-sufficient in terms of fresh eggs and dairy products and also provided a partial supply of fresh meat. In turn, those hydroponic gardens and animal farms were run and maintained by 32 qualified hydroponic technicians and by over thirty experienced farm hands, most of which were military spouses who had been hired because of their past life experience on farms and plantations during their youth. All this helped provide to the crew a steady supply of fresh produces which supplemented nicely their reserves of canned or freeze-

dried foodstuff, which in turn helped support the crew's morale on this five-year space mission.

Julie was reviewing the latest agricultural production figures in her office, situated on the main deck of Quadrant 15, Carrousel 'B', when the sound of an approaching musical band made her get up from her chair and walk out of her office to have a look down the main hallway, imitated in that by most of the other people present on this level. She smiled in amusement on seeing an approaching marching Jazz band accompanied by a number of young women dancers wearing colorful costumes. Julie then remembered something.

"It's Mardi Gras day, of course! What a wonderful idea!"

The other persons who had come out of their offices to watch apparently agreed with her, applauding and cheering on the marching band and dancers as they went by on their way to complete a full tour of the main deck level of Carrousel 'B'. One young dancer in particular attracted a lot of attention and male lust: she was leading the band while dancing energetically and was wearing a colorful but also very sexy and revealing costume typical of the costumes worn by female Brazilian carnival dancers. Apart from a colorful set of feathered angel wings worn on her back, the dancer wore only a tiny string groin piece and a pair of small pastilles clamped to her nipples. An elaborate mask covered the upper half of her face, while glittering gold and silver particles had been glued all over her body. Ankle and wrist bracelets to which a collection of tiny bells was hooked produced some extra music as she danced and walked. When she passed by Julie, the agronomist was able to see that her buttocks were bare, save for a tiny string which helped hold her groin piece. Julie then recognized one of the black Jazz musicians in the band, who was playing a saxophone with gusto, as being Ronald McNair, one of the physicists and members of the Space Corps who were part of the crew. Julie applauded along with the other spectators as the band and dancers passed by her door. Once they were gone out of sight, Julie returned to her office while one of the agronomists on her staff, a bearded Israeli scientist in his late forties, commented gleefully the spectacle they had just witnessed.

"This marching band idea was great! That lead dancer was also most appetizing. I wonder who she was."

Julie only had to think for a second before smiling knowingly.

"I think that I know who it could be, but I won't tell you, Mordechai. Sorry!"

07:01 (Universal Time)

Sunday, May 31, 1981 'C'

Delivery room, maternity section of the ship's medical center

U.S.S. PROMETHEUS, six months away from Jupiter

"KEEP PUSHING, JOAN! THE BABY IS NEARLY OUT!"

"I'M DOING JUST THAT, DAMMIT!" replied Joan Brewster, exhausted and in pain. To her relief, the baby finally slid out completely and was grabbed at once by his feet by one nurse, who suspended him head down to slap his buttocks once, making him cry loudly, an action that cleared his trachea. Next, the nurse quickly wiped clean the baby before wrapping him in a cloth and putting him in the arms of his mother.

"Congratulation, Misses Brewster: it's a boy."

"He is beautiful!" said Joan, tears in her eyes as she looked at her first born. "we are going to call him 'Nathan', in honor of his grandfather."

Jack Brewster got to first see his son two minutes later, when the baby was rolled out of the delivery room, on its way to the neo-natal care room. Tears of joy came to him as he contemplated his son.

"Welcome to the World, little Nathan."

He then looked at the nurse pushing the cart on which the baby's receptacle was.

"When will I be able to hold my son, Nurse?"

"Just let us weigh and measure him and he will then be all yours, Mister Brewster. However, he will have to stay a couple of days at the maternity section, along with his mother, as a matter of post-birth routine."

"I understand. God, he is truly beautiful!"

The nurse smiled at that but didn't remark on it: all newborns were beautiful in the eyes of their parents. Well, nearly all, corrected mentally the nurse, who had seen some ugly scenes during her nurse's training in Chicago.

In the afternoon, Ingrid made sure to go visit the newborn and his parents at the maternity section, as she had done with the two babies who had preceded little Nathan on her ship. Her first reason was to present her personal congratulations to the proud

parents, while her second reason was much more basic: she simply loved babies and small children.

10:32 (Universal Time)

Tuesday, November 17, 1981 'C'

Command conference room, Main Deck, Quadrant 09, Carrousel 'A'

U.S.S. PROMETHEUS, two weeks away from Jupiter

Ingrid reviewed quickly the notes and recommendations which had been given to her by her team of astronomers and planetary scientists, then looked around the conference table at her ten senior officers and four senior scientists assembled for this meeting.

"So, everybody is still in agreement about us going first to Europa, followed by Ganymede and then Callisto?"

"Yes, we are, General." replied Karl Henize, the chief scientist of the ship and also its most senior astronomer. "There are actually very little differences in terms of scientific interest between those three moons, plus that order of exploration will simplify our orbital maneuvers around Jupiter by allowing us to directly jump up to the next moon's orbit. All three moons are covered with water ice and both Europa and Ganymede possess a very tenuous oxygen atmosphere, while Callisto has a tenuous carbon dioxide atmosphere. In the case of Ganymede, we were able to detect a weak magnetic field around it, a field that is connected to the much more powerful magnetic field of Jupiter."

"And what about Jupiter itself, Doctor Henize?"

Henize's face then reflected near-euphoria as he thought about the observations he and his team had been able to make with their telescopes from such a short distance.

"Jupiter is a fascinating beast, I must say, and we could spend months just to observe and study it with our telescopes. However, it has no solid surface to explore, just a constantly changing gaseous atmosphere of hydrogen and helium that progressively becomes denser with depth, until it turns into what is called metallic hydrogen, thanks to the titanic pressures found deep inside Jupiter. Also, if we go too close to Jupiter, we run the risk of becoming trapped by its gravitational pull, with our rocket engines having insufficient thrust to break us free."

"Hum, not exactly my preferred way to end this mission. And what kind of surface conditions can we expect on Europa?"

Henize then looked down at his notes in front of him on the table before answering Ingrid.

"Well, with a radius 1,560 kilometers, Europa is the fourth biggest moon of Jupiter and also the sixth biggest moon overall in the Solar System. Its calculated surface gravity is around 1.3 meters per second square, which corresponds to a felt gravity that is equal to thirteen percent of Earth's gravity, while its liberation speed, the orbital speed needed to escape its gravity well, is two kilometers per second, a fifth of that of Earth. We will thus be able to easily maneuver around it and also to land and take off from it without problems. The average temperature at the surface of Europa is around 125 degrees Kelvin, or a balmy minus 234 degrees Fahrenheit, while its atmosphere of oxygen is extremely tenuous. Overall, not exactly a nice place for a vacation."

"But there will be plenty of water ice at its surface to allow us to refill our propellant tanks once we will have landed on it, General." added Rear Admiral John Young, Ingrid's deputy mission commander. "While we refill our tanks, our surface exploration teams will have plenty of time to study the surface of the moon, drill ice samples and scan the interior of the moon with our sonars and seismic radars."

"We will also be able to make some very detailed observations of Jupiter and of the other nearby moons while we will be landed on the surface of Europa." said in turn Jeffrey Hoffman, the ship's chief astrophysicist. Now fully convinced, Ingrid nodded her head once while smiling.

"Then it will be Europa first, ladies and gentlemen. Katherine, refine your calculations for a path to Europa's orbit and coordinate your results with Lieutenant Commander Gibson. In the meantime, I want our astronomical and planetary sciences teams to learn as much as they can about Jupiter and its moons while we approach Europa. The pictures and data thus collected will then be transmitted to Earth for further analysis and also to throw a pound of flesh to the pack of astronomers who have been hounding us about our observations of the Jupiter System. Well, with this said, I now declare this meeting over."

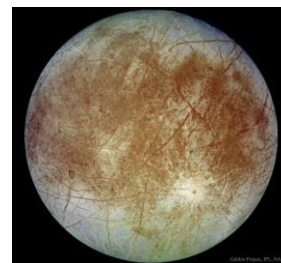
There were laughs at her last remark before the participants got up from their chairs and filed out of the conference room. They then dispersed, returning to their respective offices, laboratories or observatories.

16:01 (Universal Time)

Thursday, December 10, 1981 'C'

Command bridge of the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS

In low equatorial orbit around Europa



Ingrid was pensive in her command chair as she mulled the latest piece of news about Europa that they had just discovered...and it was not good news. Essentially, being so close to the giant, powerful magnetosphere of Jupiter, which trapped charged particles, the surface of Europa was constantly bathed by strong radiations. If left exposed on the surface to those radiations, an astronaut would absorb about 540 rems in a single day, close to a semi-lethal dose and 1,000 times more than the maximum recommended dose for a nuclear industry worker. Exposing her people to such amounts of radiation was simply out of the question for Ingrid. She finally turned her head towards her sensors officer, Major Daniel Moore.

“Major Moore, what are the radiation readings within the ship?”

“Next to zero, General: our liquid hydrogen tanks surrounding our habitats and our other manned sections are doing an excellent job of shielding us from those radiations.”

“Then, we will still land on Europa to collect surface samples and fill our tanks. However, our surface teams will have to restrict their movements to within the shadow of the ship. Commander Gibson, you may start our descent towards our chosen landing area.”

“Aye, General!”

Ingrid then switched on her intercom on ‘ship-wide mode’ and spoke in a calm but firm voice.

“Attention to all, this is your commander speaking! All the personnel and passengers except the present flight crew will immediately return to their quarters and will strap themselves in their acceleration seats, along with their spouses and families. We are now starting our descent towards the surface of Europa. You have fifteen minutes to get back to your cabins. Once strapped in, stay so until further instructions. You may switch your cabin television set to the outside view channel if you wish to watch our landing live. That is all for the moment.”

Returning her attention to the television screens giving her and her bridge crew multiple views of Europa and space surrounding them, she examined again the surface of Europa below: it was basically little more than a tormented ice surface, with extensive patches bearing a sort of reddish-brown color. A multitude of long cracks or ridges intersected the ice surface of the moon.

"Is there really a liquid ocean under all that ice?" asked Ingrid to herself. However, it was now up to her and her crew to find out about that. Thankfully, the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS was superbly equipped for that kind of job.

With its two rotating engines pods, one on each side of the ship, now pivoted down and forward by 160 degrees in order to both slow down and prepare for a vertical landing, the huge spaceship soon was overflying the ice fields of Europa from an altitude of only a few kilometers. Excitement mounted inside the command bridge as the pilot, Robert Gibson, expertly directed the descent of the ship towards the relatively flat expanse of ice they had chosen as their preferred landing area, next to one of the major ridgelines scarring the moon.

"Altitude: 9,000 feet. Forward relative speed: 640 miles per hour. Applying more retro-thrust... Altitude now 7,400 feet. Speed: 420 miles per hour... Altitude: 4,000 feet. Descent rate: 1,100 feet per minute. Pivoting engines pods to 120 degrees downward and deploying the landing skids... Altitude now 800 feet. Speed: 55 miles per hour... We are now fixed relative to the ground, at an altitude of 200 feet. We are on our final descent."

Some fifty seconds later, the ship's landing skids smoothly made contact with the icy surface.

"CONTACT! We are now on the surface of Europa, General."

Cheers reverberated around the command bridge as Ingrid congratulated her pilot.

"Nice flying, Commander. I will be paying the beer tonight."

Ingrid then switched her intercom on again.

"Attention to all! We have landed on Europa. You may now get out of your acceleration seats and resume your activities. Captain Bean, you may prepare your surface team for outside work."

Next, she looked back at her sensors officer.

"Major Moore, what are the radiation readings you are now getting under the ship?"

"The radiations attain a peak of three rems per day near the outer edges of the ship's belly, General, while they go down to a mere 0.14 rems per day under our centerline."

"Perfect! Our surface team will thus be able to operate safely under our ship. Deploy our surface penetrating radar and our VLF sonar head. Major Cranston, send the following message to Earth: we have landed on Europa. Detailed report to follow soon."

"Aye, General!"

"Captain Mattingly, start deploying our refueling rig: I want to start refueling operations as soon as possible."

"On it, General!"

Undoing her seat harness and getting up, Ingrid then toured the command bridge, shaking hands with her bridge crew and congratulating them for their job. The last one to shake her hand, her deputy, Rear Admiral John Young, smiled to her.

"So, are you going to be the first one to step on Europa, General?"

"It would be nice, John, but I don't want to play the glory hog: let Alan Bean be the first one out on the surface. Could you go brief him about the radiation conditions on the surface? If he still wants to go collect ice samples along the nearest line fracture, he may do so, but his team will have to rush out in a rover and stay less than half an hour outside the ship's shadow."

"Understood! I will go down to the main access elevator to meet him and his team."

Leaving his own seat, the 51-years-old astronaut left the command bridge and used the long communication tube linking it to the main surface vehicle hangar, situated at the level of the ship's belly. That whole area of the ship, not being a rotating one, was in near zero gravity conditions but both the magnetized soles of Young's boots and the weak gravity found on Europa helped him stay on the ship's decks as he arrived in the vehicle hangar and approached the big access door of the vehicle elevator, which would lower the rovers and equipment of the surface team down to the icy surface of Europa. There, he found Navy Captain Allan Bean near the leading rover, surrounded by the members of his surface team and in the process of briefing them. However, Bean stopped briefing his crew on seeing Young approach and came to attention out of Navy habit, to which Young replied with an accommodating gesture.

"Please, relax, everybody. I came to brief you about the radiation conditions on the surface and to inform you of the restrictions imposed by our commander."

Young then spoke to the surface team for about a minute before asking a question to Bean.

"Are you still intent on sending a rover team to the nearest ice ravine, Allan?"

"Yes, I do, sir! I am sending my most experienced one on that task: geologists Edward Stokes and Kathryn Sullivan, plus Chief Master Sergeant Denise Bateman as their driver.

"Excellent!" replied Young before looking at Edward Stokes, a tall and still solid man despite his age of 59. "Remember: make it quick! If not, you may accumulate such a radiation exposure that you would then be banned from further surface activities for the whole mission."

Denise Bateman, a still quite attractive blonde with generous curves at the age of 49, then spoke up at attention.

"Our rovers are equipped with an ice melting and pumping system connected to an anti-radiation jacket surrounding their crew section, sir. If we take some twenty minutes once on the surface to fill that anti-radiation jacket before leaving the shadow of the ship, then we will be able to decrease the amount of radiations we will absorb by a factor of twelve."

Young smiled to the blonde while pointing an index at her.

"A great idea, Chief Master Sergeant. Still, don't stay out of the ship's shadow longer than absolutely needed."

"I'll be driving like a madman, sir." replied Denise, also smiling, attracting a barb from Edward Stokes.

"You always do, Denise!"

In response, Denise pulled her tongue at Stokes, making the whole team and Young laugh.

"Okay, guys: let's get moving!" urged Allan Bean to his team before facing again Young. "Don't worry about us, sir: we will be careful."

"Thanks! Good luck on the surface."

Young then withdrew by a few paces to allow a free path to the three rovers of the surface team, which then entered the big vehicle airlock of the hangar. Once its inner door was closed, a hangar technician emptied the airlock of air, then opened the outer door of the airlock, connected to the long vehicle access ramp of the ship, which had

already been lowered to the icy surface of Europa. The rovers, which very much looked like wide-tracked Arctic snow vehicles, slowly rolled down the ramp, powered by their electric motors fed by fuel cell power units. Once on the surface of Europa, Allan Bean ordered his three rover crews to disperse a bit and start melting ice to pump water in their anti-radiation liners. As the electrically heated ice drill heads of the rovers started their work, four astronauts and scientists, including Allan Bean, left two of the rovers to step on Europa. Bean took a short moment to reflect on this historic moment before looking at his three companions.

"Alright, let's take out our manual ice drills and sample kits. Then, we will split in two pairs and collect samples near the bow and the stern of the ship. Stay away from the zone that was melted by our rocket engines exhausts: the ice there must now be considered as contaminated."

In Rover Number Three, Denise Bateman was able to announce fifteen minutes later to Stokes and Sullivan that their rover's anti-radiation liners were now filled with water.

"We are now ready to go, guys! Make sure that your seat belts are on: I'm starting to roll now."

"Then, take a heading of 093 degrees on your gyro-compass, Denise: it will lead us directly to the nearest ice fracture line, some two miles away."

"Got it!"

Denise gradually accelerated her rover to its maximum ground speed of 45 kilometers per hour and was soon rolling out from under the ship's shadow. Edward Stokes, who was watching closely their radiation sensors, nodded his head in satisfaction.

"I am reading an internal radiation exposure of 1.85 rems per hour within our crew compartment. We should thus be safe for a round trip of up to one hour, but we will still try to keep it down to half an hour."

"No worries: we will be at the fracture line within five minutes at this speed." replied Denise.

Her prediction proved correct. However, she had to drastically reduce speed as they approached the fracture line, as the terrain, which was of a general reddish-brown color, was starting to look quite chaotic.

“Damn! This looks a lot like the approaches to a glacier, like the ones I saw in Antarctica during my rover training for the Mars expedition.”

“Very much so!” agreed Kathryn Sullivan. “Remember that we suspect that Europa’s ice crust is possibly floating on top of a global ocean of salt water. In fact, the sodium in that water may have given this reddish-brown coloration to the surface ice of the moon.”

“We will soon know more about that, once we will have collected and analyzed our ice samples. We will...**WATCH OUT!**”

Denise, who had seen the same thing as Edwards in front of their rover, abruptly braked her rover to a full stop, then bent forward to look with wide eyes at what had caused them to stop.

“It...it’s moving! What could this be?”

Both Edward and Kathryn also bent forward to better see the thing that had appeared from around a big ice bloc. Kathryn Sullivan, an experienced oceanographer accustomed to see all kinds of bizarre lifeforms, spoke in a strangled voice.

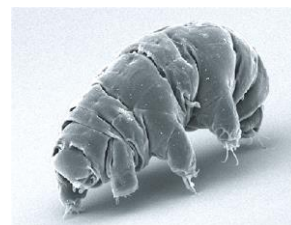
“A local lifeform...here on Europa. I can’t believe it! Quick, Ed, give me a pair of binoculars.”

Taking the binoculars presented to her by Edward, Kathryn observed for a few seconds the moving thing, which only measured a few centimeters in length. In fact, only its movements had made it visible to Edward at first, so tiny it was. She finally passed the binoculars to Edward while speaking in a weak voice.

“A...a tardigrade, here on Europa. Incredible!”

“A what?” Could only ask Denise, under near shock.

“A *Milnesium tardigradum*, if we use its scientific name, or ‘water bear’ or ‘moss piglet’ in colloquial language. These are what we call ‘extremophiles’, creatures able to resist and survive in extreme conditions. They are found everywhere on Earth, from the summits of the Himalayas to the deep ocean trenches of the Pacific Ocean. This is huge! Denise, point our external camera on this thing and go to maximum zoom power, then retransmit the images to the PROMETHEUS. Ed, take our still camera and take pictures of it while I report by radio to the ship.”



“I will do better than that, Kathryn: I will go out and take pictures from close to it.”

“Alright, but be careful.”

As Edward got out of his seat and walked to the rear section, where the airlock of their rover was, Kathryn keyed her radio microphone and did her best to speak as calmly as she could.

"PROMETHEUS, this is Rover Number Three. Hold on to your pants: there is life on the surface of Europa. We are now sending you video pictures of a tardigrade-like lifeform we just encountered near the fracture line, over."

The response from the ship took a few seconds, with the voice of Ingrid Dows answering Kathryn.

"Rover Number Three, we are now looking at your video transmission. This is an incredible find, truly! Do you see more of those creatures around you, over?"

"Uh, we haven't had time yet to look for more such creatures, PROMETHEUS. However, Edward Stokes is about to go out to photograph this thing from up close. I will go join him to look around. Denise Bateman will stay in the rover."

"I copy that, Rover Three. However, remember that your exposure time is limited. Observe a bit, then take local ice samples and come back."

"What if we find more of those creatures? Should we collect one or two of them for analysis, over?"

There was again a pause before Kathryn got an answer to her question.

"No! Not yet! We will have to debate this point before doing anything to affect these local lifeforms...or ourselves at their contact. In the meantime, keep your camera pointed at that thing: we have a team of exobiologists scrambling into action right now. PROMETHEUS out!"

Switching off her radio microphone, Kathryn then patted Denise's shoulder.

"Stay at the commands and keep our camera pointed at that tardigrade, Denise: I will go join Edward outside to look for more of these and also to take ice samples."

"I will keep the fort, Kathryn."

Grabbing an ice sample kit on her way to the airlock, Kathryn sealed her spacesuit before entering the small compartment, locking the door behind her before depressurizing the airlock. Once in vacuum, she opened the external door and stepped on the access platform, then closed and locked the external door. Next, she cautiously went down the few steps of the access ladder, mindful of the very weak local gravity. She felt a wave of emotions as she stepped on Europa's ice surface and looked up at the gigantic and colorful orb of Jupiter, which dominated the moon's sky.

"I am now walking on one of the moons of Jupiter. Way to go, Kathryn!"

Her ice sample kit in one hand, she then started walking slowly towards Edward Stokes while carefully looking down at the ground around her and bouncing lightly because of the low local gravity. Her caution soon paid off as she stopped just in time her right foot from coming down another tiny tardigrade and nearly crushing it.

"I FOUND ANOTHER ONE! NO! I SEE TWO MORE HERE! MY GOD, THIS PLACE IS CRAWLING WITH TARDIGRADES!"

Grabbing her video camera and then getting down on her knees, she laid down on her belly next to one of the tardigrades nearest to her and filmed it while moving as little as possible once down.

"Come on, little one! Show me what you were doing before the big bad woman barged in."

The creature, maybe three centimeter-long, a big size for a tardigrade, raised what passed as its head towards the camera and Kathryn and stayed immobile for a few seconds, then slowly resumed its activities. To Kathryn's excitement, it actually started munching the surface of the ice, which had a reddish coloration to it.

"So, you are eating something on this ice surface, hey? We will have to take samples of this ice spot afterwards, I guess."

Filming the creature for about five minutes, Kathryn finally got up and opened her ice sample kit next to her.

"Well, time to see what you are eating, little one."

Careful not to step on any of the few tardigrades around her, Kathryn then took surface ice samples from multiple spots around her, including from a spot right next to an eating tardigrade. Looking at her watch, she saw that she already had been outside of the rover for seventeen minutes and called Edward Stokes via radio.

"Ed, you've been outside of the rover for a good twenty minutes now. Time to go back inside and return to the ship."

"Very well, Kathryn: I'm finished here anyway. Boy, what a find!"

"Yeah! Our exobiologists are liable to assault us on our return, like a bunch of fans crowding around their favorite pop star."

Still cautious about where they stepped, the two scientists returned to the waiting rover with their precious ice samples. They were cautiously going around a tardigrade that had approached the rover when a strong sound pulse reverberated through the ice and

the soles of their boots. The reaction of the tardigrade to that sound pulse was immediate: with a speed much greater than demonstrated earlier, the little creature turned around and crawled hastily away, filmed by Edward Stokes. On her part, Kathryn spoke on the radio.

"PROMETHEUS, this is Kathryn Sullivan, near Rover Number Three. Did you just fire up one sound pulse with our deep scan sonar?"

"Yes, we just did, Doctor Sullivan." replied the voice of Ingrid Dows. "I gather that you felt it through the ice?"

"Not only us, General: the tardigrades as well. One tardigrade which was close to us and the rover at the time of the pulse reacted to it at once, turning around and fleeing in apparent panic. Maybe there is the local equivalent of predators around here, predators who would prey on tardigrades."

"That is an interesting theory, Doctor Sullivan. One exobiologist just told me that some tardigrades are known to be carnivorous and to eat smaller species of tardigrades. Decidedly, there are more things of interest here than we even suspected. You have ice samples from the area of the surface fracture?"

"We certainly do, General, on top of close up films of tardigrades munching on something at the surface of the ice. We are now getting back in our rover in order to return to the ship."

"Then, roll immediately back into the hangar: I have an excited crowd of biologists and biochemists anxious to study your samples and films."

"Understood, General. Sullivan, out!" replied Kathryn before looking and smiling at Edward. "I told you so!"

In the PROMETHEUS, Ingrid went next to look at the display screen of the ship's deep scan sonar, which had fired a powerful sound pulse downward through the surface ice.

"Anything yet?" she asked to the sonar operator, an ex-submariner and sonar expert.

"Not yet, ma'am: the sound pulse is still traveling through the ice. This surface ice crust must be quite thick and...WAIT! I have a first return echo, General." Ingrid did not say anything then, letting the operator concentrate on the image and sound from the return echo.

"I believe that our sound wave attained a distinctly different ice density at a depth of approximately fifteen miles. I now see what appears to be a transition line between ice and liquid water at a depth of some nineteen miles. Below that, there seems to be a very deep liquid ocean."

"My God! This is indeed top scientific news, along with this discovery of tardigrades at the surface of Europa. Uh, what is that small blob visible on your screen? It looks like it is floating inside that sub-surface liquid ocean."

"It actually is, General." replied the intrigued sonar operator, who then stayed silent for a long moment in order to listen better to the return echoes he was getting. The operator finally spoke up, excitement showing in his voice.

"I now can detect more such blobs, General. I think that they are moving."

"What?" exclaimed Ingrid, incredulous. "Are you sure? Can you go in passive mode and listen to noises from that deep ocean?"

"Not me, but my comrade to our right, Chief Petty Officer Dietrich, is manning our passive sonar array. Do you hear something from down there, Erik? Erik?"

Both the sonar operator and Ingrid twisted their heads to look at the said Erik Dietrich, only to see that the man was like frozen with stupor, with his mouth wide open.

"I...I... General, I had total silence before we sent our sound pulse. Now, I can hear a bunch of noises which I can only describe as biological signatures. Let me put these sounds on the speakers, General."

The man extended one arm, pushing one of the buttons on his control console. Ingrid was then able to hear a series of humming-like short noises which left her stunned.

"Whale songs! These sound like whales talking to each other. We are recording this, are we?"

"We certainly are, General." replied the shaken sonar operator. Ingrid slowly straightened her back and blew air out.

"There is life on Europa, both on its surface and below the ice crust. Wait until they hear about this on Earth."

The news of life having been found on Europa actually created two diametrically opposed kinds of reactions on Earth. The first and widest one was of excitement, curiosity and the wish to learn more. The second one, much more restricted in scope and limited mostly to the religious world, its leaders and its followers, was one of dismay and denial, like what the previous news of life on Mars had created. Fundamentalist

religious preachers and leaders who were already opposed to notions like the Theory of Evolution and Earth being billions of years old rather than only a few millenniums old screamed at once that the scientists and crew of the PROMETHEUS were either wrong or even that they were lying. In both cases, those religious fundamentalists branded the notion of life on Europa, or on any other place than Earth, as being a blasphemous one. At the White House, President Ronald Reagan, who had been reelected to a second term by a wide margin and who was a practicing Presbyterian, shook his head in disgust as he listened to some of the more vitriolic televised speeches made by many famous (and rich) American preachers.

“What a bunch of ignoramuses! Respecting the words of the Bible is one thing, but denying scientific reality is another thing altogether. What do you think about this, Nancy?”

His wife, watching with him the televised late evening news in their private suite of the White House, thought about her answer for a moment.

“Many of our best people are presently aboard the PROMETHEUS, Ronnie. If we can’t have confidence on what they are telling us, then who can we believe? How could those preachers know better than our scientists who are on Europa?”

“Well said, Mommy²³. I think that I will make a public presidential address about this tomorrow. It should calm down some of those loud mouths.”

08:35 (Universal Time)

Tuesday, December 22, 1981 ‘C’

Biology section, main deck, Quadrant 03, Carrousel ‘B’

U.S.S. PROMETHEUS, on the surface of Europa

“MAKE WAY! MAKE WAY, PLEASE!”

The few persons walking down the central hallway quickly stepped aside to let pass the four astronauts still wearing sealed spacesuits and pushing a cart on which lay a sort of cage looking like an incubator. The team and their cart soon turned into a side corridor, to arrive at the entrance of the biology section’s laboratory, where two scientists wearing bio-hazard protective suits and thick thermal gloves grabbed the cage and inserted it inside a large metal and Plexiglas cryogenic box. Ingrid, who had been standing in one

²³ Mommy: nickname Ronald Reagan often used to affectuously call his wife Nancy.

corner of the lab, in order to stay out of the way of the scientists, then approached the cryogenic box and looked through one of its thick windows, ostensibly to examine the two tiny Europa tardigrades which had been collected at the surface of the icy moon. In reality, unknown to her crewmembers, she took a few seconds to try scanning telepathically the two extra-terrestrial creatures, to ascertain their degree of absence or presence of sentience. What she felt was limited to very basic feelings, with no real thoughts attached to them. Now reassured that she was not condemning sentient aliens to biological analysis and eventual death, Ingrid straightened back up and looked at the chief bio-chemist, Shannon Lucid.

“You may start studying those tardigrades before they eventually die, Doctor Lucid, but keep in mind that we will be taking off in about one hour. You and your team will then have to temporarily suspend your work and go sit in your acceleration chairs for departure. Once we will be on our way to Ganymede, you will then be free to continue your study of these tardigrades. However, please remember that we know nothing about the biology of those creatures, thus don't know how dangerous it would be for us to be infected by them or by the microbial spores they were eating on the surface of Europa's ice.”

“We understand, General, and we will be extra careful. We should have a preliminary report on those tardigrades by tomorrow morning, ready to be transmitted to Earth.”

“Excellent! Then, I will leave you free to start your work here.”

With that said, Ingrid left the biology lab to return to her command bridge, where her crew was preparing the ship for departure. In over eleven days spent on the surface of Europa, the crew of the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS had done about all the studies and measurements possible and, as a result, now knew a lot of new things about the Jovian moon, knowledge which had been methodically transmitted to Earth via directional radio antennas. Her crew had also used their stay on Europa to fully refill the ship's propellant tanks of liquid oxygen and liquid hydrogen, on top of refreshing and refilling their reserves of potable water and breathing oxygen. They were now fully ready to visit Ganymede and continue their mission of exploration. Ingrid's only regret was that the strong radioactivity bathing Europa had drastically cut the opportunities for her crew to explore on the ground a larger surface of Europa, having had to stay either under the shadow of the ship or making quick dashes to areas near the ship.

11:40 (Universal Time)

Thursday, December 24, 1981 'C'

Command bridge of the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS

Arriving in orbit of Ganymede

Jupiter System

"We are now in a stable polar orbit around Ganymede, General, with apogee at an altitude of 338 kilometers and a perigee of 161 kilometers."

"Okay, let's regularize our orbit progressively. I want a circular orbit around an altitude of 200 kilometers. How are the levels of external radiations?"

"Uh, much less than in the case of Europa but still rather unhealthy in the long run, General. I read 1.6 rems per hour at this altitude. However, parts of the surface should be less hot in terms of radiation showers, thanks to the magnetic field we detected emanating from Ganymede. We are still within the magnetosphere of Jupiter, General."

"Yeah! Jupiter is truly the big bully on this block."

Katherine Johnson looked at Ingrid while smiling.

"Hey, it is hard not to act like a bully when you know that you are by far the biggest and strongest around the block, General."

"True! Since I am the biggest bully aboard this ship, I will now proclaim a diktat of my own."

Switching her intercom on 'ship-wide mode', Ingrid then spoke up in her headset microphone.

"Attention all hands, this is your commander speaking! We are now in the process of refining our orbit around Ganymede. However, before we start our work around that moon, I am declaring as of noon today a two-day period of rest and festivities for this Christmas. Use it to take some rest and enjoy good family time. There will be a musical concert this evening at the ship's amphitheater, while the Jazz band at the BOURBON STREET Night Club will perform. Have fun, all of you: it's an order!"

That last sentence attracted a malicious reply from her pilot, Ronald Gibson.

"Gee, General, I really wanted to stay at the helm of this ship."

Ingrid, bending forward in her seat, replied with a devilish smile.

"Mister, you WILL have fun...at gunpoint!"

A concert of laughter around the bridge greeted that exchange.

Ingrid waited until their orbit had been regularized, then dismissed her bridge crew, volunteering to stay behind on duty with a single communications operator to man the command bridge. She finally went for a late lunch once one duty officer arrived to replace her. Floating out of the command bridge section, which was one of the pressurized compartments of the ship which were kept in zero gravity conditions, she propelled herself along the communication tubes linking the command and control module with the two contra-rotating habitat carrousel and the rest of the ship, arriving at the main cafeteria, situated on the main deck level of Carrousel 'A' at around one o'clock. There was however still plenty of hot food left to allow her to serve herself a good meal. Seeing the ship's chief-cook, Nicholas Buscemi, having like her a late lunch in the company of three of his cooks and assistant-cooks, Ingrid went to their table with her food tray, making a hand sign to stop Buscemi from getting up at her approach.

"Please, relax and do as if I was not here. Could I sit next to you, Chef?"

"Of course, General!" replied the smiling NCO, who liked being called 'Chef' rather than 'Chief Master Sergeant'. Sitting down to his left, Ingrid exchanged greetings with the other cooks and took a first bite of her food before speaking to Buscemi.

"Do you have a special menu laid on for tomorrow, for Christmas Day, Chef?"

"I certainly do, General. I had two complete pig carcasses, four lambs and twelve frozen turkeys, all part of our initial food reserves taken aboard in Earth orbit, taken out of our main meat freezer, so that they could start thawing out for tomorrow. I plan on offering a self-serve grilled meat selection, while François, our pastry chef, is going to bake a whole lot of cakes as desserts."

"Hmm, sounds quite appetizing. Have we started yet to serve some of the meat grown aboard?"

Buscemi, a stocky man with a well-trimmed beard, shook his head in response.

"Not yet, General. The veal, pigs, turkeys and chickens which were butchered since our departure have all been wrapped in airtight packaging and frozen in a reserved freezer. I want as much as possible to systematically use the meat from Earth to the last before it has any chance of spoiling. I know that the food preservation techniques used by our Space Corps have been amply proven in the past, but this is the first space mission which will go on for more than three years. Also, we can't swear that none of the food product provided to us by civilian contractors will spoil faster than expected. It

would need only one batch of prepared food to be contaminated by some negligent food plant worker who didn't wash his or her hands to spoil a whole shipment."

"I understand and agree with your caution, Chef. Up to now, you and your cooks are doing a great job and I have been hearing nothing but praise for the quality and variety of the food served aboard."

"Thank you, General! That is truly warming my heart. Uh, may I ask you a question that is a bit personal, General?"

"Go ahead, Chef!"

"Well, it is about your storied ability to remember your past incarnations, which go back thousands of years. Would you by chance know via those souvenirs ancient, forgotten recipes which would be worthy of trying to replicate here on this ship and would please the crew?"

With the other cooks and assistant-cooks now listening intently, Ingrid grinned and nodded her head at Buscemi's question.

"Well, as a Polynesian woman named Mahamana, who died in the Fourth Century B.C., I certainly know how to cook a pig in the traditional Tahiti way, wrapped in banana leaves and heated in a pit. Do we have banana leaves which have not yet been shredded and recycled as animal food or composted into fertilizer?"

"Uh, I will have to go check on that, General. Thinking of it, I will go place a quick call at once, so that the vegetal recycling section holds on to any banana leaves we may have. It will take only a minute, if you will excuse me, General."

"Go ahead, Chef!"

As Buscemi hurried to the nearest telephone, Ingrid smiled to one of the assistant-cooks, Joan Brewster.

"And how is your cute baby son doing, Misses Brewster?"

"He is just fine, General." replied Joan, beaming. "Thankfully, he is now mostly doing his nights and my husband is helping by taking the baby bottle and diaper duty at the midnight break. May I ask you what kind of other skills or talents you would know apart from ancient cooking, thanks to your souvenirs from past incarnations, General?"

"Oh, they are many, without bragging, and it would take hours for me to describe them all. However, I can say that I know how to dance, sing and play ancient music."

"Now, THAT sounds interesting, General. Would you by chance be planning to demonstrate those talents to us soon?"

"I may, Misses Brewster. I may." replied Ingrid with a malicious grin.

17:53 (Universal Time)

Friday, December 25, 1981 'C'

Main food court, main deck, Quadrant 03, Carrousel 'A'

U.S.S. PROMETHEUS, in orbit around Ganymede

"Here you are, Mister and Misses Brewster. You can put your little boy in this high chair next to the end seat of this table row."

"Thank you very much, miss." replied Jack Brewster to the food court waitress who had guided them to two available seats in the main food court. He then sat his son Nathan in the baby high chair set at one end corner of the long line of tables forming one of the five branches of the arrangement of tables filling half of the food court area. Another similar arrangement of tables filled the other half of the food court, with a circulation space left free between the two sets. He then let his wife Joan take the seat next to the baby high chair before sitting to her right and looking around at the quickly filling food court.

"Wow, they managed to put together enough tables to seat over 300 persons, just in this section. With the extra tables and chairs set in the service area of the main food court, we will have the whole crew sitting together for this Christmas supper."

"Well, that was the idea, no?" replied Joan. "I wonder if they will further follow military traditions by having the senior officers serve us?"

"I think they will, Joan. General Dows may be unorthodox in many things, but she always did her best to encourage anything that would reinforce unit bonds. The only worry I have is about what Nathan will get to eat: he is only six-months-old and is not ready yet for solid food except fruit or vegetable purées."

"I believe that the answers to our questions is coming towards us right now, Jack." said Joan while watching Ingrid Dows, wearing an apron over her uniform, approach them with a service cart supporting a number of food containers. Joan was able to see that the containers were filled with a variety of baby food pots when Ingrid stopped next to them and smiled down at the small family.

"Merry Christmas to you and your cute son! We prepared an assortment of baby food for our youngest dinners tonight. You may choose the pots your son would prefer, along with small bottles of either juice, milk or water."

"You are too kind, General." replied Joan before picking three pots and two bottles from the cart, plus two baby spoons. "Thank you so much for organizing this group Christmas supper."

"It is my pleasure, truly. Have an excellent evening!" said Ingrid before rolling her cart towards another family with a baby. Jack Brewster nodded with satisfaction after examining the food pots: they were actually freshly-made baby food composed of fruits or vegetables grown in the four hectares of hydroponic cultures contained within the ship.

"Wow! Those pots were prepared only three days ago. You can't get much fresher than that as baby food goes."

"It sure beats the usual commercial brands we find in the United States, with their lists of chemical products and preservatives mixed in. The idea of having a spaceship grow its own food is a truly great one, in my opinion. I am not sure that much of the canned or frozen foodstuff sold in the United States would still be good for human consumption past two or three years."

"I spoke once with one of our cooks about that, Joan, and he confirmed to me that most packaged commercial food products have limited shelf lives of about two years or less."

Joan threw a surprised look at her husband.

"Then, what do they have in the ship's food reserves, Jack? Our trip in space is due to be five-year-long."

"Well, that cook told me that the Space Corps inherited from the previous Military Space Command another of General Dows' early initiatives: an experimental farm and foodstuff testing center, which is situated in the Midwest. That farm and testing center grew or raised a wide variety of plants and animals and also tested the long-term viability of commercially-packaged and sold foodstuff, to see how long they could actually be stored and still be safe for human consumption. They also did experiments to see if the vegetal leftovers from cultivated fruit plants and vegetables could be used to feed cattle and poultry animals. They even tested the longevity of various beer brands to see which ones would keep the longest."

"Beer? I thought that beer was like wine and got better with passing years."

"Oh no! In fact, draft beers were found to spoil within a year, while beers fermented in their bottles kept much longer, with stouts having the longest shelf life. The cook told me that this farm and food testing center played a big role in choosing and

preparing the various foodstuff now used aboard the spaceships of the Space Corps. In contrast, one of the Soviet scientists traveling with us confided to me that Soviet space rations are downright awful and that, by comparison, our space rations are, in his own terms, 'worth defecting for'."

Joan giggled at that last sentence.

"Well, it is nice to hear that we beat the Soviets in yet another department. If you will excuse me, I think that our Nathan is not ready to wait for us to be served."

"Go ahead, Joan: after all, HE is the boss in the family."

About ten minutes later, with all the places in the food court now occupied, supper started to be served to the adults, teenagers and preteens sitting at the rows of tables. Joan's initial supposition proved correct, with Ingrid Dows and her senior officers going down the rows of tables while pushing carts supporting a variety of appetizing dishes. The service started with an assortment of soups to choose from, all of which proved to be made with ship-grown or produced vegetables and milk or broth. Everything was served in the usual tin or stainless-steel plates, glasses and cutlery used aboard the ship in order to minimize the volume of waste and garbage produced during the trip. As a life support systems technician, Jack knew well that everything in the ship had to be recycled and reused as much as possible, as they simply could not simply dump their trash overboard in space and certainly could not risk contaminate an alien moon. For that same reason, the crewmembers had been enjoined to take the time to carefully separate every category of food leftover for recycling, using the marked trash bins found around the food courts, with all the various food containers, utensils and plates being washable and reusable. Jack then thought about the sharp contrast between what was done on the PROMETHEUS and the tremendous waste and neglect about recycling he had seen around the United States and the rest of the World. That was yet another domain where General Dows had shown uncommon vision.

Then came the second service, with the choice of main dishes being circulated on carts around the tables, allowing each diner to choose his menu. In Jack's case, he went without hesitation for the roast pig, carved by Ingrid Dows in person, while Joan went for a piece of turkey breast, the lot accompanied by a selection of cooked fresh vegetables, including mashed potatoes made with butter produced on the ship, thanks to the milk cows of their dairy farm. All along the meal, the couple were able to converse

with the other families and single crewmembers sitting at their table. Later on, as their dirty plates and cutlery were being picked up prior to dessert being served, Joan leaned against her husband's shoulder after gently kissing him, feeling quite happy.

"It is so nice to be able to celebrate Christmas like this, as a united crew. I was afraid at first that this trip would prove to be a long, boring affair, but I must say that I am agreeably surprised up to now. Even the nightlife is good, with many various clubs to use."

"And which club do you favor most in the lot, Joan?"

"I must say that the BOURBON STREET Jazz club is my favorite. It may be small but I love the atmosphere in it. Talking of clubs, what about going to watch the special show given tonight at the ship's amphitheater? The ship's daycare center will be open tonight, to allow parents to go watch the show."

"That sounds like a nice idea, Joan. However, I want to be able to pick up Nathan before ten o'clock, so that we could tuck him in bed."

"Deal!"

19:57 (Universal Time)

Ship's amphitheater, Median Deck, Quadrant 09, Carrousel 'A'

The 240-seat amphitheater was nearly full when Jack and Joan Brewster arrived there. They ended up sitting in one of the farthest rows of jump seats from the stage, where a piano and a set of musical instruments, including a battery, occupied the back part of the stage. Joan smiled to the bearded man in his fifties directly to her left as she sat down: Doctor Sasha Smirnov was a kind and quiet man who also happened to be one of the top astronomers in the World.

"Hello, Doctor Smirnov! Enjoying your day up to now?"

"Very much so, Misses Brewster." replied the jovial-looking scientist. "I am really happy about having volunteered for this space mission. The astronomical work itself is downright fascinating, while the ship's life and amenities all came as nice surprises as well. I don't know how General Dows managed to convince her superiors to let her hire a bunch of musicians and entertainers from around the World for this long space mission, but that initiative of hers was quite inspired, in my opinion. We will hear tonight a couple of young Soviet musicians who are truly talented, although they were still mostly unknown to the public, something that was a real shame."

"Well, General Dows can do her own things mostly for two reasons, Doctor Smirnov: first, she is the ultimate boss of the United States Space Corps; second, it is hard to argue with success."

Smirnov nodded in agreement to that.

"She is definitely most successful in all that she does, Misses Brewster. I wonder if her incredible talent extends as well to the arts."

"I suppose that we are liable to learn about that during this trip, Doctor Smirnov."

"Indeed!"

A voice then came out of the speakers posted at each corner of the amphitheater, at the same time as a young woman with a violin walked on stage.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is our pleasure to greet on stage Tatiana Smirnova, a talented young violinist from Saint-Petersburg, for our first performance of this evening." As polite applause greeted the blond woman in her early twenties, Jack Brewster looked at Sasha Smirnov with both surprise and curiosity.

"Smirnova? Is she related to you, Doctor?"

"She is my niece." replied with obvious pride the astronomer. "She is quite talented but, unfortunately, there is a glut of talented musicians in Saint-Petersburg and those who have family or political connections to Communist Party bigwigs unfortunately get the prestigious positions first. Tatiana was barely making ends meet on her own despite her talent, so I spoke to General Dows about her when she chose me for an astronomer's position on this mission. I made Dows listen to an audition by my niece and she agreed to offer her a job as a musician entertainer on the PROMETHEUS. Tatiana agreed and she recently told me that she is not regretting this one bit. I am really happy for her."

"Good for her!"

Jack and Joan then listened to Tatiana as the young woman started playing her violin, interpreting some piece of slow classical music. Jack had to quickly recognize that Tatiana had real talent and was playing her violin beautifully. Warm applauses greeted the end of her first piece. Then, to the surprise of the audience, including Sasha Smirnov, a group of four musicians carrying a variety of instruments and dressed in cowboy style accoutrements came on the stage and joined Tatiana as the voice of Ingrid Dows came out of the speakers.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please greet the group 'Ozark Mountaineers', who will join Tatiana Smirnova in playing a song imported from the future in 1940 by the late Nancy Laplante. The song is titled 'The Devil went down to Georgia' and it was composed by The Charlie Daniels Band."

"The Devil went down to Georgia?" wondered Joan Brewster. "I never heard that song."

"Me neither!" added Jack. "However, I heard once that General Dows inherited a collection of recorded music from her late adoptive mother and that there was some fantastic music in that collection. I guess that we will now be able to see how good that music from the future is."

He then became quiet as the lead player and singer of the new group introduced the song, with Tatiana accompanying the group with her violin as they started playing and singing a fiery and catchy song which quickly won the audience. After being applauded at the end of the song by the enthusiastic spectators, the group and Tatiana played two more country style songs, each with plenty of violin music to keep the Soviet musician busy. Those two songs were also equally liked, earning Tatiana and the Ozark Mountaineers a long round of applauses at the end.

"WELL DONE, TATIANA!" shouted out loud Sasha Smirnov as his niece left the stage with the country group. He then sat back down, like the other spectators, to wait for the next performance. This time, it was a male voice which announced the next number.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the Jazz band from the BOURBON STREET Club, along with the talented young singer and guitar player Germaine Lapierre."

This time, the audience was taken by surprise when, instead of appearing on the stage, the Jazz band and Germaine appeared from the back of the amphitheater and marched down one of the aisles while playing a Jazz tune. The band then marched back up by the other aisle, completing a full tour of the hall before finally climbing on the stage. With the audience already fired up, the group then played three more tunes, with Jermaine doing some fine singing while playing her guitar, before marching out while being applauded.

The Brewsters, along with Doctor Sasha Smirnov and the rest of the spectators, were already quite happy with the evening's performances to date when there was yet another announcement via the speakers.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we will now play a song recorded in the future and imported by the late Nancy Laplante. The title of the song is 'Harem' and the singer was Sarah Brightman, one of the top female singers in the World in 2012. Accompanying the song with a dance number is the adopted daughter of Nancy Laplante, General Ingrid Dows."

That announcement immediately created a short-lived exchange of whispered comments and exclamations, followed by silence around the hall as an Arabic-sounding rhythm started playing from the speakers. All eyes then fixed on a graceful shape clad in a vaporous harem outfit as it danced into the stage. The vaporous, semi-transparent outfit let the spectators admire the sexy body of the dancing girl, while a veil hid the lower half of her face, leaving only the eyes and part of the nose visible. The dancer's moves were fluid and perfectly coordinated with the music, while the singer's voice could only be described as 'divine'.

"Is this really General Dows?" asked a disbelieving Joan, to which a mesmerized Jack answered.

"I believe so, Joan. Hell, she has to be the best looking four star general I ever saw."

"I also wish that we had a general like her." added Sasha Smirnov, equally mesmerized as he followed the fluid dance moves of Ingrid on the stage. That made Jack smile to the Soviet astronomer.

"For her intellect or for her body?"

"Both! God, she really moves like a professional harem dancer!"

"Maybe she was one during one of her past incarnations." suggested Joan, making both Jack and Smirnov nod their heads.

"I could believe that. Damn, that singer from the future sure had an incredible voice." replied Jack.

They watched Ingrid's performance for the few minutes the song went on, enthusiastically applauding her when she ran from the stage and into the back room. Joan grinned to Jack then as they sat back after applauding.

"That Sarah Brightman was a truly superb singer, while General Dows could qualify as a professional dancer. I hope that we get to see more performances from her."

Her wish was quickly granted when the announcer's voice came up a few seconds later.

"Ladies and gentlemen, there will be another performance by General Dows this evening. In the meantime, the talented Jerry Springfield will perform at the piano while General Dows changes her costume. There will however be a ten-minute break to allow the spectators to go visit the washrooms as needed or get a refreshment at the small service counter at the back of the amphitheater, on the lower floor, next to the washrooms."

"Now, that sounds like a good idea! Excuse me for a minute while I go to the washroom, Jack."

"I'll wait, honey."

As Joan left for the washroom, Jack looked at Smirnov, smiling to him.

"It is quite hard for me to believe that we are now orbiting a moon of Jupiter while watching such a show with 240 persons."

"This ship is certainly a wonder in many ways, Mister Brewster."

"Please, simply call me 'Jack'."

"And you can call me 'Sasha'."

"Deal!" replied Jack before exchanging a handshake with the Soviet scientist. "So, how are your astronomical observations going, Sasha?"

Smirnov's face reflected near-ecstasy as he joined his hands in front of his mouth.

"The images and data we are able to collect around the Jupiter System are simply astounding. With the high-resolution telescopes of this ship and with the short distances we are now from Jupiter and its moons, the quality of the pictures we can take is unprecedented. We learned more about Jupiter and its moons during the last few weeks than in all the preceding years of observation from Earth. We are also able as well to obtain excellent images of Saturn and its moons from our present location. However much this mission cost, it was well worth it."

"And what do the biologists think of those small critters we found on Europa?"

"The tardigrades? That discovery was nothing less than Earth-shattering, no pun intended. Along with the discoveries of fossils and living fish on Mars, it proves that life is basically possible nearly anywhere in this universe. All our existing theories about

possible extra-terrestrial life will have to be completely revised. In terms of scientific advancement alone, this space mission is a complete game-changer.”

Jack then hesitated for a moment, wondering if he really should say what was on his mind now. He finally decided to take a chance and spoke in a low voice, so that others could not hear him.

“What about in political terms? Could we hope to see better relations between our two countries as a result of this space mission?”

Smirnov immediately sobered up but still answered him.

“I hope so, Jack. For one thing, it is becoming more and more evident in Moscow that this silly arms race is pointless. This ship alone is a clear indicator to all but a fool that the United States now has an insurmountable technological and industrial edge over the Soviet Union. By the way, you never heard me say that.”

“Of course, Sasha! Well, let’s enjoy the rest of the evening here together, as friends.”

A few minutes later, Jerry Springfield got on the stage and sat at the piano, then played and sang for a good fifteen minutes before leaving while being applauded, with the show’s announcer speaking again after that.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we will now play another song recorded in the future, with General Dows accompanying it with a dance. That song is meant to mark the spirit of cooperation in space exploration between the United States and the Soviet Union. We will thus now play the song ‘Rasputin’, recorded by the group ‘Boney M’.”

Sasha Smirnov, like the few other Soviets present, nearly laughed out loud from pleasure when Ingrid appeared on the stage as a lively tune started playing: she was dressed in typical Russian Cossack fashion, complete with high boots and long-sleeved silk shirt. She was also dancing in the Russian fashion, half-crouched while alternatively swinging her legs out. It was not long before the seven Soviets present in the amphitheater were on their feet, clapping their hands and yelling to the rhythm of the song. On his part, Jack found all that simply fun as hell and also got up to clap his hands, soon imitated by most of the audience. When the song ended, Ingrid bowed down to the crowd before leaving the stage under thunderous applause. Joan passed an arm around Jack’s torso as the applause went on and kissed him on the cheek.

“This was a truly great night, Jack. However, I think that we should go get our little Nathan and return to our cabin for the night.”

"You are right, although I will regret not seeing more of the show. What a day and evening this was!"

"We could also make the night a great one, Jack." sneakily suggested Joan, making her husband grin.

"You have a deal, you perverted wife of mine."

09:44 (Universal Time)
Monday, December 28, 1981 'C'
Surface of the moon Ganymede
Jupiter System



"Hello little critters! Where are you?"

Kathryn Sullivan nearly laughed as she watched Edward Stokes look around at the icy surfaces surrounding him while taking cautious steps.

"Ed, you should concentrate on collecting your samples instead of looking for tardigrades. Maybe there aren't any on Ganymede: this moon doesn't have the kind of gravitational tides that made salty water come to the surface of Europa. No salty water, no microbes and no food for tardigrades."

"Hum, you are right, Kathryn. Still, it would have been really sensational to find some lifeforms on another moon of Jupiter."

"I agree, but we still have to explore Callisto after this moon. Maybe you will get lucky there and befriend a local tardigrade."

Regrettably for Edward Stokes, a stay of two weeks by the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS at the surface of Ganymede turned out no signs of local lifeforms, microbial or otherwise. However, their stay was far from fruitless, with important data and samples collected about the surface, internal structure and conditions on Ganymede. Taking off again after topping off its propellant tanks, the PROMETHEUS then flew to the fourth moon of Jupiter, Callisto, where it mapped the moon from orbit before landing in a field of water ice next to a chain of hills. While Edward Stokes and his geologist colleagues were able to access some samples of rock at its surface, on top of drilling for ice core samples, they found no lifeforms on Callisto. After close to two weeks spent exploring the surface of Callisto, the PROMETHEUS took off again. This

time, the next leg of its trip would be much longer, as it was now heading towards Saturn and its extensive collection of moons.

CHAPTER 22 – VISITING SATURN

11:09 (Universal Time)

Friday, January 29, 1982 'C'

Ship's main kitchen, Main Deck,

Quadrant 01, Carrousel 'A'

**U.S.S. PROMETHEUS, on its way to the
Saturn System**



Joan Brewster, like the other cooks and assistant-cooks present in the main kitchen, was quite busy as they made the last preparations for the noon meal. Tasked by Nicholas Buscemi to change the dirty vegetable oil in one of the deep frying pans, she used thick thermal gloves to take the heavy vat of still hot canola oil out of its electrically-heated receptacle and started carrying it towards one of the large sinks of the kitchen, where it would be able to cool down before its oil would be sent for recycling. As she passed by a series of hot plates used to grill meat, she didn't notice the puddle of greasy water that had just been inadvertently spilled by another assistant-cook, who had gone to get a mop and was thus not present to warn her. With the heavy vat of hot oil compromising her balance, Joan's left foot slipped on the puddle, making her fall backward. About half of the oil inside the vat flashed into flames the moment it spilled on top of one of the hot plates, while the other half splashed over Joan's face, front upper torso and arms, burning her and making her scream horribly. Her head violently struck the steel floor of the kitchen, knocking her half-conscious for a few seconds. Then, the hot oil covering her also flashed into flames, touched off by flaming droplets of oil from the hot plates. Her whole upper body was then enveloped with flames, making her scream even louder. Nick Buscemi, who was only a few paces away, saw the whole thing and immediately ran to the nearest fire extinguisher while shouting at his kitchen crew.

"FIRE, FIRE, FIRE! EVERYBODY OUT, NOW!"

As his kitchen staff ran out, he pulled the handle of the fire alarm situated just above the receptacle of the fire extinguisher, starting a loud alarm bell. Next, he grabbed the fire extinguisher, a model filled with halon gas which could smother all types of fire by

depriving them of oxygen, and ran back towards the flames which were now rising nearly to the ceiling. He couldn't help freeze with horror for a second when he looked at the poor Joan, her upper body in flames and screaming and flailing on the floor. Taking back control of himself, he then sprayed halon over Joan, to smother the flames burning her, even though he also risked asphyxiating her at the same time. However, burning alive was a much more serious concern for Joan than asphyxiating for a couple of seconds. Thankfully, the halon gas quickly succeeded in taking out the flames enveloping Joan. Buscemi next concentrated on taking out the flaming cooking oil on top of the hot plates: if the flames were allowed to propagate through the ship, the results would be no less than catastrophic for the 530 occupants of the PROMETHEUS. He was helped then by the fact that the ship, including its internal furnishing, had been made nearly entirely of non-flammable materials. The burning oil thus had next to nothing to feed its flames and was extinguished within ten seconds by Buscemi's extinguisher. Throwing away the now nearly empty extinguisher, the chief-cook hurried to Joan and grabbed her under her armpits, then started dragging her out of the smoke-filled kitchen. The firefighter specialist on duty in the food court then ran in, a breathing mask on his face and a large halon extinguisher in his hands. Seeing him enter, Buscemi immediately shouted at him.

"QUICK, HELP ME CARRY JOAN OUT TO SAFETY!"

Thankfully, the firefighter didn't hesitate and helped Buscemi at once by grabbing Joan's feet, raising her off the deck. They nearly ran out of the kitchen with her, finally putting down Joan on the deck in the middle of the central hallway. By then, Joan had stopped screaming, now under severe shock from her third- and second-degree burns. Seeing his shaken cooks gathered nearby, Buscemi shouted at them.

"SOMEBODY CALL A MEDICAL TEAM HERE, QUICKLY!"

One of the cooks, who was a military member of the Space Corps, ran at once to the nearest public telephone, situated near the lift cage serving this quadrant. Buscemi then looked back down at Joan to evaluate her wounds. Her whole face and much of her arms were black and red from the flames and the whole upper torso part of her ship's internal coverall had been burned to a crisp. Buscemi felt tears come out of his eyes as he understood that the young woman was most probably going to be left horribly disfigured for life.

Ingrid was working in her office, situated halfway around the carrousel from the kitchen, when she heard the fire alarm bell. Looking immediately at the video monitor on one corner of her work desk that showed her the type and location of any alarm signal triggered around the ship, she swore to herself when she saw that it was coming from the main kitchen: off all the places in the ship, the kitchen areas were probably the most probable ones for a fire, as combustible oil and fat were routinely used there. Jumping out of her chair, she ran out of her office and down the short corridor linking the offices of her more senior officers, emerging at a near sprint into the central hallway linking at main deck level the sixteen quadrants of Carrousel 'A'. Ingrid then accelerated to a speed even Olympic sprinters could not equal, while shouting at the few people walking up and down the central hallway.

"MAKE WAY! MAKE WAY AT ONCE!"

She ended up covering the 200 meters between her office and the central kitchen in less than twenty seconds but had to abruptly brake when she saw a burned-up woman lying in the middle of the central hallway, next to the kitchen's main door, from which black smoke was coming out. Running to the woman on the floor, over which Chief-cook Nicholas Buscemi was kneeling, she also knelt next to the woman and examined her quickly. She was not a little shocked and saddened when she recognized Joan Brewster, whom she had spoken to quite often in the past few months. Having a long experience about battle wounds, Ingrid understood at once that Joan would end up being covered with ugly scars and would probably end being disfigured for life. There was now only one way to avoid that, but it would entail a price that Ingrid would have to pay personally for her actions. She however didn't hesitate and gently put her hands over Joan's forehead and chest while speaking to Buscemi.

"Stand aside, Master Senior Sergeant: I will take care of this."

"We called for a medical team, General. It should be here in a couple of minutes at the most."

"But they won't be able to do much about those horrible burns. You may watch but please don't interfere with what I will do now."

Ingrid next closed her eyes and concentrated. Buscemi, along with the dozen or so people around, recoiled with surprise when Ingrid's hands started glowing. Soon, a white glow surrounded Joan's body, gradually becoming so bright that Buscemi could not look directly at her or at Ingrid, who was also glowing. One of the other witnesses to this happened to be Doctor Sasha Smirnov, who had come early to the main food court

to serve himself a frugal lunch of soup and salad at the self-serve salad bar. Smirnov had felt genuine distress on recognizing the poor Joan Brewster but his distress was now being replaced by utter awe and disbelief. However, he kept silent as Ingrid and Joan glowed for nearly a minute. When the glow faded away, Smirnov felt his hair nearly rise on his head: Joan's face, arms and torso now appeared normal, with no traces of burns left other than the blackened coverall she wore. Even her hair appeared restored after having been half-burned away. Joan, shaking like a leaf, looked up at Ingrid with utter incomprehension.

"What...what just happened to me, General?"

"I healed you, Joan." Answered softly Ingrid. "Can you sit up?"

"I...I think so."

Helped by both Ingrid and Buscemi, Joan sat up on the floor of the hallway and looked with disbelief at her arms, which were now apparently intact despite the sleeves of her coverall being burned away.

"How...how could this be possible? How did you do this, General?"

"I am a Chosen of The One, the same powerful spiritual entity who gave me my ability to remember my past incarnations. One of the powers he bestowed on me is the power to heal by touch."

"A Chosen? You are some kind of prophet?"

"No, I am not a prophet, as I do not publicly promote the words of The One. I simply live by his words and help others as much as I can, occasionally with his help. Come, let's get up: you will still need to go get checked at our medical center after this." Looking next at the firefighter specialist standing close by, Ingrid gave him a few orders.

"Sergeant, get a firefighting team here on the double and check thoroughly the kitchen for any remaining flames or hot debris that could spark a new conflagration. Check in particular the ventilation system thoroughly. I am declaring the central kitchen closed until further notice, until it could be declared safe and be repaired and cleaned up. Crewmembers will have to temporarily use the fast food court and the coffee lounge to eat in the meantime."

"Understood, General. Our duty firefighting team is in fact arriving right now."

Ingrid nodded with satisfaction when she saw the approaching pair of electric carts carrying four firefighters in full protective gear and a reserve of halon extinguishers and other tools. Not far behind was a medical cart carrying two medics and a medical

stretcher. Ingrid, again helped by Buscemi, escorted Joan to the medical cart and laid her on top of the stretcher before looking at the senior medic.

“Misses Brewster will now be mostly okay, but she still needs to be checked for shock. Tell Doctor Biddle that I will soon speak with her to explain what happened. You may now bring Misses Brewster to the infirmary.”

With the medical cart now departing and with the firefighting team entering the main kitchen, Ingrid was left in the middle of the hallway, surrounded by a dozen persons looking at her with wide eyes. She looked back at them while speaking in a calm but firm voice.

“Listen carefully, my good people. What you saw may have stunned you but you have no reasons to fear me or my powers. I will make a public address later today to explain all this. In the meantime, please return to your occupations. Chef Buscemi, take your day crew of cooks with you and go to the fast food court to help the cooks there, as they soon will get swamped with customers.”

“Uh, we will go there at once, General.”

Ingrid’s next action was to go to the nearest telephone and, punching a special code in it, switched it to ship wide address mode.

“Attention all hands, this is General Dows speaking. An accident and fire have forced the temporary closing of the main kitchen and food court. You will thus have to use the fast food court and the coffee lounge for your meals, and this until further notice. Thank you for your attention.”

She then paused for a few seconds before adding a few more words.

“Sergeant Jack Brewster is to report immediately to the ship’s infirmary. I say again, Sergeant Jack Brewster is to report immediately to the ship’s infirmary.”

Ingrid then put back down the receiver and thought about how she was going to manage the fallouts from all this. While she had confidence that her crewmembers would react positively to her demonstration of her power of healing, she was less sure about the reactions from the foreign scientists traveling aboard the PROMETHEUS, or from various people on Earth once the news about this would reach it.

After making sure that the situation inside the main kitchen was under control, Ingrid started walking towards the ship’s medical center, situated in Quadrant 13 of the carrousel she was in. When she arrived at the reception desk of the medical center, the duty nurse directed her to one of the two medical examination rooms adjacent to the sick

parade waiting lounge, where she found Joan Brewster being examined by Colonel Jennifer Biddle, the ship's chief medical officer and chief surgeon. Ingrid didn't miss the cautious look Biddle briefly threw at her when she entered the examination room.

"How is Misses Brewster doing, Doctor?"

"She is understandably severely shaken but is otherwise fine, General. Is it true..."

"That I healed her? Yes! Touch healing is one of the powers I got from The One, on top of slow aging and being able to remember my past incarnations. I have been hiding most of my powers for the past decades in order to avoid creating a circus around me, but I could not and would not let an innocent suffer just to protect my secrets. With this said, I am still counting on the medical talents and skills of you and your team to take good care of my crew."

Ingrid then eyed Joan Brewster, whose coverall was half burned away, while her blackened bra had been removed by Biddle, exposing her chest.

"I have called your husband to the infirmary, Misses Brewster, and he should be here soon. He will be able to escort you back to your cabin, where I want you to rest and recuperate with your husband and son for the rest of the day. We will lend you something to properly cover your chest."

Joan hesitated for a moment before speaking, her voice still a bit shaky.

"Are you an angel, General?"

Ingrid grinned at that question, genuinely amused.

"Me, an angel? Not if you listen to some of the preachers who damned me to Hell for my off-duty partying. And they still don't know about half of my so-called 'sins'." She then became most serious before continuing.

"No, I am not an angel, Misses Brewster. I am still a mortal woman, despite my powers and prolonged youth. Yes, I benefited repeatedly in the past from divine interventions from The One, whom most would wrongfully equate to God, but I will eventually die one day, like everyone else. Right now, my sole concern is the safety and happiness of you and the rest of my crew."

"Can you tell me more about your 'One', General?"

"I will only say that it is an immensely powerful spiritual entity who has been following Humanity's evolution for millions of years. What we call our souls are actually tiny parts of The One which inhabit us from the fetus stage until our death, then return to The One for a period of cleansing before going to inhabit a new fetus. The One's gift of

individual souls is the main reason why us Humans stand out among all the other lifeforms on Earth. However, The One has no wish to be worshiped, nor does it want to impose its will on us, contrary to what you will see or hear in most organized religions practiced on Earth. When it acts, which is fairly infrequent, it is normally through a Chosen like me. Even then, it will take something truly major to push it into action.”

“You say ‘it’ and not ‘him’ or ‘her’, General. Why?”

“Because The One is neither male nor female. It is a gender-neutral entity. I will stop it at that, if you don’t mind, Misses Brewster: I already said a lot more than I ever did about The One.”

Jack Brewster, worry on his face, entered the examination room at that time and nearly ran to Joan, who was sitting on the examination table.

“JOAN, ARE YOU ALRIGHT?”

Both exchanged an emotional hug before Joan answered him.

“There was an accident at the main kitchen and I got badly burned, but General Dows healed me. I am alright now, thanks to her.”

Joan then spent a minute to explain to an incredulous Jack what had happened. At the end, Jack looked at Ingrid with a mix of disbelief and gratitude.

“However you did this, General, I can only say ‘thank you’.”

“You’re welcome, Sergeant. A nurse will provide your wife with a medical gown, to properly cover her chest. Then, I want you to escort your wife to your cabin. Consider both of you as being off for the rest of the day.”

Biddle, who had left the examination room for a short moment, then returned with a medical gown and gave it to Joan.

“Here you are, Misses Brewster. You may return to your cabin once you will have put this on.”

Joan promptly put the gown on, with Jack helping her by tying the back strings, then stepped off the examination table. Before leaving, she went to Ingrid and pressed one of her hands with both hands, while looking Ingrid in the eyes.

“Thank you again, General: you saved me from being disfigured for the rest of my life. I will never forget this.”

“I would have done the same for any other occupant of this ship, Misses Brewster. Go enjoy the company of your husband and son and spend some good family time with them.”

Joan nodded her head once, then walked out with Jack, leaving Ingrid alone with Biddle. The latter gave her a cautious look again.

“How are you going to explain all this to the crew, General?”

“Mostly, I won’t! I will call a command staff meeting for two o’clock this afternoon and will publish a short ship-wide statement afterwards. I want you to be present at that meeting, Doctor.”

“I will be there, General.” said softly Biddle, still overwhelmed by this extraordinary event.

13:56 (Universal Time)

Command conference room

Main Deck, Quadrant 09, Carrousel ‘A’

Ingrid looked around the large conference table at her senior staff members, eyeing their expressions and evaluating their individual states of mind. On top of her usual command staff officers, she had invited as well the heads of her medical, scientific, administrative and general support staff, plus a few select extra persons. One of those select extra persons was Doctor Sasha Smirnov, who was the senior Soviet scientist aboard the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS. If she was going to reveal and explain some of her secrets, then she wanted to be fully open about this. Seeing that everyone who had been summoned was in, she started speaking in a light, facetious tone.

“Okay, guys and girls! I know that many aboard qualify my ass as ‘divine’ but I am no angel, as our three chaplains could attest to. Whatever you heard up to now about the incident at the main kitchen this morning, I want you to simply consider me as your mission commander, no more, no less. First, I would like to know what kind of reactions and comments you saw and heard since then around your respective departments. Is this impacting negatively in any ways on the good functioning of this ship?”

Her deputy, Rear Admiral John Young, a man who had been under her command for years and who both knew her well and admired her a lot, was the first to speak, using a cautious tone of voice.

“From what was reported to me to date, General, I would say that there were no negative comments or reactions around the ship to your healing of Misses Brewsters. There are however a lot of questions and speculations about you. One item that was

reported to me was the fact that our internal security surveillance cameras, which we use to quickly locate any significant breakdowns or accidents around the ship, recorded you when you left your office and when you arrived near the main kitchen. According to the time stamps on those recordings, you covered the 190 meters between those two spots in no more than fifteen seconds. You thus unofficially broke the Olympic record for the 200-meter sprint by a good six seconds.”

Ingrid made a contrite smile on hearing that.

“Gee, I am slacking off: I thought that I could do better than that.”

She then became serious as the others around the table looked at her with shock.

“Listen, people, I may be able to easily break Olympic records in multiple disciplines but that, along with my other powers I hold from The One, is irrelevant to our mission. We are still engaged in a multi-year deep space exploration mission and I still am responsible for the safety and welfare of over 500 persons on this ship, along with ensuring the success of this mission. Whatever other people think of me is unimportant, as long as I still have their loyalty and respect. Do I still have those?”

Getting affirmative answers from around the table, Ingrid then looked at Sasha Smirnov, who seemed unsure about why he was present. She then spoke up in Russian, making a few of her officers stiffen a bit.

“Doctor Smirnov, I summoned you to this command meeting because you are the senior Soviet scientist aboard this ship and are well respected by both your Soviet colleagues and by the other scientists who are members of this crew. Contrary to what you may have expected, you have my permission to pass the news about this morning’s incident back to Moscow, when you will send your next personal message by radio to Earth. I will only ask you not to describe me as some capitalist experiment into a super-soldier project.”

Smirnov nearly laughed at that and played her game in turn.

“You mean that you are not, General?”

“Definitely not, Doctor! I am only a perverted girl who likes her fun.”

“I will pass that along to Moscow, General, including the perverted girl part.” replied the smiling scientist. Ingrid’s smile widened on hearing that. She then looked at Katherine Johnson, the bespectacled African-American mathematical genius who was the ship’s navigator and chief-mathematician.

“Misses Johnson, how are we doing in terms of our navigation towards Saturn?”

"We are still on our calculated path and will arrive in the Saturn System in late March of next year, in fourteen months, General."

"Fourteen months..." said softly Ingrid to herself. Watched by her staff, she then thought about what she had planned to do with her personal life. With babies seemingly popping up nearly every month aboard the ship, her own urge for motherhood was getting stronger and stronger by the day and her initial decision to wait until her return to Earth before having a baby was now becoming shakier by the day. She then took a decision and looked at her deputy, John Young.

"Admiral Young, you may end up in temporary command of the ship in about nine months, so that I could take a period of paid leave of a few months. Are you ready for that?"

"Of course, General! I believe that you in fact have accumulated an inordinate amount of unused paid leave due to you, so you could even take over a year of leave without using all that you are owed. Uh, may I deduce that you are planning to become pregnant in the coming months?"

"You may, Admiral Young. Since we will be in space cruise mode for the next fourteen months, with our sole outstanding activity being astronomical observation, I believe that this year would be the ideal time for me to take a couple of months off duty. I would of course stay available to take any major command decision as needed during that time period, but that would involve only major decisions which would impact directly our mission."

"Understood, General." replied Young, with the Protestant chaplain, Major Ronald Jefferson, following up with a hesitant question.

"Please excuse my indiscretion on this, General, but could I assume that you also intend to marry in the coming months?"

Ingrid didn't get irritated at that question and simply smiled to Jefferson as she answered him.

"You would assume wrong, Father Jefferson. I have no plans to marry right now and will have my future baby as a single mother."

Jefferson, like the Catholic chaplain, Captain James Greenwood, and the ship's rabbi, Captain Joshua Wiesenthal, barely managed to hide an expression of disapproval then.

"But, the eventual father will have to be registered as such as a matter of legal documentation, General. That is a standard administrative procedure of the Space Corps and of the American armed forces."

Her smile now gone, Ingrid bent forward and put one forearm on the conference table while drilling Jefferson with her eyes.

“The father of my future baby will stay unnamed, as my intention is to raise my future child alone. The administrative procedure you mentioned may be a standard one but it is not a mandatory one. I anyway plan to leave the military service once back on Earth, as I will have by then accumulated over 44 years of service in the American forces and will have fought for my country in six wars. And that is not counting my year of war service with the German Luftwaffe in 1940 and 1941.”

Her words, along with her tone, stunned most of the people around the table, including John Young, who did say something then.

“The country will indeed lose a great officer when you will retire from the service, General. Are you planning to leave completely government service? Apart from being presently the commander of the Space Corps, you are also our director of national space programs and a special presidential advisor.”

Ingrid nodded slowly her head at that, acknowledging the correctness of Young’s declaration.

“You are right about my other titles, Admiral young. However, I have not taken a firm decision yet on my future personal plans after I retire from the military. In truth, I suspect that headhunters from various aerospace companies and prestigious universities, including from the Boston’s M.I.T.²⁴, will be hounding me the moment that I will announce my retirement from the Space Corps. As for my positions as director of our national space programs and as presidential advisor, President Reagan will be out of office by the time we will come back to Earth, as he will have by then completed two terms as President. I can’t predict who will replace him in the White House, so I don’t know if I will still be popular in Washington by then. Well, with all this said, I believe that we have covered the subjects I wanted to cover. Does anybody have a last question, comment or suggestion? No? Then I declare this meeting adjourned.”

The participants to the meeting got up as one from their chairs and started filing out of the conference room. However, one person lagged behind the group: Katherine Johnson, who ended being alone with Ingrid. The mathematician then closed the door before looking cautiously at Ingrid.

²⁴ M.I.T.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, one of the most prestigious American universities geared towards science and technology degrees.

“First, General, let me say that the cause of equality for American women will lose its biggest supporter with you. Second, while I wholly approve of your decision to become a mother, even while staying single, I must warn you to expect busybodies to watch your cabin’s door and to hear all kinds of rumors every time a man will enter your cabin after duty hours. I myself saw plenty of that kind of unhealthy social court of opinion in my past.”

Ingrid sat against the edge of the table and crossed her arms, showing visible frustration, but not at Katherine.

“I’m afraid that you are too right about that, Katherine. I am wondering if any single man will be willing to expose himself to such personal speculations in exchange for possible sex. As for the married men on this ship, they will probably avoid entering my cabin like the Plague, for fear of being accused of possible adultery. Only visiting women may be safe from such rumor-mongering now. Damn!”

“You will find a way, General.” said softly the mathematician. “You always do when confronted with a problem. I sincerely wish that you will find a good, decent man as a father for your future baby.”

“Thanks, Katherine: I really appreciate your counsel and support.”

“My pleasure, General.” replied Johnson before leaving the conference room.

20:09 (Universal Time)

Ingrid Dows’ cabin, Upper Deck, Quadrant 10, Carrousel ‘A’

U.S.S. PROMETHEUS

Ingrid felt some discouragement and also some frustration as she entered the standard individual cabin she occupied on the ship. Her cabin shared the upper deck of Quadrant 10 with four family cabins, a common lobby-lounge, a laundry room, a storage room and a janitor’s corner. She thus lived surrounded by four families with children. Even though she was a four-star general and was the mission commander, she had insisted on using only a standard individual cabin, which measured six meters by five meters and was split into a bedroom, a lounge and a bathroom. That was in fact plenty enough for her, as she was used by years of service in war zones to be frugal in her personal needs. While crossing the eight-by-five-meter common lobby-lounge, she had noticed how the conversation between the three spouses sitting in the sofas and easy chairs distributed around the open space had suddenly died down when she had

appeared, coming from the wide staircase linking the upper deck with the main deck of this quadrant. She had also noticed how the eyes of those three mature women, wives of three of her more senior officers, had not so discretely followed her until she had entered her cabin. Katherine Johnson's warning was thus already proving prophetic.

Hooking her service cap on one of the wall hooks next to her cabin's entrance door, Ingrid turned around to go to her bathroom and take a shower but then nearly jumped out of her skin: somebody was quietly standing in a corner of her lounge. She however didn't shout in alarm or tried to flee, as that someone was actually a luminous, semi-translucent human shape, making it an angel of The One. The luminous shape then quickly solidified, morphing into a young but tall, athletic and also impossibly handsome man dressed in a simple blue robe. With her heart still beating furiously from the sudden surprise, Ingrid respectfully bowed her head to the angel.

"What message or task does The One have for me today?"

"He actually sent me in order to help you with a most delicate problem you are now facing, Ingrid. By the way, you may call me 'Michael'. Now that you are widely known aboard this ship to be a Chosen, you will be exposed to an even greater amount of public scrutiny than before. In that, your friend Katherine Johnson was right. Know that The One approves of your desire to have a baby at this stage of your life: you served The One well for decades and more than deserve to have your wish fulfilled. Besides, even if he didn't approve of it, it would be petty and wrong of him to deny that wish to you."

"And how do you intend to help me in this, Michael?"

"By making it impossible for others in this ship to know who will be the father of your baby."

The robe of the said Michael's then vanished, revealing a handsome naked male body which made Ingrid suck air in as she admired the angel in all his glory and manhood. A smiling Michael then walked softly to her and smiled down to her from his height of 190 centimeters, while gently taking one of her hands.

"You need a good shower after your hard day of work. Come, I will help you wash."

Ingrid then understood with a shock that the angel was going to be the father of her future baby and looked at him with some concern.

"My future child...will The One expect him or her to serve him?"

"Only if he or she wants to, and if you approve of it. Do you want to have a boy or a girl?"

"It does not matter to me, Michael: I love both equally."

"Well said, Ingrid, or shall I say 'Amdira', your initial name some 7,000 years ago, when your soul first walked the Earth."

Ingrid then let the angel walk her to her bathroom, her heart beating fast with emotions.

07:17 (Universal Time)

Tuesday, April 06, 1982 'C'

Presidential private suite, The White House

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

President Ronald Reagan, who liked to sleep reasonable hours, was still wearing his pajamas and was about to dress into a dark blue suit when the telephone on his night stand rang. Picking up the receiver, he noticed that the call had come on a secure line.

"Yes?"

"Mister President, this is Alexander Haig. I am sorry to disturb you at this early hour but we just got some concerning news: the Argentinians have invaded the Falkland Islands."

"WHAT? How are the British reacting to that?"

"We still don't know about that, Mister President. In fact, I am not sure that the British government has yet been advised fully about that situation."

"I see! We better make our minds quickly about how we will react to this, and before either the British or the Argentinians ask us to take their side. Call James Baker and tell him on my behalf to call in a meeting of our National Security Council for ten this morning, then send me in advance whatever you know about this. In the meantime, I will finish dressing and will have a quick breakfast, then will go to the Oval Office."

"It will be done, Mister President."

Reagan then hung up the receiver and stayed pensive for a moment. He was going to have to check a few maps to remember where precisely the Falkland Islands were.

By ten o'clock, the principal members of the National Security Council were assembled in the White House's Situation Room, a secure facility in the basement of the

building. Ronald Reagan, who had been able to read a basic briefing file on the Falkland Islands, critically looked at his Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, with whom he lately had a few disagreements.

“So, what the hell is going on down in the South Atlantic, Alexander?”

“From what we know, Mister President, the Argentinians landed some of their marines in and around Port Stanley and other locations in the Falklands, and this early this morning, Falklands time. Since only a handful of British soldiers were stationed in the Falklands, the Argentinians were able to quickly gain control of those islands and are now busy reinforcing their presence there via air and sea.”

“And why did the Argentinians decide like that to invade a territory occupied by the British, even if that territory is next door to Argentina?”

“To make it short, Mister President, the Argentinians did so probably because their negotiations with the British about the dispute on the sovereignty of the Falkland Islands had been at a standstill for years, if not decades. In truth, those negotiations were more like a dialogue between two deaf-mutes. Even the historical arguments about this question are split. The one fact that can't be denied is that the Falkland Islands are fairly close to the Argentinian coast, while they are thousands of miles away from Great Britain.”

“Then why do the British insist on retaining those islands?” replied Reagan, becoming a bit irritated. “From what I read this morning about the Falklands, that place could be rightly described as a freezing shithole. There aren't even trees on those islands! The only things there are peat bog, fish and sheep.”

“Quite true, Mister President. In my opinion, the main reason the British are clinging to the Falklands is simple national pride. Most of the British Empire has disappeared by now, including India, Newfoundland and Singapore, while other parts are now independent, sovereign countries, like Australia, Canada and New Zealand. The Falklands, along with the neighboring South Georgia Islands, are thus some of the few territories left of their empire. There was one time when the Falklands were important as a coaling station for ships and for whale hunting, but those times are long gone by now.”

“And what about the motives of the Argentinians in taking the Falklands?”

“National pride is also a factor for them, Mister President. However, the present military junta in Buenos Aires is quite unpopular, due to the weak Argentinian economy and the harsh domestic policies of the junta. The generals there may have launched that invasion in order to deflect their national opinion from the domestic situation.”

"I see! And how do you expect the British to react to this, Al?"

"Rather violently, Mister President. In this case, their national pride will clearly override any military or economic reasoning, in my opinion. The British are still a most proud and stubborn people."

"Hum! What are the chances for the British to be able to retake and keep the Falklands, gentlemen?"

This time it was General David Jones, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who answered him.

"Next to nil, Mister President. The worst problems the British have in mounting any kind of military response are distance, logistics and lack of nearby airbases. Great Britain is nearly 8,000 miles from the Falklands, while the Argentinian coast is less than 500 miles away from Port Stanley, the capital of the Falklands. Due to the poor state of the British economy in the last years and decades, and due to the loss of most of their colonies and imperial territories, the British military is only a shadow of its past self, especially where the Royal Air Force is concerned, while the Royal Navy is not much better off. The severe pasting General Dows administered to the British in 1953, when she retaliated against British treacherous attacks against her Palestine Task Force, really hurt the British in the long term, with the British aeronautical industry taking a nosedive in the following years as the various military and commercial aircraft designed by us under the direction of General Dows basically sounded the death knell of many British airlines and aircraft manufacturers. The British situation was not improved by the fact that they twice shot at the spaceplane piloted by General Dows, hitting it the second time over Australia and downing it while it carried two Soviet cosmonauts saved in orbit by Dows. That incident, as you may recall, Mister President, caused us after that to put in place severe economic and diplomatic sanctions against Great Britain. About General Dows and the British, I must state here that the British still call her a war criminal and would arrest her if she ever stepped on British territory."

"They are still blacklisting General Dows?" said Reagan, feeling anger building up at those words. "What kind of hypocrites are those British? First, they refused to help us during the First Korean War, washed their hands of the Indochina problem, then sent their commandos to attack our airbase in Israel and had their cruiser jam our radars during a mass Arab air attack. Next, they shot twice at our spaceplane and never apologized about their actions. They better not come to us now to ask for our help and support, because my answer then will be a resounding 'no'! What about the

Argentiniens, General Jones? Would they be able to resist any counter-attack by the British?"

"We think so, Mister President. Again, they have the distances and closeness of their continental airbases playing in their favor. Also, as a signatory state of the Rio Treaty of 1947, they were able in the past to buy quite a lot of American military equipment, including some quite sophisticated aircraft and missiles. They notably possess some 200 combat aircraft, including F-10 supersonic fighters and A-3 attack aircraft, which were originally developed under General Dows' direction, plus over thirty modern heavy transport aircraft and a few EC-142 flying command and surveillance patrol aircraft. If any British combat fleet approaches the Falklands, chances are that it will be quickly located, attacked and then sunk by the Argentiniens, Mister President."

"Well, I still don't like the idea of such a war in the South Atlantic and would prefer that it be resolved diplomatically. However, if either the British or the Argentiniens approach us and ask for our support, I want our answer to be that we will keep a strict neutrality into this. The Argentiniens forfeited our direct support by attacking first, while I will not help the British cling to their last shreds of empire, especially for such a worthless piece of estate."

08:12 (Universal Time)

Wednesday, April 07, 1982 'C'

Ingrid Dows' office, U.S.S. PROMETHEUS

With the intent to go next to the ship's medical center to speak with Doctor Biddle, Ingrid sifted quickly through the content of the 'in' basket on her desk. She was surprised to find in it a relatively low-level classified file, which turned out to be a short intelligence report being circulated to all American forces' units and ships. Reading quickly that report, Ingrid rolled her eyes while letting the file flop down on her desk.

"The Argentiniens and the British are going to war over a worthless piece of cold, barren ground like the Falklands? Really? There can't be more than one or two thousand people living in that place."

Giving up on trying to understand politicians, Ingrid left her office and walked to the quadrant housing the ship's medical center, where she went to see the chief-surgeon, Jennifer Biddle. Making sure first that nobody else could hear them, Ingrid went straight to the reason of her visit.

"Doc, I would like to pass a pregnancy test...discreetly. I missed my periods for two months in a row."

Biddle, a small woman in her fifties, got up at once from behind her desk and signaled her to sit down while walking out.

"Please wait here, General: I will be back in a minute."

As promised, Biddle soon returned and handed a small instrument wrapped in a sterile plastic bag to Ingrid.

"Here is a pregnancy test tube, General. You will just need to use a nearby bathroom and then return here with it. I will wait for you."

"Thank you, Doc!"

It was then the turn of Ingrid to leave for a moment, returning after four minutes and handing the instrument to Biddle, who examined it at once. Biddle threw a sober look at Ingrid while still holding the test instrument.

"You are effectively pregnant, General, about two months pregnant. You sure acted quickly about your plans to have a baby. I suppose that I can't ask you who is the father, right?"

"Exactly! About this result, keep it confidential. You may inform Admiral Young, my deputy, about it but nobody else. I do not wish to see a whirlwind of gossips and suppositions start about who my partner was."

"I understand, General. I will be discrete, I promise."

"Thank you, Doctor."

Ingrid then left Biddle's office, taking a deep breath once out in the main hallway. If all went well, her life was going to drastically change around the end of October of this year, with the coming of a true gift.

09:51 (Universal Time)

Saturday, April 10, 1982 'C'

Squash court # 2, Lower Deck, Quadrant 15, Carrousel 'A'

Quite a few spectators were sitting outside the squash court in which Ingrid was disputing a match with Sally Ride, who was an accomplished tennis player on top of being a physicist. Ingrid actually favored playing squash to stay fit, as it demanded speed, agility and good eye-hand coordination, on top of a good cardio-vascular

capacity. In that, she was not alone to like squash and the four squash courts on the ship were proving quite popular among the crew and even guest scientists.

A powerful swipe of Ingrid's racket made the squash ball bounce at lightning speed from the end wall of the court, not leaving time to a tired Sally Ride to react before it zipped by her. Breathing heavily, the thirty-year-old physicist wiped some sweat from her forehead before smiling to Ingrid.

"Damn, Ingrid! Your slam could have dug a hole in the wall of the court. As for your eye-hand coordination, you are tops."

"Hey, I'm a fighter pilot after all, on top of being an astronaut. You need good eye-hand coordination in air combat. However, don't sell yourself short: you were a serious opponent here."

"Thanks! You know, seeing all these families with children aboard this ship of space gave me an idea. I would like to know what you would think of it."

"Go ahead, Sally!" replied Ingrid, curious. She listened to Sally's idea and, by the time the physicist was finished speaking, Ingrid had a big grin on her face.

"Sally, you're a genius!"

10:08 (Universal Time)

Sunday, April 11, 1982 'C'

Port side ground vehicle airlock

U.S.S. PROMETHEUS, deep Space between Jupiter and Saturn

There was excitement inside the large airlock chamber as the outer door opened up, showing the blackness of Space. Major Ellison Onizuka, who was part of the crowd of 174 persons, along with his wife Lorna and his two daughters Janelle and Darien, gently patted Lorna's shoulder to reassure her.

"It will be fun, you will see, Lorna. Look at Janelle and Darien: they are impatient to start this."

"I know that it will be fun, honey, but I never floated in Space before."

"But you did go to the Zero-G Flying Cage a number of times, no?"

"Yes, but that was a protected environment, with padded walls all around. Today, there will be nothing around us, literally."

“Yes, but we will all be hooked to safety lines and there will be experienced astronauts like me to watch over the wives and kids. Besides, General Dows is here, with us, and she organized this. There are no reasons to be fearful.”

Lorna didn't reply to that as the occupants of the airlock started going out on the lowered cargo ramp, sticking to the deck and ramp thanks to their magnetized boot soles. While the qualified members of the Space Corps present, like Ellison Onizuka, wore regulation spacesuits, the non-members wore their much simpler safety spacesuits, which cost a lot less to produce and were easier to put on. Those safety spacesuits, produced in a wide variety of sizes, including for small children, could protect their wearers from the vacuum and cold of space and had enough air reserves for two hours, more than enough for today's activity. There had been a wave of excitement and joy around the ship when Ingrid Dows had announced yesterday that there would be a mass 'family deep Space walk' as the ship was cruising towards Saturn on its V.A.S.I.M.R. plasma engines.

Ingrid, standing on the cargo ramp and watching like an eagle as the families filed out of the airlock, made sure that everybody was clipped to a long safety line via a chord attached to their spacesuits as soon as they emerged from the airlock. The safety line itself linked the lowered port side cargo ramp to the starboard side cargo ramp, some 240 meters across the underside of the PROMETHEUS. As soon as everyone was on the ramp and attached to the safety line, Ingrid spoke out in her headset microphone.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. This is General Dows speaking. First off, about your spacesuits' radios. You were asked to switch them into 'receive only' mode so that this frequency would not instantly become clogged with various exclamations and remarks but, if you feel in danger, do not hesitate to switch to 'receive and transmit' mode. The qualified astronauts who are with you will anyway escort you at all times and will help you to enjoy this activity, which is meant to initiate you with deep Space. On my signal, you will start following the safety line, which links this ramp with the other ramp on the other side of the ship, advancing by pulling with your hands on the line. In the process, you will find yourselves floating into nothingness. Do not panic then: you will not fall, as we are in zero-gravity conditions. While you follow the line, you will be able to admire the planet Jupiter, which is still clearly visible as a big colored ball despite the distance. You will thus be living an experience that very few other Humans will have

shared. I can already tell you that, once in the Saturn System, we will organize group rover tours on the surface of the moons deemed safest for us to be on, so today's experience will not be the only special event you will live through during this mission. On this, let's start the spacewalk! Admiral Young, you may start first on the line with your wife. The others will then follow at safe intervals of ten feet. Those holding baby capsules will be towed along the safety line by the fathers. Have fun, people!"

When her turn came to leave the ramp and pull herself along the safety line, Lorna Onizuka hesitated for a second before arming herself with courage and starting to pull herself along. Her heart rate and breathing accelerated at once as she saw nothing under her but emptiness, with the exception of the distant Jupiter. Not feeling any sensation of falling however helped her regain control of herself and she followed her youngest daughter, Darien, who was now seven-years old and who appeared to have fun doing this. By the time that she was halfway, Lorna's fears had completely subsided and, when she arrived at the other ramp, she was actually enjoying the experience. Her oldest daughter, thirteen-years old Janelle, and her husband soon joined her on the starboard ramp and they were able to reenter the ship as a family. Ellison Onizuka grinned on seeing the big smiles on the faces of his daughters and the content look of his wife: this was exactly what he had hoped for out of this activity. Judging from the expressions around him, everybody else seemed to have enjoyed the experience. He exchanged a thumbs up signal with nearby hydraulics engineer James Van Hoffen, who had escorted his wife and three young daughters during the space walk. There was certainly going to be a lot of excited conversations at lunch today.

CHAPTER 23 – BATTLE FOR THE FALKLANDS

11:35 (South Atlantic Time)

Thursday, April 29, 1982 'C'

Navigation bridge of the nuclear battleship HMS VANGUARD

Flagship of British Task Force 317, Operation Corporate

320 nautical miles north of the Falklands, South Atlantic

Rear Admiral Sandy Woodward was looking at the sea from inside the navigation bridge of his flagship, the nuclear-propelled battleship HMS VANGUARD, when a duty bridge officer presented to him a telephone receiver.

“The combat information center for you, Admiral.”

“Thank you!” said Woodward before taking the receiver and speaking in it. “Admiral Woodward!”

“Admiral, this is Commander Bisley, in the C.I.C. We have a confirmed Argentinian EC-142T long-range patrol aircraft trailing our task force from the North. Unfortunately, it is staying just outside the radius of action of our SEA HARRIER fighter jets while shadowing us with its radars. The Argentinians now know that we are coming and in what numbers, sir.”

While that piece of news displeased Woodward, it didn't surprise him. The Argentinian Air Force was known to possess good numbers of American-made aircraft that, while not top of the line anymore, were still effective. One of them was the Fairchild EC-142T, which had served in World War 2 as an electronic reconnaissance and patrol aircraft. In those roles, the EC-142T had proved extremely efficient at the time, being well in advance of anything else in service then. It had eventually been replaced in American service by the RC-152 jet aircraft and relegated to secondary roles, but a number of them, being surplus, had also been sold to various Latin American countries which had signed the American-sponsored Rio Treaty of 1947, of which Argentina was part. On top of buying eight EC-142T upgraded with more modern radars and radios, Argentina had also bought in the last decade a number of American-produced jet aircraft, including the F-10 FALCON supersonic fighter and the A-3 THUNDERBOLT II attack aircraft, two types of jet combat aircraft that could seriously hurt his fleet. Even worse, the

Argentines had also bought American air-to-air and air-to-surface missiles dating from the same generation, missiles which had by now been superseded in American service by newer, better missiles. Some three decades ago, those missiles had proved murderous against Soviet, Chinese and also British forces in various wars and terrains of operations. Woodward's pious hope was that the newer British electronic warfare equipment would prove to be able to jam or decoy the guidance systems of those old American missiles. He then looked at the two forward gun turrets of his flagship, each housing two fifteen-inch guns. As originally planned when the VANGUARD had started to be built during World War 2, it belonged to the KING GEORGE V class, which had three turrets carrying a total of ten fourteen-inch guns. However, the course of the war had slowed down its construction. Then, after peace had been declared, there were plans to save money by using instead four fifteen-inch gun turrets which were surplus. At about the same time, London had decided to use its new nuclear technology, stolen from the data files from the future which had belonged to Nancy Laplante, to turn the VANGUARD into a nuclear-powered ship and also to add missile systems to it. While there had been a lot of British pride on display when it was finally commissioned, the HMS VANGUARD was in reality a sort of Frankenstein creature, mixing old and new technology into a concept, that of the battleship, that was clearly past its prime. Still, it had been retained in service despite objections from many sides, mostly because it possessed superb flagship facilities. Those command facilities, rather than its big guns and missile battery, had made the VANGUARD a natural choice as flagship of this task force. Thus, it was now up to Woodward to make the best out of it in its first use ever in a shooting war.

"Start planning an anti-submarine search grid ahead of us, Commander. The Argentines may well use the information from that EC-142T to direct one or more of their diesel submarines into an ambush position near the Falklands."

"Understood, sir! I'm on it!"

Putting down the telephone receiver, Woodward reflected mentally on his mission. He was now in command of a fleet of 33 combat and support ships and of three nuclear attack submarines, the most Great Britain could muster at such short notice, with the mission to retake the Falklands and also the South Georgia Islands, which had been taken as well by the Argentines. To do that, he could count on two aircraft carriers: the nuclear-powered ARK ROYAL, the pride of the Royal Navy; and the conventional HERMES. He also had with his fleet a brigade of Royal Commandos, transported into

the hastily requisitioned ocean liner SS CANBERRA. More troops would follow in the weeks to come. However, his biggest worry, after Argentinian submarines, was his fleet's inferiority in terms of airpower. While the Argentinians could count on over 120 moderately modern jet combat aircraft, including supersonic fighters, his two aircraft carriers only carried a total of 42 HARRIER and SEA HARRIER VTOL²⁵ jet subsonic fighter-bombers, plus twelve Blackburn BUCCANEER carrier-launched light bombers and a collection of helicopters, but no supersonic aircraft. Now, destiny was going to show if those hastily assembled assets were going to be enough to do the job.

Looking at his watch, Woodward decided to go have lunch while things were quiet and left the bridge. He however went to the officers' wardroom rather than to his dining cabin, as he wanted to discuss the coming campaign with some of his senior officers while eating. On arrival at the wardroom, a steward promptly led him to his personal table. As he sat down, he saw that the television set in one corner of the compartment was set on an American news channel, thanks to satellite retransmission, with a commentator talking about the conflict about the Falklands. That reminded Woodward the bitter fact that Great Britain had yet to launch a single person in space and had not even been able to itself place in orbit its own satellites. The problem there had been money, like many other things in Great Britain. The last three decades had been quite rough on the British economy, with the gradual loss of its empire hitting the country hard. It had also suffered severely in terms of national prestige around the World, something that had impacted on British exports and further hurt its economy. Woodward's bitterness was compounded by his belief that much of that had been self-inflicted wounds. Too many arrogant or incompetent British politicians and governments had denied the reality of a shrinking empire and had behaved as if Great Britain was still a leading nation, ignoring the dazzling rise of the United States in both economic, industrial and technological terms. A certain young female American general had then brutally reminded Great Britain about reality, starting in 1953, when she had thwarted the British strategic plans concerning the Middle East and had shown that British made-aircraft were inferior to American-made aircraft. Then, that same female general had led a masterful space program, with that general becoming the first Human to orbit Earth.

²⁵ VTOL: Vertical Take Off and Landing.

Now, the United States had a giant spaceship heading towards Saturn, while Great Britain was still cut out of space.

Woodward had time to order his meal and have it served when the American commentator switched subjects, going from the Falklands to the latest news about the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS. One lieutenant commander sitting at a nearby table shouted an order at a passing steward when the picture of General Ingrid Dows appeared on the television screen, as the American news commentator did a brief recap of her career in space.

"STEWARD, SWITCH THE CHANNELS, PLEASE. WE DON'T WANT TO WATCH THAT BITCH."

"BELAY THAT ORDER, STEWARD!" said Woodward at once, surprising everybody around him. The lieutenant commander who had asked for the TV channel to be changed gave a stunned look to his admiral.

"But, sir, that bitch killed a thousand British sailors off Israel in 1953 when she sank the HMS TIGER and she is still categorized as a war criminal in Great Britain."

"I am very much aware of those facts, mister, but I do not consider her as a war criminal. The HMS TIGER was sunk by Dows, who attacked our cruiser alone in her fighter-bomber, after our ship jammed the radars and transmissions of Dows' Palestine task force during an Arab air attack against Dows' airbase in Ramat David. She had previously warned us of the consequences if we did so but our leaders then decided to ignore her warning and we paid the price for it. You should study her tactics instead of berating her, mister: you could learn a lot from her."

An embarrassed silence fell in the wardroom as Woodward attacked his food, ignoring from then on the flummoxed lieutenant commander.

Seeing his intelligence officer enter the wardroom as he was about to finish his lunch, Woodward signaled him to come sit at his table. The tall, lanky lieutenant commander took the chair opposite his admiral as Woodward started speaking to him.

"Mister Jenkins, I am quite concerned about the threat represented by the Argentinian air force and especially by the American-made jet aircraft and missiles they possess. Have you received from London the necessary signals parameters and analysis on Argentinian radars and missile guidance systems, so that we could jam or decoy them if we come under attack?"

Woodward didn't like the embarrassed expression which then appeared on Jenkins' face.

"Uh, no, Admiral. What we have is rather fragmentary and is also dated."

"Why? This electronic data is vital to us if we want to repel an Argentinian air attack."

"We don't have it because London doesn't have it, sir." replied the intelligence officer, keeping his voice low. "The Americans still refuse to give us technical information about the aircraft, missiles and radars they produced, including about the systems they sold to the Argentinians. I was told by London that our ministry of defense contacted the Americans at the start of this crisis and asked for that data but that the Americans rebuffed our officials, saying that the United States was going to follow a policy of strict neutrality in this conflict."

"But, the American systems and aircraft which were sold to the Argentinians date back by more than a decade. Some were sold over thirty years ago. You are telling me that we never got any detailed intelligence on those systems in all those years?"

"That is correct, Admiral. Since the end of World War 2, which we ended by nuking both Berlin and a string of Japanese cities, the United States has cut all intelligence links with us and, to this day, we are still in their dog house, if I could say so. The fracas with General Dows, when we sent disguised commandos to attack her airbase in Israel and when the HMS TIGER jammed her radars during an Arab air attack on her base, was further compounded when, a few years later, we fired missiles against her spaceplane on two occasions, shooting it down over Australia in the second incident. I also believe personally that keeping General Dows on our blacklist cost us heavily in terms of any possible cooperation with the Americans, sir. As a result, the Americans continue to refuse to help us launch our own satellites in orbit and even ban British citizens from traveling to their orbital space station. To be totally frank, Admiral, I have to say that I can understand the Americans' attitude towards us: we shot ourselves in the foot many times politically in the past decades and, as recently as three weeks ago, our government still refused a demand by the Americans to take General Dows off our list of wanted criminals."

It took everything for Woodward not to bang his fist on the table out of frustration and anger.

“Do these twits in London realize that this stupid bad blood towards Dows could cost us dearly if we prove incapable of jamming or decoying away Argentinians missiles and radars?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t think that our politicians do, Admiral. As for our present situation, we will do our best to counter the Argentinians’ radars and missiles as they show up. We however will have to do that on the fly, learning about those systems while under attack by them. I frankly can’t promise total success then, Admiral.”

“I see! Thank you for your candidness, Mister Jenkins.”

“My pleasure, Admiral.” replied Jenkins before getting up and going to another table where three other senior officers were having lunch. Now alone at his table, Woodward mentally swore about the bloody-mindedness of his own government in this, as it was his sailors, soldiers and aviators who were going to potentially pay for those past political blunders.

16:39 (Argentina Time)

Saturday, May 8, 1982 ‘C’

Aircrews briefing room, Rio Gallegos Air Force Base

Rio Gallegos (806 kilometers from Port Stanley, Falklands)

Argentina

The aircrews from the Fifth Air Brigade understood at once that things were bad on seeing the somber expression on the face of their air group commander. Taking place behind the lectern placed in front of the rows of folding chairs of the briefing room, Colonel Carvalo made a map of the Southern Atlantic, on which both the southern parts of Argentina and the Malvinas²⁶ were featured, appear on the projection screen behind and to one side of him, then started to speak.

“Men, I have received some news from our upper echelons and they are not good. First, the British retook the South Georgia Islands on the fourth of this month and took out at the same time one of our submarines, the SANTA FE. Then, two days ago, the cruiser GENERAL BELGRANO was sunk southwest of the Malvinas by a British submarine. Our navy has reacted to that by recalling nearly all its warships back to port, including the aircraft carrier VEITICINCO DE MAYO. Its embarked aircraft will soon be

²⁶ Las Malvinas: Name used by the Argentinians to designate the Falkland Islands.

redistributed around our coastal air bases and will thus operate from land only, something that will severely limit their range. Furthermore, one of our CP-142, which have been doing a superb job at trailing and shadowing the approaching British invasion fleet, was unfortunately shot down yesterday when a British HARRIER fighter jet using supplementary drop tanks managed to reach it despite of the distance from its carrier. Four more of our aircraft were also shot down by British fighter jets in the last few days as they were trying to attack the British fleet. Soon, the British will be close enough to the Malvinas to start landing troops on it via helicopters or amphibious ships. The moment is thus critical for our country, if we want to retain the Malvinas as part of our sovereign national territory. I have called you in this afternoon to announce to you that the primary mission of our air group has changed. From being ready to repel any possible Chilean invasion in the Patagonia region, we will now concentrate on hitting the British fleet and preventing it from landing troops on the Malvinas. If they ever manage to land soldiers, then our job will be to support our troops defending the Malvinas and to destroy the British ground units as well as their ships. As our first contribution to this new mission, we will launch a strike against the British fleet in the early hours of tomorrow morning. The F-10 fighters of this base will escort our A-60s and will engage any British fighter aircraft encountered, leaving us free to concentrate on the British ships. Our priority targets will be the British aircraft carriers and amphibious assault ships.”

Carvalo then saw his deputy commander, Major Francisco Maradona, raise his hand to ask a question.

“Yes, Major?”

“With what will we attack the British warships, Colonel? We have no air-to-surface missiles in our base inventory and no bombs heavier than 227 kilos. What we mostly have are unguided rockets, napalm canisters and cannon ammunition, which were fine for our previous mission but not the best for anti-ship strikes.”

Carvalo nodded his head once to acknowledge the fact that Maradona was correct.

“We will use our 227 kilo general purpose bombs and both 127mm and 76.2mm rockets tomorrow. Since we don’t have air-to-air missiles for our A-60s, we will carry 127mm unguided rockets with semi-armor piercing warheads on our wingtip launch rails, while our wing weapons pylons will each carry three 227 kilo bombs. Our retractable 76.2mm internal rocket pods and our cannons will of course be filled for our morning mission. I realize that we won’t have the optimum kind of armament we would need for

an anti-ship strike, but we will have to make do with what we presently have. Now, let's review our mission parameters and meteorological conditions for tomorrow..."

After some thirty more minutes of briefing, Carvalho dismissed his pilots for the night. As his men filed out of the room, Major Maradona went to him and spoke in a low but forceful voice.

"Colonel, this mission will be a near-suicide one! We don't have the right armament to properly engage the British ships and we also don't have any air-to-air missiles to defend ourselves against British HARRIER and SEA HARRIER jets. Furthermore, our pilots never trained for anti-ship strikes and practiced launching bombs only rarely during the past years, because of the scarcity of our bomb stocks. On the other hand, the British possess long and short-range surface-to-air missiles on their ships and have embarked fighter jets."

Carvalho gave Maradona a critical look before answering his objections.

"I realize all that, Major, but the future of our national territory is at play here. While we may not have much in terms of heavy or sophisticated armament, our A-60 multirole jets have a lot to offer us for this morning mission: they are fast, very agile, have a long range and are quite small, making them harder to hit for the British. I am confident that we will be able to hurt the British tomorrow if all our pilots give their one hundred percent on the mission."

Maradona understood the message in Carvalho's last sentence and came to attention to salute him.

"We will do or die, Colonel."

06:24 (Argentina Time)

Sunday, May 8, 1982 'C'

Main tarmac of Rio Gallegos airbase

Argentina

Colonel Juan Carvalho, wearing his flight suit, G-suit, life vest and parachute and with his flight helmet under one arm, stopped for a moment to look fondly at his Cessna A-60A HORNET light multirole jet aircraft, which was now loaded down with bombs and rockets. When the first A-60As had arrived in Argentina after being sold by the United States to many Latin American countries in 1964, its most unusual looks had at first

attracted skepticism from its future pilots. First of all, it was a small and very compact-looking aircraft and sported what was known as a 'diamond box wing', in which two pairs of wings with opposite sweep angles were linked together at their tips. In the A-60's case, the wing tips were attached to two large, elongated fuel tanks which also supported the twin vertical rudders. When looked at from the front, that arrangement gave a most unusual aspect but, when looked at from under as it overflowed ground observers, its shape made it appear like the bird of prey it really was. Another unusual feature of the A-60 was the huge size of its single engine in proportion to the rest of the plane. That engine, a General Electric TF-100-300 high-bypass turbofan similar to those seen on medium-sized jet airliners, while of large diameter, was also quite short in length and had the huge benefit of being very economical in terms of fuel consumption, on top of providing nearly eleven tons of thrust. Allied to the small frame and light weight of the A-60, the G.E. TF-100-300 gave the plane tremendous acceleration and climb rates which, when combined with its very low wing loading, made the A-60 able to use rough fields and to take off and land in less than 300 meters. Due to its two large wingtip fuel tanks and large fuselage tank, the A-60 also had an excellent endurance in the air. When Argentinian pilots, including Carvalo, had first flown in an A-60A, they had been conquered at once by its fantastic agility, acceleration and climb rate, which made it a joy to fly. It also had proved to be a safe plane to fly, thanks to its diamond box wing, which made it nearly impossible to throw the plane into an uncontrolled spin. That small but performant aircraft had also proved quite lethal as well, being armed with two powerful 30mm cannons and with a large, retractable belly rocket launcher pod which contained no less than sixty 76.2mm unguided rockets, two types of weapons eminently suitable for the missions Argentina had in mind for the A-60, the most important ones being counter-insurgency, coastal patrols and close air support. On asking questions about the A-60, Carvalo had discovered that its design had been directed by the same visionary who had designed nearly all the types of combat aircraft in service with the United States Air Force: General Ingrid Dows. During the more than seventeen years Carvalo had been flying in the A-60, he had learned to get the most out of this small but outstanding package. It may not possess the most advanced electronics and may not have the largest ordnance-carrying capacity around but he was certain that it could inflict some painful stings to the British.

Shaking hands with his ground crew chief after returning his salute, Carvalho then climbed into the cockpit and took place in the pilot's seat, then started fixing his seat harness with the help of a mechanic. The other ejection seat in the cockpit, positioned directly to his right, was going to be empty for this mission. That second seat was meant to help the A-60 accomplish another important type of mission in Argentinian service: that of advanced combat pilot training. However, Carvalho was not willing to expose green, partly-trained pilots to the dangers of today's mission and had ordered his few trainee pilots to stay on the ground this morning. Besides, a CP-142TM maritime patrol aircraft was going to precede his air unit and provide it with air navigation and ship targeting data, rendering the use of a navigator/observer on his A-60 redundant. Three minutes after climbing into his plane, Carvalho started his big turbofan engine and, after completing a pre-takeoff check list, started his A-60 rolling down one of the taxiways of the base, followed by the eleven other A-60As of his unit. The ten F-10C FALCON supersonic fighter-bombers which were meant to escort his A-60s were last in the line, in order to save their fuel by avoiding to have to fly circles around the base while waiting for the A-60s to be in the air. Six minutes later, all 22 Argentinian combat jets were in the air and turning eastward towards the Malvinas and the South Atlantic.

The jet formation first flew at a medium altitude and relatively slow speed through the gray, cloudy sky, while keeping radio silence. When he calculated that he was approximately 300 kilometers away from the Malvinas, Carvalho lit his navigation lights for five seconds before switching them off again, a pre-arranged signal that meant for his pilots to go down to near sea level, in order to evade British radars. The whole formation then gradually flew down to an altitude of a mere 200 meters above the sea, which was quite agitated, with high waves and strong winds. If any pilot crashed and fell into the ocean, Carvalho knew that he would not survive more than a few minutes before dying from hypothermia in the icy waters of the South Atlantic. Once within 200 kilometers from the Malvinas, Carvalho again made his lights blink briefly, ordering his pilots to go down further. Soon, the 22 jet aircraft were speeding over the ocean at an altitude of a mere eighty meters. Now concentrating on his flying in order to avoid crashing into the nearby sea, Carvalho listened carefully to his primary air frequency, in which the guiding CP-142TM was supposed to pass navigation and targeting data to him. The first such message, using pre-arranged codewords, was heard as his air unit was now sixty kilometers from the Western Malvinas islands.

“Tango Two to Rumble Five. Delta 230 and 180. Bucket 2.7, out!”

That message, which would most probably mystify any British listening to it, meant that the CP-142TM had detected the British fleet, numbering at least 27 ships, at a heading of 050 degrees, which was the back heading to 230, and a distance of 180 kilometers from Carvalho's formation. Making his navigation lights blink again for a few seconds to warn his pilots to prepare to change headings, Carvalho pointed his aircraft towards the Northeast and went further down to an altitude of fifty meters. His pilots, their nerve tense from flying so low in poor weather, followed suit.

Some eleven minutes later, the radar warning receiver set, or RWR, of Carvalho's plane started beeping weakly, indicating that radar waves were being emitted to his Northeast but were still below detection threshold. By then, he was starting to sweat from the intense, stressful level of attention required by flying low and fast. Glancing at his fuel gauge, he saw that he still had plenty of fuel left for both his incoming attack and his return flight to base. The beeping gradually became louder, until the voice of the radar operator in the CP-142TM came again on the radio, sounding urgent.

“Tango Six to Rumble Five: KIPPER, KIPPER, KIPPER! DELTA 226 AND 82! DRUMBEAT, OUT!”

The commander of the ten escorting F-10C fighters of the Argentinian formation reacted at once to that message by shaking his wings three times, ordering his fighter pilots to follow him and get ready for air combat. Next, he started to climb while turning slightly to the right, towards the incoming British aircraft detected by the CP-142TM. On his part, Carvalho stayed at his present altitude, speed and heading: his game was now to continue approaching the British fleet while his escort fighters engaged the British jets and, hopefully, distracted them from detecting the twelve A-60s. Starting a countdown on his aircraft chronometer, Carvalho nervously waited while the seconds passed by, hoping success for his escorting fighters. Some twelve seconds before the end of his calculated countdown, he saw to his right and above a brief ball of fire in the distance, followed by a thin trail of black smoke. However, he had no way to know if this was an Argentinian or a British plane burning on its way to a sea crash. At the end of his countdown, he switched on his nose multi-function radar, which had been off until now, hoping to detect the British ships and thus refine his heading for his attack. He felt his heart jump into his chest when a large collection of bright dots appeared on his radar screen: he had found the British fleet and was heading directly towards it!

“ALL RUMBLE FIVE CALLSIGNS, FROM RUMBLE LEADER: TARGETS DEAD AHEAD, DISTANCE 54! GO TO MAXIMUM SPEED BUT STAY LOW! ARM YOUR BOMBS!”

Carvalo then pushed his engine throttle to maximum, making his aircraft jump forward and pushing him hard in his seat. He soon attained the maximum low-level speed of the A-60: 1,280 kilometers per hour, just above Mach 1, a speed and altitude at which it drank fuel like a thirsty camel. By then, his RWR's beeping was strong and steady: the British radar operators most probably could detect him by now. As his eleven pilots accelerated as well, they also at the same time deployed into attack formation, fanning out of their original echelon formation. Praying that he would survive at least long enough to release his bombs, Carvalo stayed as low as he possibly could at his blazing speed but still had to climb by a few meters to avoid crashing into the sea. One of his A-60 pilots, being less experienced than Carvalo, then made a slight piloting mistake. That mistake was however enough to send him crashing into the sea, his aircraft disintegrating on impact. Ignorant of that tragedy, Carvalo pushed on, helped involuntarily by the British, whose radar emissions were now like beacons for the Argentinians' RWR sets. Sweat was dripping profusely down Carvalo's forehead when he finally saw the dark silhouettes of the first British ships on the horizon. Shortly after that, a black puff of smoke suddenly erupted in the sky ahead of him, quickly followed by another puff, this time to his left. He understood at once that those were British shells exploding as their proximity fuses were being activated by rising sea waves, which created a jumble of radar clutter false echoes. More than ever now, flying very low would be his salvation against British anti-aircraft fire. He thus pushed on while staying barely above the waves. His tactic paid off handsomely, with the British shells either exploding prematurely or passing over the Argentinian formation before crashing into the sea. As he finally was able to clearly recognize the type of ship directly ahead of him, a British Type 42 destroyer some seven kilometers away, he guessed that the British ship was most probably part of an outer defensive layer for its fleet. The aircraft carriers, the priority targets for Carvalo, had to be beyond that outer layer.

“ALL RUMBLE FIVE, FROM RUMBLE LEADER: IGNORE THE OUTER DESTROYER SCREEN! JUMP OVER THESE DESTROYERS AND DO A POP-UP AND DIVE MANEUVER AFTER THAT. REMEMBER: WE WANT THE CARRIERS!”

On the Type 42 destroyer HMS GLASGOW, the task of the British anti-aircraft gunners turned from very difficult to nearly impossible when eleven Argentinian attack aircraft coming towards them at high speed and extremely low altitude suddenly started climbing quickly in the sky, their upward angular speed complicating the job of tracking them in their sights. One British gunner still managed to hit with his 20mm cannon one of the A-60s as it was just starting to climb while speeding towards the destroyer. However, the elation of the gunner quickly turned to horror and then near panic when the Argentinian jet, out of control and with its pilot dead, stopped climbing and fell in a shallow dive...right towards the gunner and his destroyer. The unlucky British sailor did not have time to run away from his cannon mount before the ten tons of the A-60, including sixty 76.2mm unguided rockets, six 227 kilo bombs and four tons of kerosene, slammed into the starboard side of the HMS GLASGOW near its waterline, at the level of its surface-to-air missile magazine. The ensuing explosion and fireball cut the unfortunate destroyer in two and instantly killed a good half of its crew of 253 men. The remaining crewmembers survived for only a few more minutes, until the two parts of the ship sank under the waves or until they died from hypothermia in the frigid waters of the South Atlantic.

Having already initiated his pop-up maneuver and having gone past the HMS GLASGOW, Juan Carvalo felt a powerful blast wave shake his plane for a moment but didn't waste time wondering what it was about, as his prize target was now just ahead of him, a mere 1,300 meters away. Not wanting to stay up for longer than absolutely needed due to the dense British anti-aircraft fire encountered above the altitude of a hundred meters, Carvalo pushed his control stick forward, turning his climb into a shallow dive aimed at the HMS ARK ROYAL. Seeing a pair of SEA HARRIER fighter jets about to take off from the British carrier, Carvalo's expression tightened into a mean smirk as he selected his belly rocket pod.

"You're not taking off today...or ever, kippers!"

Pressing the trigger button on his control stick, he fired away a spread of 23 76.2mm unguided rockets at the British carrier. His cloud of rockets straddled the HMS ARK ROYAL, with a good ten rockets squarely hitting the starboard side and flight deck of the carrier before exploding. The two SEA HARRIERs about to be launched were destroyed outright, with their reserves of fuel adding to the mayhem and destruction from the exploding rockets. The flight deck of the carrier, deformed and holed in multiple places,

became at once unusable, while the aircraft and helicopters parked on the flight deck were shredded by shrapnel or blown off into the sea. Switching his armament selector switch to his bombs, Carvalho took a careful aim on the wounded carrier, then released his six general purpose 227 kilo bombs all at once. Being in a shallow dive actually simplified Carvalho's aim and four of his six bombs squarely hit the carrier, while one bomb exploded in the water just short of the ship and the other splashed in the ocean some fifty meters past the carrier. Carvalho barely had time to hurriedly change course before his plane could be blown to pieces by the explosions which split open the flight deck of the carrier. Making first a tight turn to the right, followed by a half-turn to the left, Carvalho saw that the ARK ROYAL was now on fire. Still, he wanted to be sure that it would not be able to escape later on, to then be repaired in Great Britain and be returned to the Malvinas afterwards. He thus fired away his two 127mm unguided rockets, aiming at the carrier's bridge superstructure. His rockets missed the carrier's bridge block but one of them did fly right into one of the lowered aircraft elevators of the ARK ROYAL. Penetrating down all the way to the main aircraft hangar, the heavy rocket's explosion amidst the aircraft being fueled up and armed in the hangar created an inferno of flames and explosions from missiles and cannon shells cooking off. Carvalho was however too busy avoiding British anti-aircraft fire to see that. One of his tight turns actually saved him from being hit by a short-range surface-to-air missile, which flew past the nose of his A-60 without exploding. Following the trail of smoke from the missile in order to see where it came from, Carvalho felt blood rush to his brain on seeing that it had been fired by the carrier HMS HERMES. The British carrier, apparently still intact, was maybe 1,400 meters away and was turning into the wind in order to facilitate the launch of its aircraft. Carvalho then took a flash decision and dove down to just above the waves in order to avoid more missiles, then started making a wide turn to the right in order to point his nose at the carrier. By the time he had the carrier's port side in his gunsight, two of Carvalho's pilots were diving on the HERMES. Carvalho intensely prayed that their bombs would find their mark as he watched the two A-60s release their projectiles in sequence. The first A-60 missed due to a last moment maneuver by the British ship and its bombs hit the water close to the carrier's starboard side. Four of the six bombs released by the second A-60 missed, but two of them pierced the flight deck of the HERMES, then exploded, to Carvalho's joy. Intent on following up on that success, the Argentinian group commander stayed just above the waves while making a dash to the wounded carrier, which was now spewing black

smoke. Carvalho waited until the ultimate moment, then fired his remaining 37 unguided rockets in one massive salvo from a distance of a mere 300 meters. As soon as his rockets had been fired, he then pulled savagely on his flight control stick, putting his A-60 in a zoom climb and enduring in the process an acceleration force of five Gs. Experiencing tunnel vision for a couple of seconds, Carvalho continued pulling on his stick, but less hard, completing a half looping on his back. Savage joy filled him when he saw that the HERMES was now in big trouble, with flames erupting from one of its aircraft elevators: its aircraft hangar was now on fire, something usually fatal to an aircraft carrier. While still on his back, Carvalho looked around for another worthy target for his two 30mm cannons. He quickly spotted two large ships which had been following the two British carriers from a distance of three kilometers. Their flat decks, aft-positioned superstructures and low profile on the water marked them as large tanker ships: perfect targets for his cannons. Diving on one of the tankers, he suddenly felt his plane shake from a nearby explosion. Another explosion shook again his A-60 some four seconds later. Understanding that a British warship was engaging him with its 114mm medium gun, Carvalho threw his aircraft into a tight diving 'S' turn that made him avoid more shells while getting him closer to his intended target. He also flew down to near the waves, putting the tanker between him and the British warship shooting at him. Now safe from the gunfire, Carvalho was able to carefully take aim through his heads-up display, or H.U.D., then fired a two-second cannon salvo into the port flank of the big tanker. It had to be transporting light distilled fuel for marine gas turbines, as a huge ball of fire instantly erupted from the tanker, engulfing it in flames. As Carvalho made his plane jump over the burning tanker, he glanced at his fuel gauge and saw that he and his pilots would soon have to return to base if they didn't want to run their tanks dry. He thus keyed his radio microphone and spoke in an urgent tone.

“TO ALL RUMBLE CALL SIGNS, BREAK OFF THE ATTACK AND TURN BACK TOWARDS OUR BASE BEFORE WE RUN TOO LOW ON FUEL. I SAY AGAIN, TO ALL RUMBLE CALL SIGNS, BREAK OFF THE ATTACK NOW AND RETURN TO BASE.”

Returning to an altitude of just thirty meters, he flew past the bow of the British frigate that had shot at him, an AMAZON-Class frigate. The A-60 was however too low for the main gun of the frigate, which could not depress low enough and also had its bow blocking its firing arc. Very conscious that the British could fire more guns and missiles at him if he climbed to a higher altitude, Carvalho stayed close to the sea for the next

twenty kilometers, then rose to an altitude of a hundred meters: it would not do to crash due to a simple piloting error after such a successful mission. Looking anxiously around him for his pilots, he felt reassured as more A-60s gradually joined him and formed back into formation.

“Well done, men! We taught a lesson to the British that they are not about to forget. LAS MALVINAS SON NUESTRAS²⁷! VIVA ARGENTINA²⁸!”

15:22 (London Time)

British Prime Minister’s official residence

10 Downing Street, London

Great Britain

There were a mix of various facial expressions visible around the large conference table lined up with ministers and senior military commanders: frustrated; angry; depressed; discouraged. The one person who kept an impassive, stern face in the lot as the commander of the Royal Navy presented information about the war in the South Atlantic was Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

“...the HERMES finally sank while being towed towards the South Georgia Islands. In all, we lost both of our fleet carriers, two destroyers and one fleet oiler. Our casualties, according to our latest figures, are over 4,100 men killed or missing in action, plus 334 men wounded. However, as grievous as those losses are, the worst part of the morning’s battle was that our fleet has now lost its air cover. Some of our HARRIER and SEA HARRIER jump jets were shot down in the air, but most of them were lost when their carriers were hit. Only three SEA HARRIERS who had taken off at the start of the battle survived and landed afterwards on the helicopter platforms of our remaining ships. The Argentinians have thus basically won the air superiority battle in this war and are now free to roam the skies of the Falklands at will. Given this, any attempt by us to land troops on the Falklands would be condemned to end in bloody failure, Madam Prime Minister.”

²⁷ Las Malvinas son nuestras: ‘The Malvinas are ours’ in Spanish.

²⁸ Viva Argentina: ‘Long live Argentina’ in Spanish.

"And how did the Argentinians manage to achieve such a victory, Sir John?" asked in a pointed tone Thatcher. Fleet Admiral Sir John Fieldhouse hesitated for a moment before answering the Prime Minister.

"Admiral Woodward reported that the Argentinians came in fast and at very low altitude, Madam Prime Minister. Their pilots proved to be both brave and skilled and they sank our ships with both bombs and unguided rockets. Admiral Woodward also stated that, by coming in very low in bad weather, the Argentinians basically rendered our main air defense naval weapon, the SEA DART surface-to-air missile, ineffective. The radars aiming our guns were also impeded by sea clutter, further complicating the task of our gunners."

"Did the Argentinians use any guided missiles during that battle?"

"Not that we know of, Madam Prime Minister. The Argentinians do possess a few air-to-air and air-to-surface missiles, but their stocks are very limited. The planes which attacked our fleet, F-10 fighters and A-60 light multirole jets, used only cannons, rockets and bombs."

"Can you show us pictures of those two planes, Sir John?"

"Of course, Madam Prime Minister! Here is first the Cessna A-60, which conducted the strikes against our ships while F-10 fighters were battling it out with our SEA HARRIERS."

"Wait! Did you say 'Cessna'? Doesn't that company specialize in building light private planes?"

"It does, Madam Prime Minister. However, it also produces a couple of military aircraft for the American air force: a light liaison plane and the A-60, a small, multi-role jet aircraft used for advanced pilot training, counter-insurgency, ground strikes and close air support. As you can see on this slide, the A-60 is a very compact plane, on top of having a very peculiar shape, with two pairs of wings joined at their tips. That wing configuration is however to be found in a number of other American military aircraft, all of which were designed under the direction of General Ingrid Dows. We thus assess that General Dows either directed the design of the A-60 or heavily influenced it."

That earned the fleet admiral a sharp look from Thatcher.

"Dows, again? Most of our experts agree that we owe much of our military and geopolitical problems to her, either directly or indirectly, as either a presidential advisor, aircraft and spacecraft designer or as a military field commander."

“Well, since she is presently somewhere between Jupiter and Saturn, I believe that we can exonerate her of any responsibility in this present crisis, Madam Prime Minister.” quipped Fieldhouse. That brought a dreamy expression to Thatcher’s face for a moment.

“...somewhere between Jupiter and Saturn. That young woman certainly lived quite a life up to now.”

“Young woman, Madam Prime Minister? She is the same age as you are, if you will excuse me.”

“Maybe, but I wish that I could look as young as she is right now. Well, enough about Dows! We need to decide what to do next. I want suggestions, as long as they don’t imply surrendering the Falklands to the Argentinians.”

Thatcher suddenly faced a wall of silent, indecisive expressions around the table, something she did not appreciate much.

“Very well, gentlemen, I will then decide myself what we will do next. If an idea comes to your brains while you sleep tonight, don’t hesitate to call me at once. You are dismissed!”

With that barely hidden way to collectively call them ‘twits’, the politicians and officers present got up from their chairs and filed out of the Prime Minister’s cabinet room.

14:50 (Washington Time)

Wednesday, May 12, 1982 ‘C’

The Oval Office, the White House

Washington, D.C.

U.S.A.

Ronald Reagan, alerted by telephone that something urgent had popped up, got up from his chair behind the presidential work desk to greet the five men and one woman who entered the Oval Office after being announced by the President’s secretary. Right away, the somber expressions of his senior cabinet members put him on the alert.

“So, lady and gentlemen, what is happening which seems to alarm you so much?”

His secretary of state, Alexander Haig, answered him while pointing at the director of the C.I.A., William Casey.

“Director Casey just received some alarming information from one of his sources in Chile, Mister President. To make a long story short, the British are working on trying to form a military alliance with Chile against Argentina.”

“WHAT?!” nearly shouted Reagan, anger suddenly flaring in him. “What are they trying to do precisely?”

“Our information is still sketchy, Mister President,” answered Casey, “but it seems that the British are proposing to help militarily the Chileans if they would invade Argentina, in exchange for the Chileans letting British aircraft operate from Chilean territory in order to defend the Falklands.”

Jeane Kirkpatrick, the United States ambassador to the United Nations, who was also an avowed supporter of the Argentinian junta, spoke next.

“If the British succeed in convincing the Chileans, Mister President, this would mean that a European power already at war with a signatory member of the Rio Treaty would push another signatory member of the Rio Treaty, meaning Chile, to start a war with its neighbor in South America. If we let this fly, then the Rio Treaty will not be worth the paper it is written on and, worse, our authority in the South American hemisphere will be severely disputed. We can’t let that happen, Mister President.”

“Damn right we can’t!” replied Reagan, furious. “Caspar, what do you suggest that we do militarily to prevent such nonsense?”

“I believe that we have two options, Mister President. The first one would be to openly help reinforce the Argentinian military, notably by providing them with the latest military equipment, including missiles. That alone should make the Chileans think twice before trying to attack Argentina. The second option would be even more direct: to have our navy move in force into the South Atlantic in order to chase away any British ship or submarine we find there.”

“Hum, I must say that I find both options attractive. Alexander, irrespective of whether we use a military option, I want you to call the Chilean foreign minister and impress on him that we don’t want to see peace be threatened in South America.”

“I will call him as soon as I am back at Foggy Bottom²⁹, Mister President.”

“Good! On my part, I intend to call Prime Minister Thatcher and warn her not to get involved further in Latin American affairs. I also intend to order her to pull back her submarines from the Argentinians’ exclusive economic maritime zone. I will warn her

²⁹ Foggy Bottom: Popular nickname given to the American State Department headquarters building in Washington.

that any British submarine found within 200 nautical miles from the coasts of Argentina after tomorrow will be chased and sunk by us. That should cool down considerably her taste for military adventure. Caspar, tell the Navy to start sending at once a strong anti-submarine force to the South Atlantic. Make sure to include a few of our own nuclear attack submarines with that force. By the time it will be in place, we should have an answer from both the Chileans and the British. If they decide to ignore our warnings, then too bad for them!”

20:41 (Argentina Time)

Saturday, May 15, 1982 ‘C’

Aircraft hangar, Rio Gallegos Air Force Base

Argentina

Having been warned via an urgent telephone call from the headquarters of the Argentinian Air Force in Buenos Aires, Colonel Juan Carvalo was present with nearly fifty of his men in the large aircraft hangar when the American C-152 cargo aircraft rolled inside it. As soon as it was completely inside, Carvalo had the doors of the hangar closed, so that no indiscrete eyes could see what would happen next. Accompanied by his deputy commander, Major Francisco Maradona, and his logistical officer, Major Carlos Obrador, Carvalo walked quickly to the port side forward access door of the big cargo aircraft, arriving there in time to greet with a handshake a female U.S. Air Force lieutenant colonel, who saluted him in return while presenting herself in perfect Spanish.

“Lieutenant Colonel Carmen Sanchez, from the United States Air Force Logistical Command. Were you told about the purpose of our visit, Colonel?”

“Uh, I was simply told to expect some secret delivery of American military aid to my base, Colonel Sanchez. I suppose that you will be able to tell me more about that aid?”

“I certainly can, Colonel.” replied with a smile the female officer, who was in her forties and quite pretty. “Basically, the United States has decided to discretely help Argentina to remedy some of its most pressing needs in terms of modern weapons systems. I brought with me a technical team which will help you to integrate those new weapons to your aircraft and inventory. We also brought a shipment of new air-to-air and air-to-surface missiles taken out of our own strategic reserves. That shipment includes among other things eighty AIM-1E COBRA air-to-air missiles, seventy AGM-1

NAGA air-to-surface missiles and thirty AGM-2C HELLHOUND heavy air-to-surface missiles. Here is a manifest of the cargo destined for your base, Colonel.”

Already feeling elated by the preliminary explanations from Carmen Sanchez, Carvalo took the list presented to him and read quickly through it. What he read made him positively salivate and he looked up at Sanchez to grin to her.

“Colonel Sanchez, even without your weapons shipment, I would have been happy to greet you on my base. This shipment is a true godsent for us. We will be eternally grateful to the United States for this providential help.”

“And we are happy to help Argentina, Colonel. I see that you brought some helping hands with you. Shall we start unloading our cargo at once?”

“Of course, Colonel Sanchez! After this, I will be most happy to find adequate quarters for you and your team on this base.”

What Carvalo didn't say was that he wouldn't have minded offering his own bed to the pretty American officer. His smile and that of his officers and men widened further on seeing that five of the twelve-persons technical team were women, with at least two being worthy of the word 'beautiful'.

23:36 (South Atlantic Time)

British nuclear attack submarine HMS CONQUEROR

At periscope depth

Fourteen nautical miles from the Argentinian naval base of Mar del Plata

“Here is the decoded message from the Admiralty, sir.”

“Thank you, Seaman!” replied the captain of the HMS CONQUEROR while taking the message form offered to him by the communications specialist. Reading quickly the message, the captain had to contain himself not to swear aloud. Going to the navigation table in one corner of the cramped control room of his submarine, he pointed to his navigator a location to the North of the Falkland Islands, some sixty nautical miles from Port Stanley.

“Mister McMasters, trace a route to this point: we are leaving our present watch position near the coast.”

The young officer gave a shocked look to his captain, taken by surprise by his order.

“We are not going to keep watching Mar del Plata, Captain?”

"No! London just ordered all our ships and submarines to withdraw to more than 200 nautical miles from the Argentinian coastline and to stay in international waters."

"Did they say why, Captain?"

"Yes!" replied the captain in a bitter tone. "The big bad Americans are breathing down on our necks, that's what!"

The commander, unable to hide his anger anymore, then slammed one fist on the edge of the map display unit.

"Over 4,000 men lost, for nothing!"

09:10 (Universal Time)

Thursday, November 4, 1982 'C'

Delivery room, medical center of the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS

Two thirds of the way to Saturn

"Congratulations, General: it's a girl!"

Ingrid, tired and sweating from the effort of delivering, eagerly took in her arms the newborn handed to her by Doctor Biddle and lovingly looked down at her baby.

"She's so beautiful! I am going to name her 'Nancy', Nancy Dows."

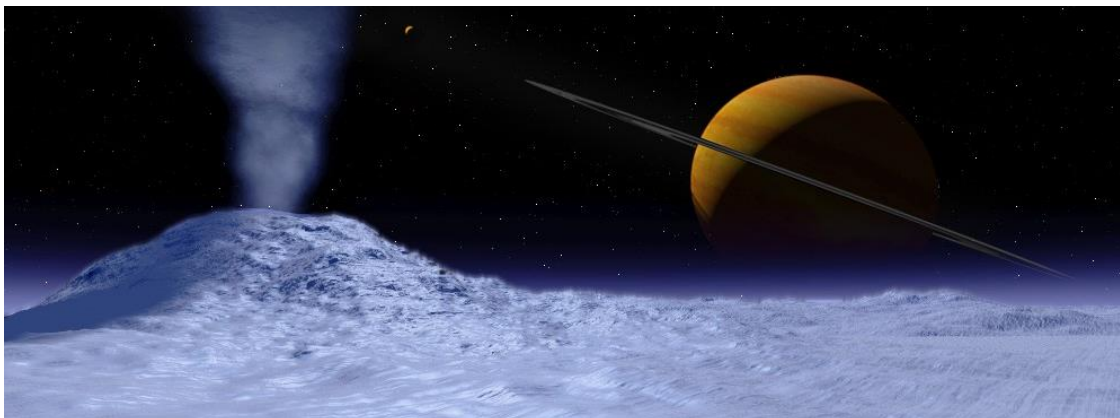
"I will take care of preparing an official birth certificate for her, General. I can imagine the face of the bureaucrat who will read it and see as location of the birth 'deep Space, between Jupiter and Saturn'."

"It could have been even more uncommon, Doctor: she could have been born while we were on the surface of a moon of Saturn."

"True! Now, I want you to take a minimum of one week of complete rest: no fitness training, no visits to the bridge or to your official office. Just resting and taking care of your baby."

"That sounds like a prescription I could follow, Doctor." said Ingrid with a tired smile.

CHAPTER 24 – WELCOME TO SATURN



06:14 (Universal Time)

Monday, March 28, 1983 'C'

Command bridge of the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS

Surface of the moon Enceladus, Saturn System

“Touchdown! We are now on the surface of Enceladus, General.”

“Excellent! Shut down all engines! Secure from flying stations! Ground Operations Department, prepare to send out our exploration team and our ice extraction team when ready. I want refueling operations to start as soon as the water ice on the surface has been analyzed and found safe for our use. Have our surface exploration team be on the lookout for any possible lifeforms: this region, with its hills and fault lines in the ice crust, should be ideal for tardigrades, if we go by our experience on Europa.”

“On it, General!”

Looking at one of the video monitors showing outside views around the ship, Ingrid contemplated the image of Saturn, with its famed rings, visible just above the icy horizon of Enceladus' surface: while on the moon, the astronomers aboard the PROMETHEUS should have plenty of interesting things to observe through the multiple high-power telescopes of the ship. Added to the fact that it would permit to fully refill the propellant tanks of the ship, this stop on Enceladus should prove most rewarding scientifically. She then looked at another viewing screen, which showed the nearby hills: one of those hills was actually a sort of ice volcano which was periodically spewing out geysers of water vapors and ice particles. The geologists and planetologists aboard the PROMETHEUS

were certainly going to find that hill very interesting in terms of exploration ground. Maybe, with luck, they would also find tardigrades or other kinds of lifeforms which would prosper from the water ejected out, especially if that water proved to be salty, like on Europa. If lifeforms were indeed to be found here, then this would definitely put to rest past claims that Earth was somehow unique in harboring life. Ingrid's only regret was that it had been impossible to equip her ship with the means to penetrate the ice crust of moons all the way to their internal seas of liquid water. Maybe a whole world of marine life swam in such hypothetical underground oceans, deep under the surface ice crust. However, what her crew and ship were going to discover in the Saturn System would already be enough to rewrite human knowledge about the outer parts of the Solar System. The PROMETHEUS may have cost a fortune to build but it already had proved most worthy of the expenditure, thanks to all the scientific data and imagery it had collected to date. If it would be only up to her, Ingrid would make sure that this would not be the sole interplanetary trip of this ship: Uranus, Neptune and Pluto and their collection of moons would still need to be visited and explored in the years to come, in order to complete Humanity's knowledge of its home system. That last thought reminded her that she had told President Reagan that she intended to retire from military service on her return to Earth. Who would then take charge of the American space program? What was she going to do with her life after that, apart from caring for her little Nancy, now nearly five-months old? All those questions still had to be answered. A factor to be considered as well in that was the fact that a new president would be elected by the time that the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS would return into Earth orbit. Would that new president, either republican or democrat, still want her to continue serving the nation in some capacity, or would he be too happy to let her go and relegate her to the shadows? Ingrid was not politically naïve and she knew that she had made quite a few political enemies in the United States during her decades of service, enemies who would not shrink from smearing her name while she was far from Earth and unable to defend her reputation. Ingrid finally shrugged off those hypothetical worries: what counted for her right now was her infant daughter and her mission and crew. That crew had in fact grown substantially since it had departed Earth some two and a half years ago. From an original total of 521 persons aboard the ship when it boosted out of Earth's orbit, there were now 569 souls on board, including little Nancy. That number was assured to grow further in the coming months, possibly boosting the population of the ship to past 600 by the time this mission would be over. Contrary to the predictions of conservative minds

on Earth, all those births, added to the children of crewmembers who had embarked with their parents on the PROMETHEUS, had up to now only positive effects on the crew and the mission. The crewmembers, not having to suffer a five-year-long separation from their families, had kept an excellent morale all along and the addition of many young babies had much lightened the mood aboard the ship, making life aboard much closer to normal. If Ingrid would have bowed to the objections of both politicians and other military commanders, she now would probably be in command of a crew suffering some serious psychological problems and neurosis, something that would have hurt significantly its performance during this deep Space mission. With all that in mind, Ingrid was intent on continuing to promote family life on her ship, notably by organizing and directing more family-oriented activities, like the family spacewalk she had organized in deep Space between Jupiter and Saturn. One of those planned activities which was on her mind would in fact happen here, on the surface of Enceladus. The view of Saturn from the surface of Enceladus was by itself most spectacular, while a rover excursion through the hills near the ship should prove interesting to all involved.

Getting up from her command chair, Ingrid went to pat the shoulder of her pilot.

"I am going to go have breakfast. You have the con in the meantime, Mister Gibson."

"Understood, General."

Ingrid then walked out of the command bridge section, with Enceladus' tiny gravity of 0.01 G helping her cling to the decks. Her first stop was at the ship's daycare center, which functioned 24 hours a day, to pick up her little Nancy. From there, she went to the ship's main food court service area, on the main deck of Quadrant 02 'A', where she collected a plate of eggs, hash brown potatoes and bacon at the hot breakfast counter, along with a glass of orange juice. With little Nancy in one arm and her platter held in her other hand, Ingrid went to a small corner area of the food court delimited by moveable partitions and marked with a large, clearly visible sign at its entrance that said 'Breastfeeding corner. No Peeping Toms allowed'. Inside that area, she was able to put down her platter on a table next to a rocking chair, on which lay a clean towel. There was also a box of tissues on the table, while a nearby shelving unit contained baby supplies like diapers, wet wipes and pots of baby food. That breastfeeding corner had been Ingrid's idea and had been set up after the first baby to be born on the ship had arrived. It could accommodate up to six mothers at a time and was by now well used.

Ingrid in fact found two other young women sitting in rocking chairs and busy breastfeeding their babies when she entered the partitioned area and smiled to both of them.

“Good morning, Margaret! Good morning Natalia!”

“Good morning, General!” replied in near unison the two mothers, attracting a chiding smile from Ingrid.

“Didn’t I tell you to simply call me ‘Ingrid’, instead of ‘General’?”

Natalia Smirnova, who until two months ago had been called ‘Natalia Gorshkova’ and who was a fairly young but highly talented biochemist who had recently married another Soviet scientist traveling on the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS, astronomer Sasha Smirnov, giggled at her admonishment.

“Excuse us, Ingrid, but it is hard to forget who you are, especially for a Soviet citizen like me, who is accustomed to authority. How is your beautiful Nancy today?”

“Hungry! And so am I! Just give me time to set myself here and we will then be able to chat together while feeding our little angels.”

Temporarily putting Nancy in one of the cribs provided in the breastfeeding corner, Ingrid then removed her uniform’s vest, then the light blue short-sleeved shirt she wore under her vest. Next, she removed as well her bra, ending completely topless. Draping carefully her shirt and vest on the back of a chair so that they would not get wrinkled, she grabbed a towel and draped it over her right shoulder before lifting her daughter from her crib and positioning her across her right arm, offering her right nipple to her baby. Her child started sucking milk at once, being obviously quite hungry. With little Nancy being taken care of, Ingrid sat down in the rocking chair next to the table supporting her breakfast platter and started eating as well while half-turned towards the two other mothers.

“So, Natalia, what do you think of our space adventure up to now?”

“I think that it is a dream come through, Gen...uh, Ingrid. I was enthusiastic about joining this mission to Jupiter and Saturn but I also had expected quite a lot of hardship during this five-year trip, including some psychological stress and loneliness. However, this ship has proven to be perfectly suited for such long space missions and I never expected to find such comprehensive crew facilities and amenities aboard it. Your decision to allow families with children aboard at the start of our journey had left me skeptical at first but I quickly realized how right your decision was. I have seen first-hand how the families of our cosmonauts spending up to nine months aboard our space

station MIR coped with family separation, or rather how they couldn't cope, and I must say that your PROMETHEUS is one truly happy ship."

"Glad to hear that, Natalia."

The Soviet woman hesitated for a moment while eyeing Ingrid's firm breasts, then spoke in a low voice, to avoid that other people around the food court could hear her.

"I have to say that I am jealous of your body, Ingrid. To have such firm breasts and young body at your age is incredible."

"And do the Soviet men aboard this ship talk a lot about my body?" asked Ingrid with a mischievous grin. Natalia giggled in response.

"You bet they do! They would all love to spend a night or two with you...if you allowed them into your bed that is."

"And your Sasha too?" asked sneakily Ingrid, making Natalia grin.

"He would deny having such fantasies, of course...but I wouldn't believe him. In the Soviet Union, one of the rumors about you is that you have a reputation as being a real temptress. I can now see that this reputation may be justified."

"Well, I do like my fun, Natalia. I will not deny that."

"Talking of fun, Ingrid," cut in Margaret Rhea Gibson-Seddon, one of the medical doctors and surgeons in the crew, "you never revealed who was the father of your beautiful little Nancy. Do you intend to keep that secret forever?"

"Yes!" replied Ingrid, becoming serious. "I consider my private life as sacred and have no wish to feed the rumor mill, either on this ship or back on Earth. The identity of Nancy's father will remain strictly confidential and I intend to raise my daughter solely by myself. Once back on Earth, I intend to retire from military service, so I will have more time to care for Nancy and pursue other personal goals and activities."

"But, you are the brains of our space program, Ingrid. What will happen to it once you leave the Space Corps?"

"I said that I will retire from military service, Margaret, but I still could stay in a civilian capacity as Director of U.S. National Space Programs. If not, many of our biggest aerospace companies will probably try to buy my services as a design engineer or program manager, or both. In any case, I do not expect to stay idle for long. There is still so much to do in so many domains..."

Both Margaret and Natalia nodded their heads at that while eyeing their 'young' 57-year-old mission commander.

14:58 (Universal Time)**Hills near the landed U.S.S. PROMETHEUS****Surface of the moon Enceladus****Saturn System**

"Be careful, Yevgeny: with that very low local gravity you could end up high in the sky if you don't limit your leg strength."

The Soviet ice geologist climbing the slope of the ice 'volcano' which had attracted his team's interest stopped for a moment to look back down at Edward Stokes and smiled to the American geologist.

"Don't worry about me, Ed: I spent a year on the Moon before this mission. I am accustomed to low gravity."

"Well, this is not 'low gravity', Yevgeny: this is 'micro gravity', so take your time to climb this hill."

"You are worrying too much, Ed." replied the Soviet geologist who, at the age of 43, was a good eighteen years younger than the highly experienced American geologist. Taking another step up the slope, he suddenly felt his boot slip on the icy surface and instinctively tried to regain his footing by pulling up with one hand. That apparently innocuous effort, made in a 0.011 G micro gravity environment, resulted in something that surprised Yevgeny: he was literally catapulted upwards and started describing a long parabolic curve in the dark sky, watched by the horrified members of his team. Trying his best not to panic, Yevgeny prepared himself to land into a safe posture: hitting the ground with his helmet and cracking his visor would be fatal to him. He mostly managed that when he regained contact with the icy ground some 200 meters away, next to the crater at the summit of the ice volcano. However, he couldn't help fall flat on his face after landing, but had time to raise his gloved hands to protect his visor. His heart beating furiously, he heard the anguished voice of Edward Stokes on his spacesuit's radio.

"YEVGENY, ARE YOU ALRIGHT?"

"Yes, I am okay! I am now at the summit, right next to the edge of the crater." Yevgeny was about to carefully get up when his eyes were attracted to a slight movement on the ice surface, centimeters from his visor. Focusing his eyes on that movement, he then grinned while speaking in a soft tone.

"Oh! Hello, little tardigrade! How are you today?"

11:03 (Universal Time)

Tuesday, March 29, 1983 'C'

Exobiology laboratory, main deck, Quadrant 03, Carrousel 'B'

U.S.S. PROMETHEUS, on the surface of Enceladus

Ingrid had a last look at the two tiny creatures kept in a small special environmental chamber, then turned to face Shannon Lucid and Natalia Smirnova.

"So, what could you find about those tardigrades, Doctor Lucid? Are they similar to those we found on Europa, in the Jupiter System?"

Lucid nodded once, her expression most sober: what she had found had a potentially Earth-shattering impact on biological science as it was known today.

"They are, General. In fact, they are more than simply similar in appearance: their DNA is closely related to that of the Europa tardigrades. My belief is that both the Europa and the Enceladus tardigrades share the same origin. Furthermore, their DNA is also quite similar to the DNA of the tardigrades found on Earth. I will let you guess what this means, General."

Ingrid was silent for a moment as she digested that revelation, then spoke softly in a near whisper.

"Life came from Space, probably on asteroids or comets. This is huge! Biologists on Earth will go bonkers about this."

"I don't know about them, but I am pretty much going bonkers about this, General." replied Lucid. "This is without a doubt the most important biological discovery of this century, and possibly of the whole of history. I am thus requesting your permission to send at once to Earth the results of our examinations and analysis."

"Please do, Doctor. Scientific knowledge is made to be shared and spread around, not to be hidden or suppressed. Congratulations to you and your team: you did a hell of a job here."

"Thank you, General!"

Giving a last look at the tardigrades, Ingrid then walked out of the laboratory, her mind nearly boiling over. Her day's report to Vandenberg Space Base on Earth was certainly bound to make big waves.

The U.S.S. PROMETHEUS ended up spending a good two months on Enceladus, taking off from the icy moon on June 2 after completing a very successful program of scientific exploration and observation. The astronomers aboard the ship were able to use the landed ship as a stationary observatory in order to observe in detail the giant planet Saturn through the ship's multiple high-definition telescopes, discovering in the process many new things about the gas giant. Ingrid also used that time to organize a few family-oriented activities, notably a program of rover rides on the surface of Enceladus which allowed everyone aboard to come out of the ship and do a short tour of the nearby hills. Ingrid did use personally that opportunity, bringing with her her daughter Nancy, who reached the age of seven months by the time the PROMETHEUS left Enceladus, its propellant tanks full thanks to the oxygen and hydrogen produced from the moon's water ice.

14:05 (Universal Time)

Friday, July 9, 1983 'C'

Planetary Sciences Center, Main

Deck, Quadrant 02

Carrousel 'B', U.S.S. PROMETHEUS

In low orbit around Titan, Saturn System



Ingrid spoke as she looked down at the electronic map display table occupying the middle of the ship's Planetary Sciences Center, a ten by four meters room surrounded by the various offices of the planetology scientists of the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS.

"I knew from the old ATHENA files that Titan was quite a unique moon in the Saturn System, but this is truly out of the ordinary: a moon with a dense atmosphere and lakes of liquid hydrocarbons. We could easily spend a whole year just studying Titan, but we won't: we have to think about our reserves of perishable food. So, what do you think, ladies and gentlemen? Now that we have fully mapped by radar and spectrometers the surface of Titan, what should we do next, in your opinion?"

Anthony England, Doctor in planetary sciences and head of the department, answered first.

"The ideal solution would be to send exploration teams on the surface of Titan, but flying in with our shuttlecraft would be risky, what with this very dense atmosphere and strong winds. Our shuttlecraft could very well be blown off course and crash on the way down. We did lose control of one of the two probes we sent down, due to atmospheric turbulences."

"But what a surface team could discover is far more than we can do from orbit." objected Karl Schmidt, a German planetary scientist who was Anthony England's assistant. "There must be a safe way to land a surface team and then retrieve it."

"There is, although it still would imply some risks." replied Ingrid, thoughtful. "We could land our ship on Titan and thus bring with us our full exploration and underground study capabilities."

Quite a few of the scientists, along with Ingrid's deputy, Rear Admiral John Young, gave her a worried look.

"General, our surviving probes indicated that Titan's atmosphere is fifty percent denser than Earth's atmosphere, with occasional violent gusts of winds. Also, the atmospheric orange haze enveloping the surface severely cuts visibility. Any attempt at landing will be quite risky in my opinion, especially if we take into account the fact that we would risk the lives of everybody aboard, including our families."

"I am very conscious of all those factors, Admiral." replied Ingrid, her tone a bit pointed. "My own daughter is aboard, remember? I would certainly not put her at risk for nothing. On the other hand, we have here a celestial body of prime interest that in some ways resemble primeval Earth in its early stages, with a true soup of chemical organic compounds which could very well harbor life. I will pilot the ship personally for the landing on Titan: I am by far the most experienced pilot aboard and have flown in all kinds of conditions. Besides, the sheer size and mass of the ship, allied to the low local gravity on Titan, will help make that flight easier and safer. Once on the surface, we will then have the means to probe under the surface of the moon, while offering a close by, safe base of operations for our surface teams."

A majority of the heads assembled around the map display table nodded their heads at her words. However, a few were still hesitant, prompting Ingrid in taking a firm decision: she never liked to procrastinate when faced with a problem and had learned from experience that her first impression was most often the correct one.

"Very well, ladies and gentlemen: we will fly into Titan's atmosphere tomorrow morning and land on that ice plain next to this liquid methane lake. Everybody aboard

will be wearing spacesuits for that flight, so I want all suits to be ready for use by nine tomorrow morning. In the meantime, we will collect additional data from orbit and map as best we can our intended landing area. I will also expect a detailed, comprehensive surface exploration plan mounted in advance. Doctor England, you will coordinate that last part with Captain Alan Bean, our ground operations officer.”

“We will be ready by nine tomorrow, General.”

“Excellent! Are there any more questions or remarks? No? Then, let’s go prepare our ship for a landing on Titan.”

The assembled scientists and ship’s officers, most of them quite excited by now, then dispersed, returning to their respective offices or laboratories. However, her deputy stayed with her as she walked out of the center, speaking to her in a low voice.

“Are you sure that this is wise, General? This may be quite a risky maneuver.” Ingrid abruptly stopped and turned to face Young, a closed expression on her face.

“As I said before, John, I am very conscious of the risks we will have to take and I also care very much about the safety of my daughter and of the other children and spouses on board this ship. However, we knew before leaving Earth that this whole mission would be risky. If I had believed that the risks would be unacceptable, I would not have allowed family members to come aboard in the first place. However, we are now left with only one way to fully learn the secrets of Titan and there probably won’t be another mission to the outer planets before another five to ten years, so this is not the time to be timid and expect a risk-free mission. We either take the necessary risks to explore our Solar System and open space to Humanity, or we stay on Earth and limit ourselves to sending out robotic probes. Do you want to lodge an official objection to my decision to land on Titan, Admiral Young?”

John Young hesitated for a moment before answering her.

“No, General!”

“Thank you! I will want a report on the readiness status of our surface exploration teams by eight tomorrow morning. If there is any problem, we will delay the landing operation until that problem or shortcoming is taken care of.”

Ingrid then walked away to return to her office. Young, a very competent and meticulous officer who also always took very seriously the safety of his personnel, watched her for a moment before starting to walk himself, still preoccupied. However, Ingrid had been right about saying that space exploration was worth taking some risks. It was just that,

up to now, he never had to put at risk children or wives, only military men who had volunteered for the job.

08:58 (Universal Time)

Saturday, July 10, 1983 'C'

Command bridge of the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS

In low orbit around the moon Titan

The atmosphere in the command bridge compartment was tense as the crew was finishing to prepare the ship for its entry into Titan's turbulent atmosphere. Ingrid, sitting in the pilot's seat rather than in her usual command seat, was very conscious of that and fully understood why her crewmembers were nervous: the risks, while low in her opinion, were still very real. The flight engineer, Major Ellison Onizuka, then spoke up out loud.

"All the external antennas are now retracted back in their hull recesses and our chemical rockets are primed and ready for deceleration thrust. The ship is rigged for atmospheric flying."

"Thank you, Major!" replied John Young, who was occupying the command chair for this rare occasion, before switching his microphone to ship-wide announcement.

"Attention to all personnel! We are now two minutes from starting our descent towards the surface of Titan. You must by now be sitting in your crashworthy seats and wearing your spacesuits. Seal your suits now and keep them sealed until further notice!"

Young then fell silent for two minutes before speaking again, this time to Ingrid.

"You may start our descent now, General."

"Thank you, Admiral! Here we go, kids! Lighting up our chemical rocket engines at full thrust now!"

A push of a button was followed by a sudden, prolonged and powerful roar from the hydrogen-oxygen chemical rockets of the ship, mounted in two rotating engine pods along the sides of the PROMETHEUS. With the pods rotated so that the rocket nozzles faced forward, the thrust from the chemical engines started at once to cut the ship's orbital speed. That in turn made the ship's orbit lower quite quickly. Soon, the crew of the PROMETHEUS started feeling the first vibrations and noise from the atmospheric reentry. However, Ingrid kept their engines at full power, accelerating the ship's rate of

descent while cutting drastically its orbital speed. Checking constantly their speed relative to the surface of the moon, Ingrid waited until the ship's speed was down to about 2,000 kilometers per hour, well below orbital speed, before lowering her engines' thrust to idle and pivoting the engine pods down, to make her engines nozzles face the ground below. However, she did not raise again her engines power at that time, letting in essence the PROMETHEUS glide down at supersonic speed through the orange atmospheric haze hiding the surface from direct view.

"Passing in aerodynamic flight control mode!"

That basically meant that she was now using the aerodynamic surfaces of the ship, including its huge vertical rudders and horizontal elevators, to control its attitude as the main body of the PROMETHEUS, shaped like the profile of an aircraft wing, provided aerodynamic lift. The dense atmosphere of Titan, at 147 percent of Earth's atmospheric pressure and composed nearly exclusively of nitrogen, actually helped create an aerodynamic lift force that surprised even Ingrid. Her long experience as a pilot, including years spent testing new aircraft prototypes, however helped her at that moment and she was able fairly easily to keep complete control of her huge spaceship as it flew down at supersonic speed through the orange haze of Titan.

"This is fun flying, guys." she said out loud in order to make her companions relax. "Should I try a few barrel rolls and loopings?"

"Uh, just a smooth landing will do, General." replied John Young, attracting a few laughs and giggles around the command bridge as the ship shook repeatedly from atmospheric turbulences. Checking their ground mapping radar, Ingrid corrected her course to head towards their chosen landing zone.

"The winds are quite strong, I must say: I need to keep compensating for drift all the time. I am now deploying our aerodynamic braking flaps to lower our speed to subsonic. It may shake a bit."

The ride actually proved quite rough once she deployed the braking flaps, with the deceleration pushing her forward in her seat. Her safety harness however kept her in her seat as she fought the controls in order to smooth their ride. She then tried more humor.

"I hope that this is recorded, guys: we may get the Mackay Trophy³⁰ for this flight."

"No, we won't, General!" replied her copilot for this flight, Robert Crippen. "We are not an air force crew, thus are not eligible for the Mackay Trophy. We however could go for the Harmon Trophy's Space Flight Award. As for recording this, our external camera views are automatically recorded, as they are now, General."

"I'll take the Harmon Trophy!" said Ingrid, attracting a retort from John Young.

"Let's not skin the bear before we have killed it, people. On the other hand, I must say that you are doing quite well, General, especially in the way you use our engines thrust."

"I was one of the test pilots who tested our A-5 vertical takeoff jet fighter-bomber back in the 1950s, on top of testing as well all our new Air Force prototypes at that time. I particularly enjoyed breaking the sound barrier at low altitude over the China Lake Naval Air Test Center as I was returning to nearby Muroc Air Force Base."

"I know! I had to make rounds around China Lake more than a few times in order to inventory the broken windows after your passage, General."

That exchange attracted more laughs around the command bridge at that bit of old Air Force versus Navy interservice rivalry. With the atmosphere on the bridge now much more relaxed, Ingrid concentrated back on her flying. As they were approaching their chosen landing zone at low speed and low altitude, Ingrid's eyes caught something on one of the viewing screens which made her exclaim out loud.

"Hey, what's that, at ten o'clock, just below us?"

All eyes went at once to that viewing screen, with John Young speaking up after a couple of seconds.

"I see it! It looks like a kind of sphere floating in the sky. Damn! We are now past it. Major Moore, do we have this thing on radar?"

"Uh, no sir! I however can review the recordings from our external cameras."

"Do that once we have landed, Major. Right now, the important thing is to safely land the ship on Titan."

Forcing herself to stop thinking about the mysterious flying object, Ingrid piloted her 600-meter-long ship down into a gentle landing on an icy plain close to a lake of dark liquid, then shut down her rocket engines and spoke up, triumph in her voice.

³⁰ Mackay Trophy: American reward for the most meritorious flight of the year by a United States Air Force pilot, crew or organization.

"We are now on Titan, ladies and gentlemen."

Cheers and high-fives greeted her announcement, with John Young then going on ship-wide intercom.

"To all aboard. We have safely landed on Titan. You may now remove your spacesuits and resume your normal activities. Captain Bean, prepare your surface exploration teams for their first sortie."

Giving back the pilot's station to Robert Gibson, Ingrid then went to John Young, who was still sitting in the command chair.

"I am going upstairs to the sensors section, to go review the recordings from our external view cameras. That spherical flying object is really intriguing me."

"What do you think that it could be, Ingrid?"

"Uh, I would rather wait until I could examine our films, John. Right now, it could be about anything. I should be back down in less than thirty minutes."

"I'll keep your chair warm in the meantime, Ingrid."

"Thanks!"

Followed by the ship's sensors officer, Major Daniel Moore, Ingrid went up one level to the sensors section, walking cautiously in order not to fly off the deck due to Titan's weak gravity, which was only fourteen percent that of Earth. On arriving in the compartment filled with monitoring stations and large viewing screens, she went at once to the station in charge of external view cameras, which was manned by a young female lieutenant of the Space Corps.

"Could you replay for us the camera recordings taken just one minute before our landing, Lieutenant Cassini? We saw some kind of flying sphere at ten o'clock, at about five degrees of negative elevation."

"Just a moment please, General, time to retrieve those video segments... Here we are, General."

With Major Moore looking as well at the station's large viewing screen, Ingrid watched attentively the video recording as it played out. She suddenly pointed at the screen after some twenty seconds of viewing.

"THERE! Freeze and enhance that image, please."

Both she, Cassini and Moore were soon staring at a fuzzy still image of a spherical flying object. Cassini was the first to speak as they still eyed the object on the screen.

"I see some kind of ribbons or tubes hanging down from that flying sphere. This reminds me of a medusa."

Ingrid nodded her head at those words at the same time that she grabbed the receiver of the station's telephone and composed a number.

"It does indeed look like a medusa, a flying one... Hello, the exobiology laboratory? This is General Dows speaking. I am going to send you a video picture of some flying object we saw just before landing. I want you to look at it and tell me what your exobiologists think of it... I am staying on the line."

Fiona Cassini, who appeared to be a very intelligent young woman, didn't wait for an order from Ingrid and made at once a connection with the exobiology laboratory, sending them the video recording displayed on her screen. Ingrid heard background voices and quite a few exclamations on the telephone line before her initial interlocutor spoke up.

"If your question was if that thing could be a lifeform, then we are ready to say 'yes', General. This is potentially huge."

"I agree! Analyze what you see on that video recording, then report back to me. I am presently in the sensors section, in the command module."

"Will do, General!"

Putting back down the telephone receiver, Ingrid then gently tapped Cassini's shoulder.

"Pass the word to your operators, Lieutenant: keep an eye out for similar flying spheres. I doubt that what we saw is the only one of its kind on Titan."

"Understood, General!"

As the young lieutenant passed directives to her subalterns, Ingrid stepped back from the station but continued looking at the viewing screen with Major Moore.

"I really believe that this sphere is a local lifeform. If we could prove it, it would give a giant kick to what we thought we knew about life in the Universe. First, we found fossils and living fish on Mars. Then, we found those tardigrades on Europa and their cousins on Enceladus, living in separate planetary systems. Now, this!"

"Isn't that the main goal of exploration, General? To discover new things?"

"You are a hundred percent right, Major."

They were silent for the next minute, until one operator suddenly spoke up, excitement in his voice.

"General, we have two flying spheres approaching from three o'clock!"

Ingrid, along with Moore, nearly ran to the operator's station to stare at his video screen.

"They are approaching us together: they must be alive to behave like this." said a stunned Moore. "I wonder if they are intelligent beings."

"Well, there is only one way to learn that, I guess." said Ingrid while starting to walk out of the sensors section, prompting a question from Moore.

"Where are you going, General?"

Ingrid, who was still wearing her spacesuit but had her visor open, smiled to him in response.

"Topside, to go chat with those spheres. Make sure that our cameras record everything from now on, Major. Tell our exobiologists to watch closely what will happen."

She then walked out of the compartment, leaving behind a stunned Moore.

Using Titan's weak gravity to bounce along the ship's communication tubes, Ingrid arrived at one of the secondary airlocks which gave access to the topside surface of the hull of the PROMETHEUS. Sealing her spacesuit and switching on its systems, she then entered the airlock and firmly closed and locked its inner hatch. Initiating the depressurization cycle of the airlock, Ingrid then opened a valve which allowed in the nitrogen atmosphere of Titan. Her spacesuit, instead of inflating, as it did in the vacuum of Space, shrank around her due to the high pressure of Titan's atmosphere, which was fifty percent higher than that of Earth. That actually made it easier for her to flex her arms and legs, not having to fight off joints stiffened by air inflation. Once the pressure between the outside and the inside had been equilibrated, Ingrid climbed the ladder going up to the topside hatch and opened the latter, then stepped up on the top of the ship's hull, which was nearly flat in that part. Closing and locking the hatch, she next looked around her to spot the two approaching flying spheres, conscious that an external view camera positioned near the hatch would film her every move. She smiled with anticipation on seeing that the two spheres which had been filmed were now less than 150 meters from the starboard side of the ship. Walking on the top of the hull, which was made of a steel alloy honeycomb structure, Ingrid went in the direction of the two spheres while concentrating into telepathically sending an image of herself and hoping to get some kind of response. At first, she felt nothing but, as both she and the sphere got closer to each other, she started feeling mental surprise and confusion. Changing slightly her telepathic message, she imagined a picture of herself and of the two spheres coming very close to each other. The spheres, which had stopped for a moment, then

resumed their flight, this time heading directly towards her. Ingrid felt a wave of joy submerge her when she saw a third sphere approach as well, this time from her left. This was proof of at least mental curiosity, if not of some degree of intelligence. Concentrating next on the nearest sphere, she examined it closely as it flew towards her. She also spoke softly in her helmet's radio microphone, relaying her observations to her crew.

"I can now see clearly how those spheres fly around. They swallow the surrounding nitrogen gas, then expels it out from one of at least nine vent-like tubes surrounding the base of the sphere, using jet propulsion principles. I can see a total of six tentacle-like appendices hanging down from the sphere. They may well be their equivalent of our arms. The sphere itself is semi-transparent but appears to be rigid, a bit like an empty egg shell made of glass. This could indicate that those spheres float around by lowering the gas pressure inside them, thus functioning much like a dirigible with a lighter atmosphere inside them. I see as well a small, undefined mass inside the sphere, at its base, where the tentacles and air vents connect. That mass could be the internal organs of the creature. I am now certain that this is a lifeform. Is any exobiologist listening to me right now?"

"This is Shannon Lucid, General. I am watching you via camera and also listening to you on the radio. My biologist colleagues are also watching this. This is nothing less than fantastic! Personally, I would tend to agree with your observations. The fact that they are now coming towards you as a group denotes at least some degree of curiosity and group behavior. What are you planning to do once they will be close to you, General?"

"I will try to communicate with them, Shannon."

There was a slight pause before Lucid's voice came back on the air, sounding perplex.

"Uh, how, General?"

"Via telepathy." simply answered Ingrid before concentrating on sending a new message to the spheres, this time a vocal as well as a visual one.

"Greetings, Titanians! I am Ingrid and I come from another world."

The first thing she mentally heard in response was a concert of modulated noises sounding like hissing air. Ingrid then understood that the spheres were communicating between themselves, something she reported at once.

"I can now hear in my head a concert of hisses: those spheres can communicate between themselves. Since the atmospheric pressure is high on Titan, their voices

could very well be vocal ones as well as telepathic ones. Too bad that our external view cameras are not equipped with microphones. I will now send more telepathic messages to those spheres.”

As a stunned silence came on the radio, Ingrid pointed at her own chest while mentally saying her name.

“Ingrid, from Earth.”

Next, she pointed the nearest sphere, which had stopped a mere four meters in front of her, and waited for a response. It actually came in the form of a kind of modulated, whistled sound: that alien being possessed at least enough intelligence to reply to her! Feeling ecstatic, Ingrid next concentrated on sending a succession of mental images to the spheres, starting with a picture of Earth from orbit. She followed up with images of the PROMETHEUS leaving orbit and traveling to the Jupiter System, then to the Saturn System. Her last mental images pictured the PROMETHEUS landing on Titan. At first, she felt no mental response except more hissing exchanges between the spheres. Then, the nearest sphere slowly flew closer to her, finally stopping only one meter away. That allowed Ingrid to have a very good closeup view of the creature.

“I am now retransmitting pictures from my helmet camera, so that you can have a good look at those Titanians. Doctor Lucid, are you there still?”

“Uh, yes, General. We were still digesting the bit about your telepathic powers.”

“Pah! Don’t worry about that: it is only one of the powers I hold. By the way, they just conversed between themselves after listening to my last mental pictogram. What do you think about these Titanians, Doctor Lucid?”

“That I just wetted my panties from the emotion, General. This by itself fully justifies the expenditure and efforts put in this ship and mission. Are you going to try to touch them?”

“NO!” was Ingrid’s immediate response. “For them, living in an environment at a temperature of only 94 degrees Kelvin, my body would be the equivalent of scalding hot. I could very well wound them if I touch them. The reverse is also possible, although I am much better protected thermally than those Titanians are.”

“Titanians... I like that name, General. What will you do next?”

“I will send more mental pictures to them, to try to inform them about us. You will excuse me if I now stay silent for a while: I must concentrate on my telepathic messages.”

In the exobiology laboratory, Shannon Lucid exchanged a glance with Natalia Smirnova, who was standing next to her in front of the camera monitor.

"First, she looks twenty-something at the age of 57 and can remember her past incarnations. Then, she showed that she could heal someone with the touch of her hands and beats an Olympic running record. Now, she says that she is a telepath. What else can she do?"

She got an answer to that two minutes later, when another biologist watching Ingrid via an external camera nearly shouted out in a strangled voice.

"THE GENERAL! She...she just floated off the topside of the ship and is flying away with the spheres!"

It was the turn of Natalia Smirnova to look with a near haggard expression at Shannon Lucid.

"Isn't she called 'God's General' in the United States, among other things?"

"Yes, she is!" answered Lucid in a weak voice.

A disturbing thought then came to Natalia's brain.

"Her little daughter, will she be like her mother?"

Shannon Lucid paled on hearing that but was unable to reply to her Soviet friend at that time.

Outside, in the orange haze which constituted Titan's atmosphere, Ingrid was using her powers of levitation to follow the three Titanians, who had replied to her string of mental images by their own mental images which invited her to go visit their nest. Traveling for a good three kilometers at a low altitude and at a speed that Ingrid actually found quite slow, the group overflew a number of low hills made of water ice, ammonia and methane before arriving at a long, large fissure in the icy surface of a valley. The spheres, still followed by Ingrid, then started descending towards the ravine. Soon flying under the level of the surface and entering the ravine, the three spheres led Ingrid to a sort of ice ledge on which the entrance of an ice cavern could be seen. Ingrid followed the spheres inside the cavern, which proved to be fairly deep, despite being rather narrow, with an average width of three meters. As the cavern was quite dark, she lit her helmet's lamp but set it to low intensity, worried about possibly blinding the Titanians she was following. Her heartbeat suddenly accelerated when she saw that a number of other Titanians were present in the cavern, resting in what someone could call 'ice nests', sometimes being two together: this cavern was the home of a whole group of

Titanians! Checking that her frontal camera was on and recording what she was seeing, Ingrid slowly landed on the ice floor of the cavern, then looked around her, trying to see and record everything possible about this place. Living as a community in a chosen location was proof that the Titanians possessed at least some degree of intelligence, something that their whistled language and ability to send back mental images supported.

“Intelligent life on a frozen moon of Saturn... They will go positively bonkers about this on Earth. I can only imagine what any possible underground ocean could contain.”

One of the spheres then approached her slowly, floating in the thick and hazy nitrogen atmosphere, and sent her a new mental image that played like a video in her head. It basically invited her to follow the sphere to one of the nests in the cavern. Ingrid obliged with good grace and floated off again, flying for maybe twenty meters down the cave, until she arrived at a nest occupied by a sphere resting in it. The sphere which had led her to the nest then lowered itself next to the resting sphere and snuggled up to it, forming a picture that nearly screamed ‘affection’ in Ingrid’s mind. Recording the Titanian couple with her camera, Ingrid landed again on the ice floor and concentrated mentally to send more images telepathically. This time, she sent in sequence a picture of herself in a spacesuit, then a picture of herself naked, so that the Titanians could see what she looked like as a living being. Next, she made an image of a naked man appear next to her own image, followed by an image showing her and the man in an embrace. She followed up by a picture of herself, still naked and with a bulging belly. She did her best to simplify the scene of her daughter’s birth, finally ending her string of images by showing herself holding little Nancy in her arms. All along, the two Titanians stayed still in their nest, apparently attentive to her mental message. To her joy and satisfaction, Ingrid soon started receiving a string of mental images from one of the Titanians. What she saw was however very different from what she had shown about Human procreation. It basically showed a process in which Titanians used hydrocarbon organic compounds drawn from a nearby lake of methane, digesting them and transforming them into a sort of organic polymer which they then regurgitated and molded to make an empty, semi-transparent sphere similar to their own spheres. Once the sphere was completed, two Titanians were shown coupling together and producing a sort of small egg on top of which the newly made sphere, which had a small hole at its base, was laid. More images showed the ‘egg’ evolving and growing inside the base of the sphere while

its parents were shuttling in and out, bringing what had to be some kind of nutrient to their growing offspring. All that time, the growing creature and its covering sphere didn't move from the nest until it was fully shaped, with six tentacles and nine propelling gas vents plugging the base of the sphere. Then, it floated up from the nest for the first time, pictured being closely escorted and supported by its parents. Nearly overwhelmed by that fantastic revelation, Ingrid then sent more images of her own, showing her eating food. The Titanians responded by showing themselves going up and down the slopes of the ravine, licking the surface of the ice walls. Ingrid understood from those images that the Titanians fed from possible microbial cultures growing on the surface of the ice. Overall, what she had just learned was going to make her exobiologists go positively crazy. Sending a last mental message showing her returning to the PROMETHEUS, Ingrid closed her mental exchange session by sending a feeling of warm affection around her, then flew off and left the cavern.

As she came into direct view of the gigantic mass of the PROMETHEUS, resting on its landing skids some three kilometers away, Ingrid heard a male voice on her radio headset calling her in a rather concerned tone.

"General Dows, this is the PROMETHEUS, if you can hear us, please respond, over."

"PROMETHEUS, this is the big cheese: there is no need to be worried about me. I simply went and paid a visit to the home of a tribe of Titanians and I am fine. However, I will want a complete and thorough decontamination of my spacesuit inside an airlock on arrival, as I now know that there probably are local microbes on Titan. I will need to know in advance which airlock will have been prepared before I arrive at the ship, over."

"Acknowledged, General. Uh, how did you learn that there are microbes on Titan? Our exploration teams have not left the ship yet, over."

"Easy: the Titanians use them as food and lick them off the surface ice. Now, you better get that airlock prepared for a decontamination procedure, over."

There was a distinct delay before she got a reply to her last transmission.

"Understood! PROMETHEUS out!"

Ingrid had time to fly to less than 300 meters from the ship before a new message radio informed her to use the lower starboard ground access personnel airlock, something that she had expected: that airlock, used by ground exploration teams to

leave the ship and return to it, was the best equipped for a thorough decontamination. Flying into that airlock, which was located besides the vehicle access airlock of the starboard cargo ramp, Ingrid closed and locked at once the outer hatch, then spoke in her radio microphone.

"I am now in the airlock. Use all the decontamination options on me while I am inside and don't pressurize the airlock until the whole procedure is completed."

"Everything including the kitchen sink: got it!" Replied the voice of Alan Bean, who was in charge of the ground operations of the ship and was attempting some humor of his own to relieve the tension he felt after Ingrid's long sortie. "How was your walkabout, General?"

"Fascinating and very instructive, Mister Bean. The Titanians definitely are sentient beings: they collectively live in ice caves and form couples for reproduction purposes. I counted seventeen Titanians inside the cave to which I was guided to by the three spheres which approached our ship. I will however wait until I can speak face to face with our exobiologists before telling the full story. In the meantime, blast away!"

"You asked for it!" replied Bean in a facetious tone just before hot decontamination solution under high pressure started spraying Ingrid's spacesuit from multiple angles while she kept both arms extended and her legs spread open.

"Aaah! There is nothing like a nice, hot shower to relieve stress." Inside the locker room in which the control panel of the airlock was, Alan Bean gave a funny look to John Young, the deputy commander of the ship, who had hurried down from the command bridge to greet Ingrid.

"Well, at least she seems to be in good humor."

"Yes, but wait until our exobiologists descend on her like a bunch of vultures."

"Paah! The General can handle about anything."

"You know what? You may be right about that. It makes me wonder what other surprises she still has in store for us."

"Probably plenty!" replied Bean, suddenly serious.

Bean was nearly finished putting Ingrid through the full decontamination procedure when the four exobiologists on the ship entered the locker room. They would probably have done so at a run if not for the micro-gravity conditions in this part of the ship. John Young smiled to Shannon Lucid, who was leading the exobiology team.

"We are nearly finished with the General's decontamination procedure, Doctor Lucid. You will soon be able to grab her for interrogation."

"Excellent! We have a zillion questions for her. When I think that only four slots were allowed in the crew list for exobiologists on the argument that we probably wouldn't find life out in the Jupiter and Saturn systems."

"Well, don't blame the General for that, Doctor: I participated in the discussions and debates about the elaboration of the crew list and we basically got steamrolled by the astronomy, astrophysics and planetology crowd, which was clamoring for the majority of the scientific slots on the crew list."

"The rats! They would find a simple rock more interesting than an alien organism."

"Hey, watch out!" protested Natalia Smirnova, who was close behind Lucid. "My husband Sacha is an astronomer!"

"Uh, sorry about that, Natalia: nothing personal." Replied Shannon Lucid before looking back at Young. "Do you know if General Dows took some films of those spheres while outside?"

"No, but you will soon be able to ask her in person. We are now about to pressurize the airlock. You will just have to be patient for a couple more minutes." Lucid nodded her head and kept silent for a few seconds before speaking again to Young.

"Uh, you saw how the General flew off by herself and followed those spheres, right?"

"I did! If you were going to ask how she did it, then I can only say that I don't have a clue myself. Again, be patient."

The frustrated Lucid then had to cool down with her three colleagues until Ingrid finally emerged from the airlock. The latter smiled to the group of exobiologists after opening her helmet's visor.

"Just give me a minute to get out of my spacesuit and I will then be available for your questions, ladies and gentlemen. If that can make you happy, I filmed an ice cave which sheltered a tribe of seventeen Titanians. I was able to make a mental exchange with them, using pictograms, and learned quite a lot about them. Basically, they feed on microbes living on the surface ice in or near fissures and reproduce via egg fertilization. They don't use any tools and probably have the intelligence level of the first hominids on Earth. However, they are definitely a sentient race, thus I will not allow any invasive

observation or study of those Titanians. No putting in cages and definitely no anatomical dissections! Just the arrival of our ship on Titan must have been a traumatic event for them. Now, let me get out of my spacesuit, please.”

Lucid had no choice but wait then as Ingrid went to one of the spacesuits support racks and leaned against it before opening the large entry hatch in the back of her suit. Sticking out her head and upper torso through the opened back hatch, she secured her suit to the rack with the lines attached to the rack, then disconnected the various electrical wires and water and air tubes linking her space undergarment and headgear to her spacesuit’s systems. She finally grabbed an overhead bar located just above her rack and pulled herself out of her suit, stepping on the deck. With her magnetized boot soles making her stick to the steel deck, she closed her spacesuit’s hatch and connected the various tubes and wires which would refill and recharge her suit. She was then able to turn around and smile to the exobiologists after retrieving the film cassette on which she had recorded her trip outside.

“Well, I believe that I am all yours now, ladies and gentlemen. Let’s go to your lab.”

Shannon Lucid rubbed her hands together in near glee at those words.

“Excellent! I promise you that it won’t be too long, so that you can get back to your cute daughter Nancy, General.”

That promise didn’t survive for very long, as Ingrid was still being grilled by the exobiologists by the time noon hour arrived, with the scientists reviewing with her the films taken of the Titanians and their cave while Ingrid recalled her mental conversations in as much detail as she could remember. Looking at her watch, Ingrid finally called for a lunch break and excused herself to go to the ship’s daycare center to retrieve little Nancy. She however didn’t miss the somewhat reserved attitude of the women on duty at the daycare center when she arrived there and asked for her Nancy. Ingrid discretely scanned telepathically the thoughts of Lorna Onizuka, who was in charge of the present care workers shift. What she read and felt somewhat cooled down her happiness at getting her daughter.

“Is something wrong, Misses Onizuka? Did Nancy behave?”

Lorna Onizuka, whom Ingrid knew and respected as a kind, intelligent and tolerant woman, looked a bit embarrassed by her question.

“Uh, little Nancy did behave well, General, but a few things happened around her which seem to have somewhat spooked the other kids.”

“What things exactly?” asked Ingrid, who already could guess what had happened.

“Well, at one time she wanted to play with a few toy blocks and those blocks then flew to her by themselves. At another time, when she was thirsty, I felt her frustration in my head. May I ask you if she is going to have the same kind of powers which you possess, General?”

Ingrid nodded her head once, her expression sober.

“I can’t say yet to what extent, but yes. She is however still very young and probably doesn’t realize yet that she has special powers. In particular, she still can’t control her telepathic power the way I can, thus her mind may appear invasive at times, but I can assure you that there is no malice on her part about that.”

“I can believe that, General: Nancy is a very sweet toddler girl and never got aggressive or mean with other kids. It is just that the other kids are starting to feel that she is different and some of them are not always as sweet and nice as Nancy is. I am afraid that, one day, there will be an incident between her and other kids. Again, I do not fault Nancy at all for that, but I believe that you should be forewarned, General.”

Ingrid lowered her head and sighed then: she had worried before about this happening one day but had hoped that those problems would have emerged much later, when Nancy would at least be able to talk properly. Right now, short of relinquishing command to John Young for the rest of the mission in order to take care of Nancy full time, she could see only one other option. It was however one with possibly quite serious consequences. She was still debating what to do while facing Lorna Onizuka when she heard a voice she knew very well, coming from behind her.

“Do not worry about having to care for Nancy all the time, Ingrid: I will watch over her, the same way as I watched over Hien.”

Turning around with a flash, Ingrid looked with shock at the small but very beautiful young Semitic woman dressed in a simple robe and sandals now standing two paces from her.

“NATAI! But, you can’t be on this ship, so far from Earth!”

“And why not?” replied the angel, presently using her human avatar form. “The One permeates the whole Solar System, not only Earth. The One sensed your worries

about the care of your Nancy and decided to send me to help you, the same way he sent me thirty years ago to help you with Hien when you adopted her.”

“Who...who is this woman, General? I never saw her aboard the ship.” asked Onizuka, her voice half strangled as she stared at Natai with bulging eyes. Natai replied to her questions by changing into a second into a glowing, half-translucent humanoid shape and by telepathically talking to her in a soft female voice.

“I am Natai, angel of The One, and I came to help Ingrid care for her daughter Nancy. I also cared in the past for her adopted daughter Hien, decades ago. Do not worry about my presence on this ship: I intend to keep a normal human form while on this ship and have none of the normal needs of human beings. In fact, I am ready to help care for other children as well as for little Nancy if you don't mind, Misses Onizuka.” Lorna Onizuka paled and Ingrid was afraid for a moment that she would pass out, but she managed to stay on her feet, although she wobbled a bit for a moment as Natai returned to her human avatar shape.

“A...an angel?”

“Yes! My soul was created by The One some 9,000 years ago to inhabit the body of a girl born in the Neolithic city of Jericho. My first name was ‘Natai’ and I wish to be called by that name while on this ship. Will you accept my offer to help care for the other children aboard this ship?”

“Uh, how could I refuse such an offer, miss?” could only say Lorna, making Natai smile benevolently.

“Please, just call me ‘Natai’, Misses Onizuka. I however have one favor to ask you: that you do not publicize who I am to others. Let Ingrid take care of that.”

“I...I will keep mum, I promise.”

“Thank you! As my first task as a daycare employee, I will help escort the kids to lunch. I believe that you use an electric cart pulling small wagons to carry the children around?”

“That's right...Natai. The children actually love those rides to the food court.”

“Then, I will ride with the driver of that cart. Let's get the children ready for lunch, will you?”

“Uh, sure, Natai.” replied Lorna, still a bit shaky.

Between finishing to brief her exobiology staff about her excursion to the Titanians' ice cavern and discretely informing her command staff about Natai while

passing some strict directives about her, Ingrid's day proved quite a busy one. However, she also felt much better now, with an utterly reliable nanny now helping her take care of little Nancy, whose emerging powers had been bound to create untold problems and headaches for her. Ingrid felt at peace when she went to bed that night, her daughter next to her in the big bed of her cabin and with Natai staying close, invisible and silent during the night but ever present and vigilant.

CHAPTER 25 – TAKING OFF THE UNIFORM

13:36 (Universal Time)

Wednesday, March 20, 1985 'C'

South Docking Station, space station AURORA

Low Earth orbit

"The PROMETHEUS has now docked safely, Mister President. We have the green light to board the ship."

"Excellent!" replied George Herbert Walker Bush, who was surrounded by his Secret Service bodyguards and a few officials, including the current commander of the AURORA space station, Brigadier General John Reynolds. "Please guide me in, General: I still am not very familiar about what steps to take while passing through an airlock system."

"That's quite understandable, Mister President. Please follow me!"

Filmed and photographed by the dozens of media members present for the arrival of the PROMETHEUS from its nearly five-year-long space mission, the presidential party made its way through the large airlock of the space station and was cycled through it and through the ship's own main airlock before stepping on the deck of the reception compartment of the PROMETHEUS, where Ingrid and her most senior officers and scientific staff were waiting for President Bush. On the latter arriving inside the compartment, Ingrid, wearing her Space Corps parade uniform, called her subaltern to attention, then saluted Bush.

"Welcome aboard the PROMETHEUS, Mister President!"

"Thank you, General Dows! Let me first congratulate you and your crew for your long and epic voyage to Jupiter and Saturn. You were an inspiration for both our country and for the rest of the World, while what you discovered during your mission revolutionized many areas of our sciences."

"Thank you, Mister President! May I first present my senior command staff to you before we go further?"

"Please do, General Dows."

Walking to the waiting officers and scientists and shaking their hands one by one while exchanging a few congratulatory words with them, President Bush looked again at Ingrid at the end of the presentations.

“What’s next, General?”

“I am planning to give you a tour of the ship, Mister President, but I would like first to present to you my whole crew and their families, who have assembled in the main food court in anticipation of your visit.”

“And I will be most pleased to meet with them all, General. Lead on!”

Ingrid saluted again, then guided President Bush and his followers out of the reception compartment and through a series of communication tubes which were in micro-gravity conditions. While floating down the tubes, Bush and Ingrid exchanged small talk about how the mission went and about the state of the crew’s morale. That last point attracted a slight smile on Ingrid’s lips.

“The morale is truly great, Mister President. To have their families with them on this long trip did wonders for the spirit of my crewmembers. I definitely recommend that all such future deep space trips of more than a few months should be done with crew family members aboard, Mister President.”

“Well, while I would agree with you on that, General, that is still a bit of a politically contentious issue. Some of the more conservative members of Congress, pushed on by a few prominent religious preachers, are still a bit, uh, sanguine about this. I however am ready to fully support your point of view on this subject.”

“And I thank you for that, Mister President. Once you will meet our people, you will be able to see what kind of effect this family trip policy had on my crew. By the way, we started this mission in August of 1980 with 92 children of all ages aboard. Today, you will be greeted by 145 children aged between a few months to seventeen years old, while you will also see ten young men and women who reached adulthood during our mission.”

Bush couldn’t help stare at Ingrid then, truly stunned by her numbers.

“You mean that 53 children were born aboard your ship during your space mission?”

“Yes, Mister President! Furthermore, those children were able to enjoy and learn from their space trip while growing up. You will be able to see that once we are at the main food court.”

“I can’t wait for that moment, General.” said Bush, being sincere.

The trip became easier for the President and his followers once they arrived at Carrousel 'A', where its rotation provided apparently normal gravity. Now able to walk normally, Bush let Ingrid guide him to the entrance of the big compartment housing the main food court. The President, like his accompanying cabinet members and advisors, stared in near shock on seeing the double row of toddlers, preteens and teenagers standing in the front of a crowd of nearly 600 people, with some women behind the rows of children holding small babies. Ingrid then shouted out loud at the crowd.

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES, THE HONORABLE GEORGE HERBERT WALKER BUSH!"

Everybody in the crowd, including the young children, then stopped moving and came to attention, with the military members in the crowd saluting Bush. The latter quickly went over his shock from seeing so many children inside a spaceship and spoke up loudly.

"AT EASE, PLEASE!"

Ingrid then led him to a lectern and microphone set up near the entrance of the food court, where Bush was able to better look at the crowd, whose front row of children stood less than five paces away due to the lack of space. He was not a little surprised to see that over two thirds of the children sported embroidered patches of various designs on their clothes and spoke in a low voice to Ingrid.

"What are those patches the kids are wearing, General?"

"Those are their mission patches denoting various trips and accomplishments during the mission, Mister President. Each kid, whatever his or her age at the time, who participated in a space activity, like space walks and rover tours on some of the moons of Jupiter or Saturn, got a dedicated embroidered patch for the occasion. Let me show you. DARIEN ONIZUKA, PLEASE STEP FORWARD AND COME TO THE LECTERN." A cute oriental girl of about ten years of age then came forward timidly, stopping next to the lectern and President Bush, who was then able to detail the patches she wore on her sports vest as Ingrid described them.

"Darien Onizuka is ten-year-old and is one of the two daughters of one of my officers, Mister President. The patches she wears are the overall mission patch, given to all aboard the ship, a patch for spacewalking in deep space and three patches for rover trips on the surfaces of Ganymede, Enceladus and Titan."

"My God! Qualified astronauts would be proud to wear those! And are you proud of wearing those patches, little Darien?"

"Very much, Mister President." timidly replied the small girl.

"And did you like your trip in Space?"

"A lot, Mister President. I learned a lot of new things during our trip."

"I see! Congratulations for your trip, Darien. You may now return with the other children."

"Thank you, Mister President."

Bush smiled as he watched the girl return to the front of the crowd.

"Damn, she is so cute! They are all cute, in fact."

"Thank you, Mister President." replied Ingrid. "Feel free to address my crew before we tour the ship."

"I certainly will, General."

Not having a prepared speech for this unexpected occasion, Bush did his best at that time, keeping his speech quite informal while praising the accomplishment of the ship's crew and the devotion of their families. That speech, which went on for about two minutes, was greeted by warm applauses from the crowd. With Bush's approval, Ingrid then dismissed her crew and faced her President.

"If you will now follow me, Mister President, I will give you a quick tour of the ship."

"I'm all yours, General!"

That tour took a good two hours and ended up in Ingrid's command office, where she and Bush went in to speak in private. The President's expression was a sober one as he eyed Ingrid after sitting with her on a sofa of her office.

"General Dows, my predecessor, Ronald Reagan, briefed me about your powers and the fact that you are a 'Chosen', a representative of a spiritual entity I would tend to equate with God. I also was briefed about the various powers you demonstrated publicly aboard your ship while on its mission to Jupiter and Saturn. I was at first quite skeptical of what was said to me but I have now accepted those pieces of information. What do you intend to do with those powers of yours, General?"

"Nothing except to occasionally help others in times of need, like when I healed a crewmember's spouse burned in a kitchen fire, Mister President. Be assured that I have no intention of using my powers for any other purposes, especially political or personal purposes. Personal power is unimportant to me and I do not want either to become some kind of religious preacher, something I personally loathe. The One may have

been shepherding Humanity along for millions of years but he has zero interest in being worshipped. When he acts, which is rare, it is through its angels or via a Chosen like me. However, you may rest in peace about me and my powers, as the only goal I have now is to retire from military service in order to pursue a quieter personal life and to raise my little daughter Nancy, who is now nearly two and a half years old. President Reagan did tell you of my wish to retire at the end of this mission, didn't he, Mister President?"

"Yes, he did and I must say that you will richly deserve your retirement after what, forty-some years of military service?"

"Forty-three years of service, Mister President. I officially enrolled in the U.S. Army Air Force in 1942, after fighting the Japanese as a fighter pilot under a Filipino uniform. In those 43 years, I have fought in a total of six wars while wearing American uniforms and led two long, deep Space missions: this one and one to Mars. I am quite ready to retire, Mister President."

"And what will you do next, once out of uniform?"

"I am not sure yet, but I will certainly take much of my time to raise and care for my daughter Nancy. I am quite well-off financially, thanks to all those years of general officer's pay accumulating in my bank accounts while I was traveling in Space, plus thanks to my full general's pension, which is not exactly small change. I thus don't have a real need to find another job. However, I have aviation and space technology in my blood and will probably end up seeking a designing engineer position with a big aerospace company. I am sure that I would have no problems securing such a job, Mister President."

"Oh, I believe you on that, General: I can tell you that headhunters from the major aerospace companies in America, starting with Lockheed, are already preparing ambushes for you the moment you step foot again on the planet."

Ingrid chuckled a bit at those words.

"It's true that me and Lockheed have had a rather successful history of cooperation with each other, Mister President. I could do much worse than ending in their pay as a senior designing engineer."

"Well, I do have an offer of my own for you, General." said Bush, now appearing dead serious. "I would like you to stay on in a civilian capacity as a presidential special advisor and as our Director of National Space Programs. Furthermore, in view of your various incredible talents and vast experience, I am also ready to use you as my special plenipotentiary envoy if and when delicate overseas situations will emerge. As such an

envoy, I am ready to give your word primacy over that of even my present cabinet members when on a mission in my name.”

“That is a lot of power, Mister President. Aren’t you afraid to create some jealousy among your cabinet members towards me?”

“Screw them if that happens! You proved your worth as a presidential envoy in the past, in Indochina, in Palestine and in the more recent Israeli-Arab conflict. As for dealing with military situations, you showed yourself without equals. So, are you ready to accept my offer, General?”

Ingrid only had to think for a few seconds before extending her hand, which Bush shook.

“I accept your offer, Mister President. However, expect fully to get the unvarnished truth from me.”

“Did you ever do otherwise, General? I am after a presidential special advisor, not a sycophant.”

“I hear you on that, Mister President. I however have one condition: to be able to first spend a few months on quiet personal vacation, away from the limelight.”

Bush grinned at those words.

“After spending nearly five years on a deep Space mission? You would have been entitled to such a leave period anyway! Hell, I believe that you have close to a year of unused paid leave time, thanks to all your space missions and your incessant work at the command of the Space Corps. I can only wish you the best of time during your vacation, General.”

Bush then got up from the sofa, imitated by Ingrid, and shook again her hand.

“I have arranged for a retirement ceremony for you in Washington, General. There is no way that I will let go such a meritorious officer as you without a proper sendoff. After that, you will be free to go on vacation with your daughter.”

“I truly can’t wait for that moment, Mister President.” replied Ingrid, meaning it.

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